

## Stories of God and Life: Separation Day!”

A farmer sowed seeds in his field. One night while he was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds in that field. When the wheat crop began to ripen, then the weeds also appeared. The farm workers noticed what had happened. They asked the farmer, “Didn’t you sow good seed? Where did the weeds come from?” The farmer replied, “An enemy of mine did this” (I’ve read that even today this kind of thing happens in Eastern countries). The servants say, “Do you want us to pull up the weeds?” The “weed” here is the “bearded darnel”. It was a slightly poisonous weed. In the early stages of its growth, it looks like wheat. And by the time you can distinguish it, its roots are so intertwined with the wheat that if you pull out the weeds you risk pulling out the wheat also. The farmer understands this, and so he answers them, “No – don’t try to pull out the weeds, because in doing so you’re going to be uprooting the good seed too. Let both grow. Then at harvest time, the reapers will bind the weeds in bundles, and burn them.”

This is the second message in a summer series where we are looking at the parables Jesus told. Parables are stories about God’s kingdom or reign – what it’s like when God rules. Now if we had heard Jesus tell this story, do you think we would understand what He meant? Well, the disciples didn’t! So Jesus explains this parable. “Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!’” (Matthew 13:37-43.

What can we learn from this story? ***For one thing, there is a hostile, destructive power at work in the world.*** Jesus says it is an Evil One, the devil, who sows poisonous seed in the world. You say, “Harry, you don’t really believe in the Devil, do you? *Yes, I do.* The late Bishop Ken Goodson of Virginia was known as a staunch conservative. He had a very liberal United Methodist lady in his conference named Tess Hoover. One day Tess said to him, “Bishop, you’re so conservative that you probably believe in the devil.” The bishop’s tongue-in-cheek response was, “Yes I do, and I don’t like *her* at all!”

There is a devil who entices people to do evil. And his (or her) destructive work is everywhere! *There are no fields without weeds* - no safe havens in this world totally free of the presence of evil and the Evil One! It is in the halls of government, in corporate offices, in filmmaking studios, in the behavior of street gangs and unruly crowds, at McDonalds and Applebees, and in the privacy of our homes!

And this sinister power is also at work *in the church*. Even *in the Church* the Enemy is sowing toxic seeds of unbelief, pride and self-seeking, prejudice, greed and lust.

***The parable also shows that God allows good and evil to exist together – for a while.*** In any

group, you have bad people mixed in with good people. No doubt in every *church* there are the real disciples of Jesus, but also those who appear to be followers, but aren't. Remember, even among Jesus' 12 apostles there was a Judas, a betrayer.

***The parable also teaches that it's hard to distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous, those of the kingdom and those not of the kingdom.*** It's hard to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds. We may *think* it's easy to tell who's saved and who isn't saved, who belongs to Christ and who doesn't. But can we understand the deepest intent of a person's heart? Can we see beneath the surface to tell what that person *really* is like?

***Because of this, we should not be a "weed puller".*** In the parable, the servants wanted to pull the weeds and fix the problem! But the master said, "No, because in pulling the weeds you'll pull out the good grain along with it."

Do you know any "weed pullers?" (Think for a moment). People who figure it's their job to pull out all the evil in the world...and in you! They know who's saved and who isn't. Who's righteous and who isn't. Who has the correct beliefs and who doesn't.

There are television preachers who act like *their* view of Christianity, or the Bible, or prophecy is the *only correct one* – and if you don't agree with them, you are outside God's kingdom. There are "weed pullers" looking for the perfect church. They insist everybody should be "spiritual", and have the right theology and the right politics; that the worship style and church procedures are correct ones. I've had some of these people in the churches I have served, and it makes you feel like you are under a microscope, and they are watching and judging everything you and the church does. To be honest, these kind of persons are a royal pain in the neck. And sooner or later, someone or something in the church doesn't measure up to their standards, and they'll leave. No doubt they will stay at the next church until something doesn't suit them, and then leave that church. In the process, they tend to create all sorts of upheaval and bad feeling within the congregation

***This kind of "weed pulling" has blackened the name of Christ and the Church throughout history.*** In Salem the Puritans burned suspected witches, to maintain a pure society. In the Spanish Inquisition people who disagreed with the official teaching of the church were tortured. People have murdered abortionists and bombed abortion clinics in the name of Christ. Others have embraced bitterness and cut off all ties with their children because they disagree with some of their children's lifestyle decisions. In the end, in trying to root out weeds, these folk do more damage to the kingdom of God than if we'd just let the weeds grow until harvest time.

***Let's accept the fact that in the world, and even in the church, good and bad exist side by side.*** Does this mean we should make no judgments in the church? That we should allow people to do anything without holding them accountable? No, not at all! For instance, say a church leader of a Sunday School teacher is arrested for drunk driving. This is something we don't just ignore. In a situation like that, we would probably best say to the person, "You need to step down for a while until you get your life squared away." But I think this parable warns against pointing fingers at people and saying, "You're a Christian...but you're not," " "You're righteous...but

you're not...". *None of us is qualified to make that judgment.*

As I look out over the congregation this morning, I can't tell the wheat from the weeds. I don't know what's in your heart. How can we be sure that the person in the church who appears so committed to Christ might not have a secret life that few but God knows about? On the other hand, someone who might look like a "weed" spiritually might just be the real deal! A few weeks ago I visited a friend of mine in the state prison near State College. He was a pastor. For years I met with him and another pastor for lunch twice a month. It was a total shock when I found out my friend was being arrested for sexually molesting at least one boy. I had no clue that he had this weakness. Likewise with the husband and wife couple who were on the church staff as youth directors in a church I served. This man one day was apprehended and sent to jail for sexual improprieties with teenage girls. I, along with many others, were totally shocked when this information surfaced.

But on a positive note, with some of the people I've known who *appeared* to have little Christian commitment, I discovered that they were loving and serving the Lord in ways I didn't realize. Truthfully, sometimes I feel more like a weed than ripened grains of wheat. So before we decide to get the weeds out of the church, or our workplace or our neighborhood, it would be wise to get the weeds out of our own life!

***This parable also shows that in the end, there will be a "separation day."*** God allows wheat and weeds to grow side by side – *for a time*. But in the end, judgment will take place! A number of Jesus' parables speak of judgment and separation. When the kingdom comes God will separate the righteous from the unrighteous. The parable of the fish net also has this same theme: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:47-50).

***The last judgment is one of the central themes of the Bible and Christian theology, but it is not in vogue to talk about today.*** There was an article in the Scranton, PA Sunday Times titled "Clergy Increasingly Reluctant To Raise Hell." This article said that pastors today are hesitant to preach about hell even if they believe in it because people don't want to hear about it. It quotes Bruce Shelley, a professor of church history at Denver Theological Seminary. Shelley said, "It's just too negative. Churches are under enormous pressure to be consumer-oriented. Churches today feel the need to be appealing rather than demanding."

This newspaper article also related that the first catechism in the Presbyterian Church (USA), drawn up a few years back, mentions hell only once. The chief writer of the catechism, George Hunsinger, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, wanted the catechism to address hell more directly and "talk about divine judgment in a responsible way." But the committee rejected the idea without much debate. Hunsinger went on to say, "It's a failure of nerve by churches that are not wanting to take on a non-popular stance."

In our culture, many people have pretty much written off the idea of a final judgment – that we are accountable to a God who has absolute standards of good and evil. In our more secularized society, where God is moved more on the fringe of life, it naturally follows that people lose the sense that we have to answer to God. This also leads to moral decay. There are no absolutes, no divine standard of behavior, no God we need to be accountable to, so we can pretty much do as we please.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist relates a story he heard when he first started practicing law in Arizona. In the earliest days of the settlement of Arizona, the Archbishop of Los Angeles sent a missionary out to Phoenix to try to establish a church there. After 2 years the priest returned to tell the archbishop that he couldn't start a congregation in Phoenix. "Why not?" the bishop asked. "Are there no people there?" "Yes, there are people there," the priest said. "But those lucky enough to live there during the winter have no need of heaven, and those who live in Arizona during the summer have no fear of hell."

It's interesting that while many in our culture don't fear hell or even consider a final judgment, and many pastors shy away from talking about this, the secular media at times seems eager to deal with these spiritual themes – judgment, heaven, hell (even though the Hollywood version may reflect little of biblical truth). Have you ever seen the movie "Ghost"? It stars Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore. They play the characters of Sam and Molly, an upscale Manhattan couple who've moved into their first apartment. They have it all, but as they return one night, Sam is mugged and killed. But Sam's "ghost" rises from his body and justice must be done before he's allowed to leave this world for his appointed place in the afterlife. In some of the film's graphic scenes, the demons appear from the underworld and commence to drag screaming victims into hell to meet their doom!

The parable of the weeds and wheat, and other parables of Jesus, teach that there is a final separation between good and evil, between the righteous and the unrighteous. Hebrews 9:17: says, "Each person is destined to die once. And after that comes judgment." We must all give an account of our life to God!

***What is the final judgment based upon? When separation day comes, how do we know whether we'll be counted among the righteous, or the unrighteous? First, it depends on our response to Jesus and His message.*** Hear these words of Jesus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only son of God... whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath" (John 3:16-18, 36).

Our response to Jesus determines how we fare on judgment day! We will not be condemned if we "believe" on Him. The word "believe" in the Bible does not mean just believing some facts about Jesus, but trusting Him, giving ourselves to Him as the One who forgives our sins, and

brings us back into a relationship with God. We have this promise: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

***But the final judgment is also based on the life we’ve lived and the things we have done.***

2 Corinthians 5:10 tell us, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.”

Jesus said the Father has given Him authority to exercise judgment. He then goes on: “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29). In the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, Jesus says judgment is based on how we response to persons in need: the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, those in prison, the stranger, those needing clothes. So, Jesus seems to indicate that while all who trust Him as Savior will be saved and there will be no condemnation, God’s judgment will also take into account how much we’ve put our belief in Jesus into practice, by living right, and caring about people, and obeying God’s commands.

There is evil in the world, and evil people. For a while, God lets the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous, exist, side by side. But eventually there is a separation day, when God weeds out the bad from the good.

*And let’s always keep in mind, it’s not our job to figure out who is who!*

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