

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

²⁷ “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?’

²⁸ “ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹ “ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.³⁰ 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.’ ”

⁶ 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.”

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

⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.⁴¹ 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.⁴² They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.
(Matthew 13:24-30,36-43)

What is the Kingdom of Heaven Like?

Most of you probably know that my family is moving from the house on Frederick Street into the one on West Chicago. A couple of weeks ago, I packed the contents of my sons’ desks. They had the usual things like soccer trophies and school awards and toys. But I was surprised by how much of what was there was stuff that only a young boy would treasure – bottle caps and old stickers and feathers and rocks. In the eyes of my sons, those things were treasures. But in the adult world, all of it put together wouldn’t generate enough money to buy a tank of gas. As I tried to carefully preserve those treasures, I thought about the difference between what we adults think is important and what God tells us is important. So many of the things we value most in this world are old bottle caps to God. All of it put together couldn’t buy us one minute in heaven.

Why do young boys treasure rocks and feathers and old bottle caps? You might as well ask why we adults treasure nice cars and beautiful homes and healthy bank accounts. It’s easy for us to value those things because we can see them and feel them. But the kingdom of heaven is different. It’s hard for us to wrap our minds around. In fact, in the chapter from Matthew that we have before us this morning, Jesus uses six different parables to teach us what that kingdom is like. What does he teach us? **What is the kingdom of heaven like?**

I.

It’s like good seed sown in a field. Jesus told a parable about a man who went out and planted good seed – in this case, wheat. But during the night, an enemy snuck into his field and scattered the seeds of weeds. When the crop came up, his servants noticed the problem. When I was teenager, I worked for a farmer. Sometimes, he would send me out to walk down very long furrows and hoe out the weeds. Every field fights an endless war against weeds. But what the servants saw was far worse. His entire field was contaminated by weeds. The man’s servants suggested picking the weeds. But the landowner knew they would uproot the good plants in the process and do far more damage. So he decided to let them all grow together until harvest time, when he’d have the harvesters remove the weeds and burn them. Then they’d harvest the grain.

Jesus said, **“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.”** When he explained the parable to his disciples, he said, **“The field is the world.”** The kingdom heaven is something that takes place in this world. Wouldn’t you think that the kingdom of heaven would be someplace else – like maybe in heaven? How can Jesus say that it’s here? When we hear that word “kingdom,” we think of place.

We think of borders and capitals. But the kingdom of heaven is not a place. It's an activity. The kingdom of heaven is God ruling over our hearts. It does not come with borders that we can ride up to and look over. It comes with the gospel message. It comes when God reaches into our hearts through the story about Jesus and he moves us out of the power of the devil and puts us under his power. So the kingdom of heaven is everywhere and "every when" that the gospel is preached because there and then God makes believers.

The kingdom of heaven is right here and now. God has sowed good seed – he has made believers. But while we live in this field of the world, there are two great threats to God's kingdom. One is doubt or despair. This is what happens when we look around and we don't see enough evidence of what God is doing. This is supposed to be his kingdom. How come everybody isn't coming in? How come we don't have a twenty or thirty new converts every week? How come we don't have even one? Why do we, the people of God, spend so much time and effort struggling with out budget and trying to work out differences between people and wrestling with our attempts to live Christian lives? That's doubt. It questions what God is doing because it doesn't see enough evidence. And in its final form, despair, it gives up on faith.

The other threat has a funny name: triumphalism. That's when Christians assume that we're supposed to win. God promises that he'll take care of us, so, of course, I'm going to make lots of money in my life, and of course, my children will never have serious illnesses. If I just let him "lead me" only good things will happen to me. That kind of thinking leads us to believe that if we get behind the right candidates, we can elect a president and a congress that will govern this country according to Christian principles and that will usher in an age of prosperity and brotherhood across this great land of ours. It leads us to believe that if we come up with the right vision and use the right kinds of music and activities and preaching, this church will become a megachurch. We'll be on TV. People will pay attention to what we say.

What could possibly be wrong with that? Simply put: it's a lie. When all those things don't happen, when our kids get cancer and our nation gets stuck in endless wars and our congregation shrinks instead of growing, people begin to feel lied to. They get cynical. They figure pastors and churches just want their money. And faith gradually dies.

But if we thought of the world in terms of Jesus' parable, we'd be armed against these threats. God made us the sons of the kingdom of heaven. But we live with the children of the evil one. Every unbeliever is a slave of the devil, whether they know it or not. That's even true about people we like and are friends with and even about people we might marry. We will live, mixed in with the weeds, until the harvest – until Judgment Day. Weeds always multiply faster than good plants do, so there will always be more of them. Weeds choke out the good plants. Even when they don't kill them, they make them less fruitful. The attitudes of society, of the entertainment industry, of people in general are hostile to our faith. The devil wants to kill it. Even when he fails, he does make us less fruitful. The sin in our hearts conspires with the sin around us, and every one of us sins. Day in and day out, we fail to serve our Lord. We treasure all the things this world treasures and we ignore the things God treasures – like the gospel, the fellowship of believers, the joy of serving.

Someone told me once about a farmer who took him out into his field. This man was a city boy, like most of us here. The plants were just coming up. The farmer pointed to one and he said, "See that? That's wheat." Then he pointed to another one and he said, "See that? Them there are tares" which is an old word for weeds. Then he asked, "Can you tell the difference?" The city boy couldn't, because they look so much alike. Sometimes it's hard to tell who is a believer and who isn't. Sometimes, the people we admire are weeds. Sometimes, the wheat, the people God puts in our congregation, don't seem all that likeable. Sometimes, they don't even seem all that Christian.

That's the reality we live. The wheat, the good seed, is not better because our hearts are better. Our hearts are just as sinful as the hearts of the unbelievers around us. We all deserve eternal death. If you don't believe that, just take a minute and do an honest appraisal of how many of the attitudes of this life you've sucked into your heart and made your own. What's your attitude about wealth? About work? About the church? Is it what Christ commands it to be? If it isn't, you're showing that you're a sinner. You're showing that you were born a weed and you deserve to be burned in hell just like they do.

But God sent Jesus to die for you. Then he reached into your heart with the gospel and he changed a natural born weed into wheat. Only God could do that miracle. He did it for us! Yes, life here is still a challenge. Those weeds around us want to choke us out and the wheat around us doesn't always do a good job of building us up. But before the world began, God chose us to have everlasting life. He found us and gave us

faith. And no matter how the devil rages against us, he cannot conquer us. No matter how many times our sinful hearts betray us, God will lead us to repent of our sin. He will forgive us and keep our faith alive because he makes us the good seed. He makes us his kingdom. He rules in our hearts, here, today.

II.

The kingdom of heaven is now. It's something God is doing in us. He will keep doing it. He will continue to proclaim the gospel and make believers. But there is another way to look at the kingdom. Jesus spoke about that way right at the end of the parable when he said, **“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”** Judgment Day will show us what the kingdom of heaven was meant to be like. **The kingdom of heaven is like the sun shining.**

On Judgment Day, the angels will cast the unbelievers into hell, which Jesus describes as “the fiery furnace.” The point of the fire is agony of hell. Jesus often calls it “the outer darkness.” It's the place where the condemned are locked out of the glory of God. They don't get to shine like the sun. They don't ever experience the love and fellowship with Jesus that you and I are looking forward to. Jesus says that in the fiery furnace, **“there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** All that pain will go on and on forever. Even the toughest person will have weep, knowing it will never end.

But sometimes, people misunderstand the gnashing of teeth. The Jews gnashed their teeth when they were angry. In hell, the unbelievers won't be sorry for their sins – they'll be bitter and mad at God. Think about how much you suffer when you're angry over what someone has done to you. They might not even know how you feel, but you can't eat, you can't sleep. Imagine that feeling magnified a million times over and going on forever. That is hell.

But that is not what's going to happen to us. We will shine like the sun. We will share in the glory of Jesus. God is going to take us into his own family and treat us like his own children. Jesus points to the most brilliant sunshine you've ever seen on the most glorious summer day, when you looked out over a lake or a wood or a mountain and your heart sighed at how unbelievably beautiful God's world is. You will be that beautiful when your heart is finally purified from all sin and you live with Jesus forever.

All that is ours. But note the warning Jesus announces: **“He who has ears, let him hear.”** Everyone needs to ask: how can I shine like sun instead of being burned forever in the fiery furnace? The only way is by recognizing that we deserve hell by nature. All those times that the attitudes of this life distracted us from God and his promises, all those worthless things of this life which we treasure, all that comes from sin.

You and I need to recognize that we deserve hell. But then we need to trust that Jesus came to set us free. Of all the people who ever lived, only Jesus had a perfect heart. Only Jesus loved his Father perfectly. Only Jesus was a perfect Christian. But he didn't live that perfect life to make us feel even worse by comparison. He came down here to take our place. God calls us perfect because Jesus was. God call us perfect because Jesus took all those sinful attitudes in all these sinful hearts and he died for them. He suffered hell itself on the cross. That three hours of darkness, that was hell. God abandoning him, that was hell. Jesus suffered everything that a whole world of sinners deserved. He died and paid for us all. Then he rose so that we can rise. Today, he has returned to glory. He lives in heaven and he shines like the sun. Because he shines, we will shine.

That makes us the kingdom of heaven. While we live here, God calls us to be good seed. To hear his word. To come to communion. To live a life that praises him. To change our sinful attitudes and treasure what he treasures: the gospel. And he promises the day will come when we will shine like the sun. We will be freed from living with weeds and God will reveal us as his true children. Do you know who will be most surprised and impressed by the glory that you will show on that day? You yourself because it will be more than anything you could've imagined! And you will praise God forever. Amen.