

The Parable of the Weeds



Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, Mark 4:26-29

Foreword

Setting the Scene

Jesus taught the crowds from a boat on the Sea of Galilee while they stood on the shore. Matthew 13 gathers several parables of the kingdom after the Parable of the Sower. In that setting, he told the story of a man who sowed good seed in his field. While people slept, an enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and departed. When the plants grew, and the grain appeared, the tares appeared with them. The servants asked whether they should pull the weeds. The owner refused: both must grow together until harvest, when the reapers would first bind the tares for burning and gather the wheat into the barn.

Later, privately, the disciples asked for the meaning. Jesus identified the sower as the Son of Man, the field as the world, the good seed as the children of the kingdom, the tares as the children of the wicked one, the enemy as the devil, the harvest as the end of the age, and the reapers as angels. The tares would be

gathered and burned; the righteous would shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom.

Mark records a shorter, complementary parable in the same cycle of teaching. The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed on the ground and then sleeps and rises night and day. The seed sprouts and grows he knows not how. The earth produces of itself—first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain. When the fruit is ready, he immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.

These two pictures—one of mixed growth under enemy opposition, the other of hidden, inevitable growth—belong together. They describe the present character of the kingdom and the certainty of its future harvest.

Context

The parables sit inside Jesus' public ministry in Galilee and his larger announcement that the kingdom of heaven (Matthew) or of God (Mark) has drawn near. First-century Jewish hearers knew wheat farming and the particular weed called tares or darnel (*zizania*), a plant that closely resembles wheat in its early stages. Only when the heads form can the two be distinguished with certainty. **Pulling** the tares too soon risks tearing up wheat whose roots are intertwined. The image therefore carried immediate agricultural force.

Literarily, Matthew 13 forms a structured discourse on the mystery of the kingdom: it is already present yet not yet consummated, growing amid resistance, and destined for a final separation. **Mark 4** likewise clusters seed parables after the Sower, emphasizing both receptivity of the soil and the sovereign, often unseen work of God. The Growing Seed parable has no explicit interpretation in Mark, which heightens its emphasis on mystery: the farmer sows and waits; the earth itself brings forth.

Theologically, the texts address expectations of an immediate, visible purification of Israel or the world. Many hoped the Messiah would at once expel evil. Jesus instead portrays a period of coexistence, hidden growth, and deferred judgment. The field is explicitly "**the world,**" not merely the gathered community, though later interpreters (Augustine and others) also applied the mixed field to the visible church. **The enemy's work is real; so is the owner's patience.**

Observations

Several features stand out when the texts are read together.

First, the kingdom is already sown. The Son of Man has planted good seed. The children of the kingdom exist in the world now. Growth is real even when it is mixed or hidden.

Second, opposition is personal and stealthy. The enemy sows while people sleep and then leaves. Evil is not merely the absence of good or an impersonal force; it is introduced by an adversary. Yet the owner is not surprised or defeated. He names the source and sets the timetable.

Third, premature separation is forbidden because it would damage the wheat. Human servants lack both the timing and the precision required. Distinguishing wheat from tares before the heads appear is unreliable; roots are entangled. The command “Let both grow together until the harvest” is therefore an act of both protection and patience.

Fourth, harvest is certain and belongs to God. In Matthew, the angels, not the servants, perform the gathering. In Mark, the farmer himself puts in the sickle only when the grain is ripe; he does not produce the growth. The earth brings forth “of herself.” The two parables together insist that the kingdom advances by divine agency, not by human zeal to purify the field ahead of time.

Fifth, the outcomes are irreversible and contrasting. Tares are bound and burned; wheat is gathered into the barn. Those who cause stumbling and practice lawlessness are removed from the Son of Man’s kingdom and cast into the furnace. The righteous shine like the sun. Judgment is not postponed indefinitely; it is reserved for the end of the age.

Sixth, appearance is deceptive until maturity. Wheat and darnel look alike for a long season. The parable therefore warns against confident present-tense sorting of persons or communities. Fruit, **in time**, will make the difference visible.

Questions

The parables raise persistent theological questions.

Why does the owner allow the enemy's work to stand? If the Son of Man is sovereign, why not uproot evil immediately? The text itself supplies part of the answer: to protect the wheat. A further implication is divine forbearance. The present age is a time of growth and of mercy, not yet of final winnowing. Human attempts to enforce purity by force have historically damaged the very community they sought to protect.

Who exactly are the tares? Jesus identifies them as “**the children of the wicked one.**” The language is corporate and eschatological rather than a license for individuals to label neighbors. The field is the world; sons of the kingdom and sons of the evil one live side by side. Later tradition sometimes narrowed the tares to heretics inside the church. The text itself is broader. Distinguishing the two before harvest remains the angels' task, not ours.

Does the parable describe the church or the world? Jesus says the field is the world. At the same time, the church exists *in* that world and is not immune to mixture. The warning against premature gathering applies wherever zeal for purity outruns patience and humility.

How does Mark's Growing Seed qualify Matthew's Weeds? Mark stresses that growth occurs while the Sower sleeps; he “knoweth not how.” The kingdom is not finally dependent on human vigilance or technique. **Together the parables balance two truths: evil is active, and yet the good seed grows by a power the farmer neither originates nor fully understands.** Harvest comes in God's time. **What is required of hearers in the meantime?** The servants are not told to be idle. **They are told not to take the reapers' place.** The posture is watchful patience, continued sowing of good seed, and trust that the owner will not leave the field mixed forever.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Weeds

The Parable of the Weeds and the Parable of the Growing Seed portray the kingdom as already present, contested, and hidden in its growth, yet moving toward an appointed harvest. Good seed has been sown by the Son of Man. An enemy has also sown. The two grow together. Human servants are neither

competent nor authorized to perform the final separation. The earth itself, by a mysterious vitality, brings the grain to maturity. When the time comes, the angels will gather and the distinction that was once obscure will be public and final.

The texts therefore counsel against two opposite issues: despair that evil will always coexist with good, and **impatience** that tries to force the harvest now. They call hearers to recognize the reality of opposition, to refuse the role of premature judge, and to wait for the day when the righteous shine and the field is at last clean. The owner of the field has not abandoned it. He has appointed the harvest. Until then both parables say the same thing in different keys: let both grow; **the sickle will come.**

Revelation 14:14-20 — one like the Son of Man with a sharp sickle reaps the earth when it is ripe; another angel gathers the vine for the winepress of wrath.

