

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Do You Really Want to Yield the Sickle?”**

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Parable of the Weeds – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Recently, a couple of our members were at a brat fry at Glenn’s meat market. (Nothing unusual there. I can usually spot one or two of you wherever there’s a bratwurst to be found.) Our members were sitting there at a picnic table in the shade next to the big fiber glass chicken, enjoying the breezy weather and a good brat. Another couple was at the table from Oconomowoc. They didn’t know one another, but the four of them struck up a nice conversation. Suddenly, however, the conversation took a dramatic turn when the fellow from Oconomowoc asked, “Are they going to have that fag fest again in Watertown?” He was probably alluding to the drag queen event at Riverside Park last year.

Understandably, our member didn’t want to get into a deep, dark discussion on that topic, with a stranger, while eating a brat. He said, “I guess it’s not for me to judge.” That’s when the other guy’s wife chimed in. “Oh, but it is! You can look it up in the Bible. We *must* judge such people and behaviors! If we don’t it will only get worse.”

What do you think? Should Christians be bold and loud to judge sin and sinners where we see them for the preservation of society? Should we quote Ezekiel 3, “If you do not warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand” (v. 19ff). Or, should we quote Matthew 7, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”

Our parable can shed some light. On the surface, it’s about agricultural sabotage. A wheat field is sowed with good seed. One night soon after, under the cover of darkness, an enemy sowed weeds among the wheat. When the wheat came up, the weeds came up too. What to do? The servants just hate the sight of all those weeds growing within the beautiful wheat. They want to go into the field and clean it up. Get rid of the wicked. Save the good. Make the world clean and perfect right now. It’s a seductive idea. And there have been many in history who’ve tried it, who have put themselves up in God’s judgment seat to judge between the good and the wicked and destroy the wicked. But in the parable, the owner, God, will have none of it. “No” he says, “lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers to gather the weeds then and bind them in bundles to be burned but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Notice his calmness. He’s not cursing or promising to ring the guy’s neck who wrecked his field. And he doesn’t seem surprised either. Just sad. He knows there are dark forces at work in the world. He knows “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the . . . spiritual forces of evil” (Eph. 6:12). My grandmother used the expression: “It’s part of the cost of living.” That is, we live in a fallen world, wrecked by sin, death and the devil. So, there’s really no reason to be surprised or angered. It’s just the sad and on-going state of affairs.

Notice also the owner’s primary concern is for his wheat, God’s people. Going after the weeds (not God’s people) could do damage to the wheat, and He finds that intolerable.

It’s all very consistent. Remember how for the sake of just a few righteous ones, God refused to bring down his wrath on the rebellious city of Sodom? And remember how Jonah wanted God to wipe out the city of Nineveh? God would have none of it. He was more interested in their salvation than he was in their destruction. And how about that Samaritan village that rejected Jesus and his disciples (Lk. 9:52ff)? James and John asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?” Jesus wasn’t amused. He turned and rebuked them. He didn’t come to condemn the world, but to save the world (Jn. 3:17). He later taught the disciples, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet” and move on. Don’t get dragged down into hatred; keep moving forward.

We want to be careful lest in fighting the dragon we become the dragon. Christians can become so dour and disapproving, grim and judgmental that our witness is effectively nullified. Instead of a winsome witness, it can become repulsive. Instead of sending up a pleasing fragrance to the Lord, we become odious, smelling of herbicides. Our focus should be on grace rather than power. Our calling is not to impose Christian morality on an unwilling nation. Our calling is to “live such good lives among the pagans that, they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12). Our lives should be marked by joy rather than judgmentalism, compassion rather than condemnation, service and mercy rather than anger and enmity.

This does not mean we throw a blind eye to sin and evil. 1 Corinthians 5 is important here, and very clear. Paul says, “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this *world* who are sexually immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this *world*. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who calls himself a *brother* [that is, one who claims to be a Christian]

but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of *mine* to judge those *outside* the church? Are you not to judge those *inside*? *God* will judge those *outside*" (vv. 9-13).

You see the distinction? Our concern as Christians is to address sin within the church because calling oneself a Christian while continuing to live an immoral life is reprehensible and gives a false testimony to Christ. People might assume the church approves ungodly living and thus the name of Christ would be dishonored. The church is to exercise spiritual discipline over believers within. It is not our job to judge people who are unsaved. For now, their behavior is judged by the government, but a time will come when God will be their judge.

I read last week that an official of the National Education Association, the largest U.S. teachers union, recommends asking preschoolers their "preferred pronouns." Can you imagine? Now, how do we, as Christians, respond to that foolishness? We cannot affirm it because Scripture is clearly opposed to such confusion. It would also not be good to let our anger morph into hatred and judgment. In Ephesians, Paul calls us "to speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). Paul also writes, "Get rid of all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander" (v. 31), such as was heard at the brat fry. These things will not help us be the light of the world. These things belong to the darkness and not the light.

One temptation might be to withdraw from the world and seek only the company of like-minded people. We cannot do that either because Jesus said, "A city on a hill cannot be hidden" (Mt. 5:16) and "You are the salt of the earth" (v. 13). Being the salt of the earth cannot be fulfilled in this building. It happens outside this building.

So, if the local school system were to start pushing teachers to ask preschoolers what their preferred pronouns are, then it would certainly be appropriate to go to one of their open meetings with a carefully prepared statement in opposition. It would also be appropriate to speak against such things in conversations with friends, co-workers, and in the voting booth. But do it all with gentleness and respect, again, not like that fellow at the brat fry. Paul writes, be ready with the Word "in season and out, to reprove, rebuke, exhort, but with complete patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim. 4:2).

We condemn the sin, but it's not ours to condemn the sinner. One who wants to take the speck out of his brother's eye must do so with complete humility, because in the Bible there's no room for arrogance or self-righteousness or hypocrisy. That's why Jesus said, "First remove the *log* from your own eye." If we deign to take the speck out of our brother's eye, it must be done with love and humility and compassion, in part for your own good. Jesus said it is the merciful who receive mercy (Mt. 5:7). He also said, "In the same way you judge others, you *will* be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Mt. 7:2).

Remember, we interact with others as fellow sinners. We are redeemed, for sure, but still saints and sinners simultaneously. So, there's no top-down communication toward other sinners, nor should there even be a whiff of self-righteousness in the air. No, we need Christ's ongoing forgiveness just as much as anyone else out there.

The servants in the parable ask, "Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?" He replied, "Let both grow together until harvest, when I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned." What does that burning point to? It points to the work of the angels on the last Day as they usher the damned to their eternal fate. So, the owner says there will be a reaping, but not yet, and it is not your responsibility. This is a merciful invitation for us to lay down a burden which is not ours to carry or ours to carry out.

That is, do you really *want* to wield the sickle? Do you want the responsibility to cut down and separate the good from the bad? Can *you* read the heart? What an awful burden that God must judge people He has created and loved, people for whom He died, knowing that the act of reaping judgment will lead to a final and eternal separation. Some will enter paradise as children of the Kingdom, and some will be cast away from God's presence forever. The stakes could not be higher. If we take that task on ourselves, our zeal for justice might cause actual harm where God would provide mercy. 2 Timothy 2, "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone . . . patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. Who knows, God may grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth."

Evil and good grow right next to each other. Their roots are intertwined. Those who belong to God and those who belong to the devil—they live as neighbors. They marry each other. They are born into the same families. And some live their whole lives appearing to be one or the other, and surprising everyone in the end. No, we cannot do God's job of judging and separating, nor do we want to. It's our job to be merciful to fellow sinners, as God has been merciful to us. We know sin and shame and guilt are God-awful burdens to bear, and we praise the Lord that He has already carried that load for us all to the cross. With this parable, He seems to be saying to us, "Let me also take from you the impossible burden of judging others."

Don't fret about the weeds or the one who sows them. God has freed you from that burden, by taking it on himself, even as He has freed you from the burden of *your* sin. Amen.