



KINGDOM EPIPHANIES

The Farmers Intent

January 24, 2021

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 85:8-13

I can't wait to hear what he'll say.
GOD's about to pronounce his people well,
The holy people he loves so much,
so they'll never again live like fools.
See how close his salvation is to those who fear him?
Our country is home base for Glory!

Steadfast Love and Truth meet in the street,
Right Living and Whole Living embrace and kiss!
Truth sprouts green from the ground,
Right Living pours down from the skies!
Oh yes! GOD gives Goodness and Beauty;
our land responds with Bounty and Blessing.
Right Living strides out before him,
and clears a path for his passage.

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43

Verses 24-30 (Holly)

Jesus put another parable before them, saying,

'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, 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, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned but gather the wheat into my barn.'

Verses 36-43 (Christine)

Then Jesus dismissed the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him saying, 'Explain to us the parable of weeds on the field.' Jesus answered,

'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all who practice lawlessness, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. He who has ears, let him hear.'

INTRODUCTION | The Point of the Placement

Remember that parables are not meant to clarify, at least not straight away. The stories with intent are told as they are to those who would have ears to hear, ready hearts, for the kingdom of God Jesus was actually revealing, **not merely the kingdom we are prepared to receive**. Jesus does not use parables to explain life with God to our “satisfaction, but to call attention to the unsatisfactoriness of all previous explanations and understandings.”¹ And that is most certainly true of our parable today. A parable that challenges what we (and most of the world) think is at the heart of the kingdom of God: judgment of sin and evil.

[Last week](#) we immersed ourselves into the poorly named “parable of the sower,” a parable that all three synoptic Gospel writers use as an introduction to [a shift in Jesus’ earthly ministry](#). If we miss its point and function, says Jesus (Mk. 4:13), it will mean that we’ll have a hard time *not* missing the point and function of the parables that follow. This parable for the parables describes the universal and inexorable nature of Jesus and claims that the kingdom of God is about our union with God.

“on the plain terms of the parable,” Rober Capon argues, “Jesus has already, and literally, been sown everywhere in the world—and quite without a single bit of earthly cooperation or even consent.”²

What distinguishes the life birthed in the soil is only the faith to holding fast with a ready heart to the granular and gradual—all-be-it life-giving—union of seed and soil, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:26), as Paul puts it. When we cling to the person and promises of God-With-Us, we experience the fullness (fruit or maturity) of life as it was meant to be. We experience our specific and unique lives individually and collectively as God created them to be lived, bring forth abundance in union with him. [Bless-edness](#) is the foundation of our religion, a life lived in harmony with God, others, and even within ourselves. Sin—hard-heartedness, a superficial relationship/connection with God, and appetites and affections for lessor goods—do not keep the kingdom of God from coming, but rather keep us from experiencing the bountiful produce of kingdom living.

Jesus was sown into the world, “to produce people in whom the power of the kingdom will bear fruit...The biggest difference made by the responses to the Word [in last week’s parable] is the difference they make to us, for us, and in us. **They decide not whether the Word will achieve his purposes but whether we will enjoy his achievement—or find ourselves in opposition to it.**”³ The difference is subtle but the key to entering, living, in the kingdom.

Peter, who was there as Jesus spoke this story, would later describe the experience of our union with God through Jesus this way,

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. **His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them **you may become partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped

¹ Robert Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 5.

² *Ibid.*, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

from the corruption [failure of function, failure to mature] that is in the world because of sinful desires. For this reason make every effort to supplement [bring to maturity] your faith... (2 Peter 1:2-5a)

Jesus' concern for us is that we would be reconciled to the Father, and live a life fully in who we are created to be, for the blessing of the world. **Blessing is why the Messiah came, to bring life to maturity, not just to an end.** It is for this purpose, the purpose of life, not judgment (Jn. 12:47), that the Word has become flesh. Jesus is not threatening judgment in the parable of the sower. As he will say in John's gospel,

"I did not come to judge the world but to save it" (12:47).

He is not pronouncing condemnation on those who fail to make the best response to seed; instead, "he is almost reflectively portraying what we miss when we fall short and fail to bear fruit," what life without a humble, open-heart to God-With-Us results. The result of a life in which our hearts remain hard to God's intimacy and provision, and our relationship with him remains distant, and our desires and loves settle on something less than him is unfruitfulness. A missing out on maturity and progeny, life forever. And here is the thing, unfruitfulness is not a "punishment visited on it by the seed, but **an unhappy refusal on the plant's part from what the [sower] and the seed had in mind for it.** It is missing of its own fullness, its own maturity—even in some deep sense, of its own life. So too with us. If we make deficient responses to the Word, we do not simply get ourselves in [the hot stove], we fail to become ourselves at all."⁴

Or as Jesus described it elsewhere,

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him...And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and the people *loved* the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." (Jn. 3:17, 19)

So, Jesus' message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17), is a message to turn, let go of what you are holding onto (ideas, expectations, assumptions of who God is and what God wants) and hold fast, cling to God-With-You, God-For-You, but maybe not as you expected him.

But let's be honest, we have a hard time picturing God's kingdom without punishment of sin, without direct and immediate judgment of evil. Religion (as many of us and our neighbors have come to know it) is about getting it right and getting out what is wrong, and for a good reason. The ills and evils of this world are no joke. They corrupt life, make life putrid, and, if we are honest, make us doubt if there is good, especially a good God who raises a bountiful and prosperous existence.

When God is with us, we believe and even hope that evil is overcome, pushed out so that we can live life without the ills. And it is undoubtedly the job of the religious to work out (uproot) those ills and evils out of the soil. Isn't it?

⁴ Ibid., 73.

Jesus knew the parable of the sower would have us saying ‘*Yes and amen,*’ on the one hand, as well as, ‘*Wait a minute,*’ as the story got around our expectations. And so he tells the story of farmer’s intent...I mean the parable of the weeds which Holly and Christine read for us moments ago. A story (along with the parables surrounding it) that helps us further understand that **life in God’s kingdom is more about bringing us to maturation than it is about bringing an end.** So let’s jump in.

THE FARMER’S INTENT | The Climax and Missing the Point

Let me say this at the beginning. I do not believe this parable is about you and I trying to live a holy life or not. Jesus makes it clear that we are to pursue a life in-step in character and kind to the life he lived, a life lived in loving obedience to the Father’s heart. I also do not believe this parable is about our role in standing against the evil of this world or not. Jesus has already said that the mature life is a life of peacemaking, loving our enemies, and overcoming evil with good. (see [Matt. 5-7](#)) So, from the get-go, let me be clear, this parable is not about what most of us have thought this parable is about. **This parable is not about how you and I deal with sin and evil.**

And yet, we listen to what Holly and Christine read cannot help but center on judgment. Because of Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ desire for an explanation (vs. 36-43), it is hard for us not to think the main emphasis of the parable is dealing with the weeds. And to be candid, our perception is somewhat correct; it is about how the weeds are dealt with, *but not at the end.*

While this parable has proven to be one of the most challenging and debated parables in Christian (and secular) history, especially when it comes to application, there is, however, ironically one point of agreement. Nearly every pastor, theologian, and scholar in church history have agreed that the weight or climax of the parable itself is not the burning of the weeds but rather the Master’s intent to “Let both [wheat and weed] grow together until the harvest” (v. 30). On this phrase hangs the stunning revelation of the farmer’s nature and his intention for his field and harvest. These seven words reveal what he thinks about the betrayal, its consequences, the solution, and, more importantly, for you and me today—what to do in the in-between.

Yet, scholars, theologians, pastors, and disciples alike, show a tendency to focus on the destruction of the weeds and miss Jesus’ spectacular (and controversial) point. After this parable and its adjoining accompaniments, the crowd was offended by Jesus. Their rejection of Jesus’ words led to him stopping the direct demonstrations of the kingdom (13:57-58).

Perhaps we focus on the wrong end of the story out of fear, religious zeal, self-righteous zeal, hatred of evil, expectations that such things will be destroyed, or merely an obsession with the future, I do not know. Regardless, my guess is this parable upsets us somehow, which I think is the opposite of what Jesus intended. We, too, take offense because we misunderstand. The parable is not giving us an answer to the problem of evil, why it’s with us, or how it will be dealt with, or even how we are to deal with it, but rather revealing to us the intent and nature of the farmer. What the farmer is up to and why.

“Let both grow” is how the ESV translates the sentence. Other translations say “Allow both to grow” (NASB) and “Permit both to grow” (Literal Standard Translation) and even “Suffer both to grow” (Douay-Rheims Bible).

The Grek word that each English translation attempts to capture is “*aphete*” from the verb “*aphiemi*,” which has two primary meanings in the New Testament. The first is to leave or to permit or to dismiss. The same root is found in verse 36 when Jesus ‘*apheis*’ or dismisses the crowds or left them alone. This first meaning is well represented by “Let” and “Allow” in the majority of our translations and certainly fits the context. But, as we have said before, the parables are meant to take us deeper than the story's representative parts. They describe something, usually something just as real as the familiar elements of the short stories themselves, but not so visible: things like our souls, our hearts, our relation to the world, how God relates to us, and the nature and intent of God’s kingdom. The layered feature of the parable brings us to the second significant meaning.

When *aphiemi* is “applied to debts, trespasses, sins, and so on,” it “comes out in English as ‘forgive.’”⁵ In fact, just a few chapters before, Jesus taught the people, particularly the disciples, to pray,

“*Aphes*, us our debts (our sins as Luke puts it), as we also *aphiemen* our debtors (those who have sinned against us).” (Matt. 6:12, Lk. 11:4)

So, when the crowds, the religious leaders, and the disciples heard Jesus speak the word “*aphete*,” they would have heard a word that would have made them pause. Not only was the action of the farmer unexpected—what farmer lets weeds grow without trying to get them out, especially a large patch of weeds nefariously and thoroughly mixed in, putting the entire crop at risk—but surprising too is Jesus’ choice of words to describe the farmer’s intention. It’s like the farmer doesn’t think that the treacherous act puts the whole crop in jeopardy like he has non-violent and perhaps slow-acting ways of dealing with the problem. Not because he doesn’t care about the wheat, but precisely because he does care about the wheat.

So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather [the weeds]?’ But [the Master] said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.’ (v. 28-29)

Jesus’ surprising use of *aphete* would have subtly stirred in the listeners', memories of how God has dealt with the sin of humanity in the stories of their ancestry. Like the first story in which humans chose to follow the serpenty lie of the “evil one” rather than Father, to which the consequence was death. And yet, the Father’s first response was compassion, sacrifice, and perseverance (Gen. 3). Then even as patient mercy was extended even to the offenders' offspring and his evil (murder) (Gen. 4), the progeny of sin took root amid the grace and multiplied, leading to a great reaping flood. And still, patient mercy was extended and forever promised (Gen. 6-9). And then, in the most formative of their ancestral stories, when God brought them out of slavery into the promised abundant life, and still they choose something other than him, away of living that did want to deal with him face-to-face (see Ex. 19-34 & Matt. 13:15), God’s response was patient mercy, salvation that took the form of God-With-Them despite them:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with Moses there...The LORD passed before Moses and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity

⁵ Ibid., 90.

and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third generation.'

And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, 'If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.'

And the LORD said, 'Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.' (Ex. 34:5-11)

A few verses later (v. 34-35), Matthew reminisces on this description of the farmer's intent, his patient mercy and steadfast love that does not dismiss the fruits of evil, but neither seeks its immediate removal saying,

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet [whose psalm reads]

'I will open my mouth in parables;
I will utter what has been hidden
since the foundation of the
world.' (What humanity has failed to grasp from the very beginning!)

So, in these two parables, which Matthew intentionally puts back-to-back, two of the only three parables in which Jesus explains, by the way, we have a description of the kingdom of God in which God is completely inhabiting the earth (through the hearts of humanity), and while not everyone experiences the fullness of this reality, and there is resistance to the inexorable produce of its union with the good seed in the field, the farmer shows long-patience, mercy, forgiveness so that what has been planted might bring forth its intended fruit. Evil is not dismissed or overlooked, but it is "suffered," allowed to bring forth its own mirrored but fruitless plants. Why? So that the wheat might not be uprooted with the weeds.

The word for weed in this parable describes darnel, a wheat-like weed that looks very similar, especially in the immature stages of growth, to the wheat (only millimeters of difference in the size and shape of the leaves), but if not separated at harvest will spoil the flour, the product of the fruit of the wheat.

Such a kingdom in which wheat and weed are "permitted," "allowed," "suffered," "forgiven," to grow together is absolutely unique. However, we might wonder about the success of such a kingdom. But Jesus reminds us that while starting so small and innocuous, nevertheless, this kingdom matures into something far more grandiose than all the other garden plants. A mustard tree cannot be mistaken for any other herb, or any other number of kingdoms, in its look, size, and welcome. (v. 31-32)

Such a kingdom, mixed with the flour (the worked product of the wheat's fruit), is the leaven that permeates the entire loaf (in this case, several hundreds of loaves (it's like a 100 plus bounds of dough this lady mixes! Enough to feed 100 to 150 people!⁶) that causes growth and cannot be separated from it by any force known

⁶ Kyn Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 229-230.

to humans. Once the leaven is in, it's not coming out. And with almost no exceptions, can it be stopped from doing what it is purposed to do. (v. 33)

So the opposite of what we think is true. No matter what the enemy might sow, the farmer knows that his harvest is sure and that even in his patient permitting, he is ensuring the harvest is bountiful.

And that's good news! Right? To live in a world in which we each are not only able but created, to be in union with our Creator. And though we find ourselves in resistance to his intentions for us, and amid a world where the seeming opposite of what he desires is allowed to flourish, we know that his patient permitting is only to ensure a healthy harvest. **That no matter what the opposing scheme may bring forth, they don't change the thing that is changing the entire loaf.** A kingdom in which the farmer's intent is not to put off by the soil's deficiencies nor the enemy's progeny; that he "overcomes" both by patient, persistence, mercy—forgiveness.

So why the focus on judgment? Why does Jesus' explanation seem only to focus on the end and not the in-between?

Two reasons.

The first reason is the weeds are obvious, and like the disciples and the servants, we cannot help but be obsessed with them, even if we can't figure out how to get them out without doing damage to the wheat. In no small way, Jesus' response is a placation to the disciples' question. The disciples, not Jesus, call this the parable of the weed (v. 36). I wonder if Jesus would have called it the parable of the good seed or the farmer's intent? As we've pointed out, the farmer's purpose is the climax, and the bringing of the harvest of wheat—which is fully expected—into the barn is the last word.

But, like the servants and us, the disciples are focused on the weeds. What are they, and what will be done to get them out of here? Surely the kingdom of God cannot thrive with those weeds! The farmer sows good seeds, and so only good seeds should grow. Again, we've seen that simply isn't the case; in fact, it's quite the opposite as the mustard seed and leaven so aptly communicate. Nevertheless, Jesus gives the disciples what they want. Kind of.

Jesus focuses on the part of the parable the disciples are focused on, explaining to them only the details that will get to the heart of their expectations and assumptions of the kingdom of God. **Notice that he leaves out the servants (so anywhere for them to be in the story than the wheat or weed), and he doesn't talk about how the enemy got in and why or where he ran off too (questions we'd like an answer also!).** Instead, Jesus focuses on judgment (taking the cue from the disciples' focus) in a way that brings our hearts back to the point.

Jesus' explanation gives us an understanding of judgment that we should hold on to: evil and ill, sin and its causes and products, do not have the final word in this world or the next- God does. This truth we cannot let go of. But as Jesus' brother James (who was one of those family members who at one point thought Jesus was a bit too much (see Mark 3:31-35) nevertheless) would one day write,

'So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.'" (James 2:12-13)

Mercy over judgment as been God's intent, the farmer's plan, for all of history! "at the close (or consummation) of the age" (v. 40), means in "at the conclusion of the entire historical process...by which the world marches and/or stumbles toward its destiny. The whole world may have done its [utmost] to reach what it considers its proper conclusion, but God in Christ has done his blsdest to take away the curse it put on itself in the process; now, at the close of the age, at the final meeting of the blessing and the curse, he is about to make the blessing stick once and for all."⁷

There is a final judgment, a separation of what is good and what is evil, but praise be to God it is he who has shown mercy who is the judge! It is Son of Man and his loyal and obedient emissaries that do the gathering and separating, removing all the causes of sin and those who willfully and totally reject their need for forgiveness, for the way, the law (of liberty and love) which has graciously and patiently been planted on their hearts and permeated the very world they inhabit.

The progeny of the enemy that end up getting gathered and burned up at the end of the age (when time has reached its telos, its terminal purpose) are the sons of a different Father; their father is the devil—a phrase Jesus used one other time in John's gospel (8:31-47) to a group of people who thought they needed neither forgiveness nor freedom from sin to inherit life in the kingdom of God. People who Jesus said, "my word finds no place in you" (Jn. 8:37).

And listen, they'll throw a fit, grumble and complain, as we all do when what we choose has been proven to be less than what we wanted. There is no sugar coating what the end brings them, **but there is also no way of overstating what is the final word either**. The last word is grace, salvation, blessing, "the righteous shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (v. 43). Jesus ends his explanation like he ended the parable, with sure blessedness.

We know the righteous are not children of the Father because they are somehow better, but simply because they received Jesus as the means of the farmer's intent to bring union, and believed that forgiveness was nature—the entry and ethos of the kingdom, a truth that set them free. They have an open and ready heart to reality undergirding all of life, that God is with us, and God is for us in Jesus.

So, what do we do?

When our hearts stumble over the treasure that is the reality of the kingdom Jesus reveals, we sell all we have to buy it, and all that goes with it (the field—the world) included! (v. 44) When our hearts find what they've been searching for, in a place least expected, we sell as we have and buy it, making every effort to bring it into our home, into daily life. (v. 45)

We've been *let* (*aphete*) in on the true nature and reality of the kingdom of God, caught in its all-consuming net, so let's lose all the expectations and assumptions and resistance and get in on it, bringing its beauty and splendor and value out for all to experience, becoming "masters of a house" ourselves for the sake of others. (v. 51-52)

⁷ Capon, 133-134.

That's how Matthew 13 concludes, and it's how we'll conclude too, with an old and new treasure from the each-of-us Peter to his faith family,

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.' For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient on your account, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Since all things are thus...what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness...And count the patience of the Lord as salvation...

(2 Peter 3:1-9,11,15)

Let's pray

COMMUNION READING | John 15:1-11

'I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer...Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear fruit by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

I'm the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.

Separated, you can't produce a thing [, fruit just cannot mature].

Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce fruit, when you mature as my disciples.

I've loved you the way my Father has loved me.

Make yourselves at home in my love.'

I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature.'

CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION

John continues, “This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I’ve named you friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from the Father.

You didn’t choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in this world to bear fruit that won’t spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you.

But remember the root command: Love one another.” (Jn. 15:11-17)

We confess that a true, complete, and abundant life comes from Christ in us. Yet we also confess that at times our fear of and longing for judgment causes us to miss the point of your patience, keeping us bound rather than setting us free. Thank you for forgiving us, heavenly Father. With ready hearts, we receive the Word of God, who became flesh and dwelt among us. With ready hearts, we receive his body broken, and blood poured out because of our sin. With ready hearts, we receive and make ourselves at home, in the love of a Friend, who is our Savior. May we love as we are loved. In Jesus Name. Amen.