

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Waiting for the Harvest

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

About a decade ago a 7-month-old boy in eastern Tennessee made the news when his parents gave him the first name "Messiah." When the parents ended up in court because they couldn't agree on the boy's last name, the judge heard the boy's first name and ordered it changed too, from "Messiah" to "Martin." So when all was said and done, the child was named Martin DeShawn McCullough. In the first case where she had ever ordered a first name change, Judge Lu Ann Ballew argued that since the county had a large Christian population, it could make things difficult for the child as he grew up. She said, "The word Messiah is a title and it's a title that has only been earned by one person and that person is Jesus Christ."

Interestingly, one article noted that in the previous year, Messiah was no. 4 among the fastest-rising baby names, according to the Social Security Administration's annual list of popular baby names. Whatever your opinion about the judge's decision, and the reasoning behind it, I can see where having the name "Messiah" could make for some complicated, and potentially divisive, situations. It wouldn't be easy going through life wearing a title that's reserved for the Savior of the world. You wouldn't want others to falsely accuse you of claiming to have the authority to fix everything that's wrong in the universe. After all, no human being is capable of separating the wheat from the weeds on that kind of scale.

But that doesn't mean we human beings should do nothing. We can't just sit idly by in God's world and let evil go unchecked. There are injustices that need to be remedied, divisions that need to be overcome, and sufferings that need to be addressed. There are wrongs that need to be prosecuted, inequities that need to be corrected, and wounds that need to be healed. There's disease, poverty, sexual abuse, climate change, political corruption, racial discrimination, violence, human trafficking, war, and a multitude of other problems that always seem to have the upper hand. So contentment with the status quo isn't an option. Something needs to be done, and we're the ones who can do it. We can make a difference in the world.

There's something in us that resonates with the zeal we hear from the master's servants in today's Scripture passage from Matthew. When they discover the weeds that have grown in the midst of all the wheat, they're ready to take action. These aren't the kind of people who are content to sit in the shade on the front porch and watch a good crop get ruined by a bunch of bad seed. This kind of agricultural mess simply can't be tolerated. No wonder they're ready to purge the farmer's field of the bad, so that all that's left is the good. So they ask their master, "Do you want us to march into the field and start pulling up those weeds?"

But the master says, "No, not so fast. Let's just give this field some time. Just let it be. Let the wheat and the weeds grow together until it's time for the harvest. Then they'll get separated. The weeds will get destroyed and the wheat will get stored in my barn. But for now, it's better if you just keep your hands off of it."

Now, what kind of agriculture is this? Why is this wealthy farmer being so passive? Why doesn't he order his employees to take immediate action to fix this situation? Well, there's

a clue within the text itself. When Matthew speaks about weeds, he uses a Greek term that refers to darnel, a grass that closely resembles wheat and is plentiful in Israel. In fact, darnel looks so much like wheat that you often can't tell the difference until the plants mature and the ears appear. The ears of the real wheat are heavy and droopy, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight. So it makes sense that the farmer tells his servants to hold off on uprooting those nasty weeds. In a frenzy of weed pulling, they could easily yank up the good as well as the bad. Better to wait until harvest time, when it's easier to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds.

According to Jesus, this is what the kingdom of God is like. Maybe part of what Jesus is saying is that in this present world, the presence of God's kingdom is often obscure and not easy for us human beings to sort out and establish. In other words, we're not the ones who can straighten out all that's wrong with the world. We're not the Messiah, individually or collectively. We need to trust that God, in his patient, puzzling, and seemingly inefficient ways, will eventually sort things out and set things right in his creation.

One person tells about the time that his seminary professor wrote on the board, "There is a God. You are not Him." That's solid advice for anyone training for ministry, and everyone involved in the ministry of the church and the life of following Jesus. The kingdom of God is just that—God's kingdom—not ours. It's God's work to bring it about and bring it to completion. We as human beings aren't in a position to make judgments that only God can make, issue verdicts that only God can issue, and accomplish things that only God can accomplish.

But that doesn't mean that our job is to do nothing. We aren't called to complete passivity and absolute idleness, as if our efforts are useless and unnecessary. History and experience show us that impatience with injustice and resistance to the status quo can bring about change that aligns with the reign of God in the world. When, for instance, Martin Luther King Jr. adapted a legal maxim and wrote in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that "Justice too long delayed is justice denied," or declared in his "I Have a Dream" speech that "This is no time ... to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism," he captured the urgency of acting now, not later. So yes, our Lord hasn't called us to inaction. He has called us to act, but to act within the context of divine patience, God's long-term work of redemption.

Part of what this means is that we maintain a realism about the reality of sin, in our lives and in the world. As John G. Stackhouse Jr. has captured it: "We should expect sin." But as he goes on to say, "Expecting sin does not mean accepting it, much less ignoring it. Expecting sin means being practical: It means *planning* for it. It means refusing to live as if we are in the New Jerusalem, and instead intentionally structuring our lives, individually and corporately, with the expectation of evil."¹

This includes the evil out there and the evil in here. That is, the evil in our individual selves and in the life of the church. Examine the terrain of your own heart and mind. Search the landscape of your own attitudes and actions. What you'll see is a mixture of wheat and weeds. Apply the same analysis to the life of any congregation, ours included, and you'll come to the same conclusion. Russian writer Alexandr Solzhenitsyn said, "If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"²

Sometimes we're so zealous to rush in and start pulling weeds from the world, from the congregation, and from the lives of others, that we lose all sense of perspective on ourselves and overlook the limitations of our actions. Yes, we need to be about the business of reconciliation, restoration, and transformation, but our redemptive activity is

always a form of waiting for a salvation that only the Lord can accomplish. So we should always move into action from a posture of humility and with a deep awareness that we are not messiahs, sent to fix other people, to purify the church, and to heal the world.

Marriage and family expert Gary Smalley tells about a time when he noticed weeds sprouting amongst the healthy grass in his yard. So he went to a hardware store, purchased a bottle of weed killer, and drenched those eyesores. The next day, he discovered that the weeds remained, along with the brown grass he had inadvertently killed. He tried again, and killed more grass. His wife finally told him to speak with a professional before his determination killed their whole yard and left nothing but the weeds. Smalley later reflected on the advice he received: "What he said I'll never forget because it applies to marriage [or dealing with sin in our lives in general]. You don't go after the weeds. You want to grow the healthy grass around them. The healthy grass will kill the weeds. It will choke out the weeds."³

That's a different approach from the farmer in Jesus' parable. But the objective sounds similar, namely, to cultivate the growth and spread of the good, whether it be the wheat or the grass. It's not just a matter of removing the unrighteousness in us and in the world. It's also, and above all, a matter of sowing and growing righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, in our lives and in the lives of those around us. This is the kind of crop that God has in mind.

In the second part of today's Scripture reading, Jesus makes it clear that there will be a harvest, and that God will weed out everything and everyone that resists and rejects his reign. God will decide who's in and who's out. That's his job, not ours. And we can trust him to do it, in mercy and righteousness. In the meantime, our job is practice repentance, to bear our witness, and to call others to faith in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, in ways that lovingly reflect the hope we have through him.

John Stackhouse reminds us: "God is not discouraged by the evil in us and our world. He is sad about it, angry at it, and grieved by it, but God is not discouraged. He works away at it, knowing that his labor is certain to produce fruit. And he has called us to do the same."⁴

In today's Scripture, Jesus promises that the day will come when "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (v. 43). As for now, the Father wants his children to shine as much as possible. He wants us to spend most of our time trying to be wheat in the world rather than just pulling weeds. Pastor Jim Somerville tells about a ministry that one of his churches started in the small town of Wingate, North Carolina. It was a ministry to the children in a nearby trailer park. Somerville says:

We could have chosen to root out all the sources of evil in that place—to chase down the drug dealers and the deadbeat dads, to confiscate handguns and arrest child abusers. Instead, we chose to put up a basketball goal, to tell stories from the Bible, to put our arms around little children, and sing songs about Jesus. And two years after we started that ministry, two years of going out there Saturday after Saturday to do those things, I got a note in my box at church with five words on it: "Adrian wants to be baptized." Adrian. The terror of the trailer park. That little girl who had made our work most difficult during the previous two years. Who would have guessed? Instead of pulling weeds in the field where she lived, we just tried hard to be wheat, and somehow Adrian saw that and fell in love with it and wanted it for herself. After she was baptized, there was a little more wheat in the field. And because she was there, soon, there was even more.⁵

As we wait for the final harvest, living with hope and trusting in God alone for the triumph of his kingdom, may the Lord help us to be wheat, the fruit of his faithfulness and righteousness.

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- ¹ John G. Stackhouse Jr., "This (Ambiguous) Political Life." *Christianity Today*. November 2, 2012. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/november/this-ambiguous-political-life.html> (July 19, 2023).
- ² Quoted in Bill Hybels, *Making Life Work: Putting God's Wisdom into Action* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 204.
- ³ *The Journal*, "Rebuilding Marriage: Where Is the Hope?" (9-13).
- ⁴ Stackhouse, "This (Ambiguous) Political Life."
- ⁵ Jim Somerville, "A World Full of Weeds," at www.day1.net.