

## Scripture Readings for Sunday July 19 2020

### Romans 8:18-25 (NIV)

<sup>18</sup> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

<sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup> Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

### Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (NIV)

<sup>24</sup> Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup> But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup> When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

<sup>27</sup> "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

<sup>28</sup> "'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

<sup>29</sup> "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them.

<sup>30</sup> Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

<sup>36</sup> Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

<sup>37</sup> He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

<sup>40</sup> "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. <sup>42</sup> They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

## Sermon: Why Doesn't God Do Something?

Why doesn't God *do* something? That's a key question people often ask. Tragedies happen; famines, floods, fires, and earthquakes cause devastation and death. Horrific accidents destroy lives and families; cancer and life-threatening illnesses seem to strike at random. Tyrants and bullies seem to get away with it; it's one rule for the rich and powerful, and another rule for the likes of you and me. And sensitive souls ask again and again, "Why is God apparently silent?" "Why doesn't God step in and stop it?" Those questions arise from our innate sense of justice and fairness, which we have somehow convinced ourselves to be universal, even a human right. But more than that, I believe it reflects a profound sense of our world being somehow "broken" and we have a memory or an inkling of that it could and should be like. And we *yearn* for it. Hold on to that thought for a moment, for it's not wrong!

While it's true that we experience natural disasters, including the present pandemic, nevertheless, we *humans* are the cause for *most* of the suffering in the world. It is *we* who mistreat and abuse others. We do so as individuals through insensitivity and ignorance, as well as through deliberate acts of cruelty. We also abuse others through systemic global trade practices, for example, that favor the rich and oppress the poor. When we don't get what we want, we are prone to economic and physical violence, and even start wars. If we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize that none of us are exempt here; as Solzhenitsyn said: "The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of *every* human being." We like to hear about a God of *love*, but what about *divine* justice? Would we really like it if God were to rule the world directly and with immediacy so that our every thought and action would be instantly judged and, if necessary, punished on the scales of absolute holiness? No, we wouldn't! *We* want leniency and grace for ourselves - and demand God's justice for *others*! We want God to step in when *we* want him to and for him to back off for the rest of the time! *Why* is God apparently silent? *Why doesn't* God act? Let's be careful what we ask for!

Today's fascinating parable is not a direct answer to such questions, but it does indicate that the world isn't quite as straightforward as we sometimes imagine. Immediately after Matthew presents the well-known parable of the sower, which we considered last week,<sup>1</sup> he relates another farming story, namely the parable of the weeds.<sup>2</sup> Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven is like a person who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away."<sup>3</sup> In this story there are *two* sowers and *two* kinds of seed. The weeds sown are not just *any* unwanted plant; it refers to "darnel," an especially undesirable weed that bears an uncanny resemblance to wheat until the ears of grain appear, and on darnel grains there resides a poisonous fungus. This was such a serious issue that Roman law forbade such agricultural sabotage.<sup>4</sup> The nature of darnel also explains why this weed was not recognized until it was fully mature. Once that happened,

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 13:1–9; 18–23; see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Listen-Understand-Grow-and-Persevere.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Matt 13:24–30; 36–43. The parable is unique to Matthew, although a highly condensed kernel is found in Mark 4:26–29.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 13:24–25. "The Kingdom of heaven/God is like . . ." indicates the kingdom has *begun*, it's come.

<sup>4</sup> Ingesting darnel causes feelings of drunkenness and could prove fatal (see NET Bible).

the slaves informed their Master and asked, “Where did these weeds come from?” And he replied, ‘An *enemy* has done this.’ The slaves then asked, “Do you want us to go and gather them?” “No,” said the Master, “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”<sup>5</sup>

In looking over this story we notice several things. First, the Master does *not* chastise the slaves for incompetence or lack of diligence, rather he discerns the origin of the weeds to be more sinister and he blames “an Enemy.” Second, it initially seems that the harvest is ruined and the Enemy has triumphed; but that is *not* ultimately the case. And, third, the slaves seem impatient to rescue what can be saved by pulling up the poisonous weeds. The Master urges *patience* along with the *reassurance* that at harvest time, which was a common Jewish metaphor for the Final Judgement, the matter *will be* resolved and justice realised. The weeds will be destroyed and the wheat saved.

Matthew spells things out more explicitly through a later private conversation between Jesus and his disciples.<sup>6</sup> We are told, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.”<sup>7</sup> This alludes to a popular apocalyptic vision from the Book of Daniel.<sup>8</sup> Influenced by this image, it was commonly thought that God was reserving in heaven an actual transcendent being - the Son of Man - who would come *from* heaven at the end of history and inaugurate the kingdom of God. Indeed, they believed all nations and peoples of every language would worship him and his reign would never end. This mysterious title, “Son of Man,” is one Jesus often uses to refer to himself; it is he who sows the good seed. Jesus goes on to say, “The field is the whole *world* and the good seed are the *people of the kingdom*,” in other words those to *belong* to God.<sup>9</sup> And the weeds that look like genuine wheat, but are actually toxic, are those who belong to the evil one - the enemy or the devil. This is a very dualistic, or black-and-white, picture and I appreciate the strong language of being the “devil’s children” sounds unpalatable to our modern ears.<sup>10</sup> However, because the language in Jesus’ explanation is *apocalyptic*, we need to recognize it as a *visionary* description, rather than literal. Nevertheless, the crux of the story is still true; divine justice

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<sup>5</sup> Matt 13:27-30.

<sup>6</sup> Matt 13:26-43. Some scholars suggest this is Matthew’s interpretation, rather than Jesus’ own; this need not trouble us. Regardless, this interpretation reveals a 1<sup>st</sup> century (*apocalyptic*) worldview and, I venture to say, is not inconsistent with the way the Gospel writers generally present the views of Jesus himself even if the tone sounds harsh to us; see Matt 5:20.

<sup>7</sup> Matt 13:37.

<sup>8</sup> See Dan 7:13-14. In Matt 13:40-43 not only is there a reference to the “Son of Man” but he cites Dan 3:6 and alludes to Dan 12:13; such literary connections are evidence that the Book of Daniel was well-known for Matthew’s readers. The 1<sup>st</sup> century understanding of “Son of Man” is *not* as a mortal being (as in Ezekiel) but someone transcendent - or *from* God – then this has incarnational overtones. In which case “Son of Man” is, ironically, a *theocentric* title!

<sup>9</sup> Matt 13:37-38a. (Note: the seed, here, is *the children* – literally, “sons” - of the Kingdom, rather than *the word* of the Kingdom of Matt 13:19.) “World” is *cosmos* in Greek. This is important as historically there has been some confusion and many have seen “the field” as being the *Church*. Hence there the notion that the Church contains “sinners and saints” (see also Matt 7:21–27; 13:47–50; 22:11–14). While that is undoubtedly true, this parable says something else: Because God’s Kingdom *has come* [inaugurated by the Christ Event – the life (i.e., teaching and deeds), death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus], the *whole world* rightfully belongs to the exalted Jesus. In 13:41 we read: “The Son of Man will send *his* angels, and they will gather from his kingdom everything that causes sin as well as all lawbreakers.” This not only points to the Son of Man’s authority (see [8]) but the broad *scope* of his kingdom.

<sup>10</sup> See also John 8:44; 2 Cor 4:3–4; 11:14.

will be realized at the end of time when the harvest is gathered and then sorted between those who align with God and those who rebel against him.<sup>11</sup> And because that's a serious matter, Jesus concludes, "Those who have ears had better listen"!<sup>12</sup>

So how does this parable connect with the original question, "Why doesn't God *do* something?" Various things come to my mind. First, perhaps Jesus used this parable to say that human beings are not competent to make the kinds of judgment required separate the wheat from the weeds. Only God who knows-all-that-can-be-known can make such judgments.<sup>13</sup> We are therefore to trust in God's justice and mercy - and in his *timing*. Jesus' contemporaries were impatient for God to act,<sup>14</sup> and we tend to be that way inclined too. Remember, the Jews expected the present evil age to dramatically change into the age to come when the final Judgement arrives, the so-called "Day of the Lord." In light of the resurrection, however, the early church came to understand Jesus to be *redefining* that expectation. The New Testament picture is that the kingdom of God has *begun* with Jesus and is presently operating *in parallel* with this present evil age.<sup>15</sup> In Paul's language, the "new creation" has begun and we are to live confident that the old creation has no ultimate power over us.<sup>16</sup> When Christ returns, he *will* bring about the final harvest and the old age will be completely destroyed and the new age - the kingdom of God - will be *fully* realized. However, as this parable shows, evil is very much present at this time. Paul recognized that too, as we heard in our earlier reading.<sup>17</sup> He speaks of us, along with the whole of creation, as "groaning in the pains of childbirth" – excited and full of hope at the future prospects of new life, but the present path continues to contain pain and suffering.<sup>18</sup> The parable is to therefore encourage Christians to endure in a world that does not acknowledge Jesus is its legitimate king.

I appreciate that all this can seem a bit of a copout today.<sup>19</sup> And it may still seem to us that God is inactive or uncaring. But *if* we believe that God was powerfully at work in the life of Jesus, *then* it is impossible to say that God doesn't care; he was very active, deeply compassionate, and battled with evil - even defeating it in the resurrection. God *has* acted, God *is* acting, God *will* act; the *final* overthrow the evil enemy is yet to come.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The "lawless" one's cause others to "stumble" (*skandalon* in Greek; the same word is used in Matt 18:6) are compared to the "righteous" ones.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 13:43b, NET Bible. Jesus, then, is behaving like a *prophet* who *warns* the people – some find that aspect strange!

<sup>13</sup> Even then, divine judgement is not as straight forward as we might think

<sup>14</sup> In Luke 9:51-56 is an incident that needs to be seen in this kind of context; divine judgment for others, grace for ourselves!

<sup>15</sup> This overlapping picture of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world can be very helpful in understanding Paul's language as well the teachings of Jesus. It is often referred to as the "now-and-not-yet" Kingdom of God.

<sup>16</sup> See 2 Cor 5:17. Paul also describes this as "life in the Spirit" and "life in the flesh"; see Rom 8:1-17.

<sup>17</sup> Rom 8:18-25.

<sup>18</sup> Theologian Robert Jewett expresses the same sentiment: "Our weakness (Rom 8:26) refers to the believer's vulnerable position of being caught between two ages, knowing enough of the coming age to yearn for it (along with the rest of creation) but continuing to be assaulted by the principalities and powers of the old age of the flesh," Jewett, *Romans*, 522.

<sup>19</sup> And Jews, then and now, haven't embraced Jesus' paradigm shift for reality. There are other Christian responses to the 'problem of evil'; I have addressed this extensively in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018)

<sup>20</sup> Theologian Colin Gunton writes: "As great a mystery as the origin of evil is the time taken to destroy it. In face of this, all we can say is that the nature of its overcoming by the patient obedience of the incarnate Son makes it clear that evil is finally to be destroyed only eschatologically (1 Cor 15). . . . That overcoming is, to be sure, anticipated in the resurrection of Jesus

Second, the evil seeds of suffering were *not* sown by God and he doesn't *want* them in the field; God wants the very opposite.<sup>21</sup> Take comfort from that fact today. And when the Master forbids the servants to go and pull out the weeds, this is *not* to be interpreted as a call for passivity in the face of evil. It is *not* a divine command to ignore injustice in the world, of violence in society, or wrong within the church. Remember, Jesus confronted and took action against evil and corruption. It is, rather, a realistic reminder that we don't have the ability to get rid of all the weeds and that sometimes attempts to pull up the weeds causes more harm than good; life is not that simple. We should not, therefore, expect perfection this side of Judgment Day. Consequently, this parable is the antidote against unrealistic idealism on the part of the social revolutionaries who expect utopia in *this* age, or on the part of a Christian who hopes to find the perfect church! Remember what I said in the beginning: We have a gut feeling that our world is somehow "broken" and we yearn for it to be fixed. Yet, despite the wonders of human achievement, we also see the mess and suffering we are causing to each other and to our planet. We must therefore recognize modernism's *lie* of humanity's *progress* and see our need for God's rescue, for we obviously are unable to save ourselves. This is not meant to sound pessimistic or negative; rather, if we *deny* evil even exists,<sup>22</sup> then we can not begin to address the root causes of our problems.

Finally, this parable tells us something about *how* the kingdom of God will be realized. It also tells us something about discipleship. We are *not* lost in a hopelessly compromised world because - as I have already said - the parable contains a promise that the weeds will ultimately be destroyed. Evil is temporary; only the good endures. This is an encouragement when we are tempted to be depressed by the power of evil in the world, in the church, and in our personal experience. The implication is *not*, of course, that evil does *not* matter; it *does*. And one day be judged and eradicated. The parable, then, leads us to a place of joy and of hope. Yes, we live in an imperfect world and human effort can't eradicate that fact. But that was never the Christian's job anyway. We are given the task of living as faithfully and obediently as possible, confident that the harvest is sure. Jesus has begun a kingdom revolution and we are called to partner with him, in the power of Holy Spirit, to bring good out of evil. This is a call for *action*, not passive acceptance. Are we ready, willing, and able? Let's respond: "Yes!" Amen.

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and in our times by the works of the Spirit, who enables particular beings and events to become what they are created to be in the Son. But until then it is only partial and by anticipation." Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 173–4.

<sup>21</sup> Consequently, there is now no "Why *me*?" question, for there is nothing *personal* in this view of suffering because God did not plan or micromanage our pain. Instead, according to this parable, suffering is simply "collateral damage" in the cosmic war. Stark as that may sound, this perspective means we need not—even should not—*blame God* for our suffering. As Gregory Boyd puts it, "While we need not assume there is a divine purpose *leading to* our suffering, we can and must trust that there is a divine purpose that *follows from it*," Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 196. And, in the context of Romans 8:28, Richard Rice adds: "This doesn't mean that everything is ultimately good. Nothing makes it good that bad things happen. What it means is that God works for good, no matter what happens. God doesn't let suffering have the last word. Instead God responds to every situation in ways that promote growth and healing. God works to bring about something good, no matter how bad things may be," Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 99.

<sup>22</sup> How ever we choose to define it. (Modernism also denies the spiritual and only believes in the material/physical.)