

# PULLING WEEDS

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Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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## SCRIPTURE

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### Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

24 He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup>but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. <sup>26</sup>So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup>And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ <sup>28</sup>He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ <sup>29</sup>But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup>Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’ ’

36 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.’ <sup>37</sup>He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; <sup>38</sup>the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, <sup>39</sup>and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. <sup>40</sup>Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup>The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, <sup>42</sup>and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears\* listen!

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## SERMON

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Over the past couple of years, I have made it a goal of mine to plant flowers around my condo. I do not have a particularly green thumb so I have sought help and advice from a number of people about what to plant and where. One of the things I didn't count on was having to pull weeds all the time. I was naïve enough to think that all I needed to do was get the flowers in the ground and water them and all would be good. Not the case, right? Every time I go out to do some gardening more weeds have popped up. They are pushing their way above my plants and by this time of year they have a strong root system. I have to be careful and it's slow going pulling them out.

There is a Lowes commercial on right now that speaks to my current frustration. You see a man standing outside on his lawn looking around and the voice says, “When you come to the realization that the only thing growing like weeds are the weeds.” And weed pulling is not only a never ending battle but it is sometimes hard to discern what are weeds and what are flowers that grow naturally. It reminds me of the story that came out recently about a cheese company that was busted by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for producing fake cheese.<sup>1</sup>

The Pennsylvania company was marketing its product as being 100% real parmesan when it actually contained no parmesan at all. In reality, consumers were sprinkling a mixture of imitation cheese and trimmings of other cheap cheeses like Swiss and cheddar on their pasta. As if that weren’t sneaking enough, the FDA discovered that Castle Cheese, Inc., was also adding filler material to the cheese, the bulk of which was cellulose—better known as wood pulp. Makes you think twice about that parmesan you sprinkle on your pizza or spaghetti, doesn’t it? And this isn’t the first time. The FDA is constantly on the lookout for food manufactures who cut corners. Sometimes it takes an expert to tell the difference between what’s real and what’s fake.

The parable that Jesus tells us about the weeds and the wheat tackle the same problem of figuring out what is fake and what is real. A farmer planted wheat in one of his fields. During the night an enemy went through and planted weeds in the same field. As the grain began to sprout, the farmer’s hired hands noticed something that was not quite right. Bad seed was coming up with the good. These servants were outraged and with good reason. The weeds that were planted were not just useless vegetation that took up space and diminished crop yield. In the parable Jesus doesn’t say that this enemy planted just any kind of weeds in the field. He is very specific. Bearded darnel is what it is called and it’s a vicious weed. One of the definitions describes it as follows: a grass, related to rye, having bristles on the seed head and bearing seeds that yield a narcotic poison. Emerson once said that a weed is “a plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered,” but this plant might give him reason to change his mind. In any case this is not what you want growing in the middle of your wheat that you expect to harvest as a food source for your family and your livestock!

So the people in Jesus’s story are ready to pull some weeds—they’re ready to go out there and get rid of this pernicious plant. But the surprising thing is that the master in the parable tells them “No,” because if you try to harvest bearded darnel, what the Bible calls “tares,” you’d pull up the good wheat. You see, this sneaky plant is “fake wheat”, it looks just like it when it first pops out of the ground, when it would be easy to pull. It’s even called “cheat wheat” but by the time you recognize that it’s a weed, it has already wrapped its roots around those of the wheat so that if you pulled out the weed you’d also pull out the wheat.

And all of us here know what Jesus is talking about. We are that farmer’s field—where the weeds and the wheat both have a firm grip on our minds and hearts and souls. Paul wrote, “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7-15). And that’s us—our good and our bad are mixed together, our very strengths are also our weakness. You can’t get rid of the one without getting rid of the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Homiletics. July/ Aug. 2017 Volume 29 Number 4. Fake Food, Fake Faith.

This problem crops up in so many of life's situations—we need our government to provide stability and justice, to protect us and provide public systems for things like roads and safety. But the good we want to accomplish has its “weeds”—we try to accomplish common goals through our tax system and health care, but there are imbalances. We need our school systems to educate our children and prepare them for vocations and for life—but the politics of test scores and negotiating salaries and the system of property taxes gets weeds in it and the system serves some better than others.

And we can't let the church off the hook. We have our systems that slow down and stifle the very purposes of our existence. We have weeds. And then we argue over the definition of weed—whose faith is valid and whose faith is not. One person's flower is another person's weed, one person's faith is heresy to someone else. What criteria do we use?

Like the slaves of the parable—so often when we encounter evil we want a legal solution to stop it, we want to pull those weeds out of our lives. After hearing of tragic consequences from school bullying—we've enacted laws about it. When we're looking to weed out evil and injustices, inequities, misuse of our systems—we want quick, definitive action. It leaves us frustrated and angry when that isn't accomplished.

So what does it mean that the master of our parable says, let the weeds grow right along with the wheat? Surely we can't condone evil! We can't ignore it. But we have seen in some extremists the evil that is perpetrated when one group claims a mandate from God, to literally destroy or oppress those they claim are enemies of God. Surely the Christian church, as it wrestles with its own issues can choose a better way.

Today's parable reminds us that we can't rely on our human capacity to know fully the mind of God. We have only to look at history to know that we aren't always good at discerning weeds from wheat. Good Christians engaged in the horrors of the Crusades, and tried Galileo for saying that the universe revolved around the sun instead of the earth, and argued in favor of slavery.

But we can do what we are good at—what we are called to do—we can plant wheat. Leave the harvest to God and just focus on planting wheat. In a world that daily sows seeds of greed and hate, violence and oppression, this parable affirms that God is still in charge of this world—even turning weeds that are bundled at the harvest into heat and light. In the meantime, our job is to sow wheat. Our calling is not to be concerned with pulling the weeds but to plant love and hope, to nurture kindness and compassion, to name what is good and hold up what is enlightening.

Castle Cheese filed for bankruptcy shortly after it was found to be a manufacturer of fake cheese. Its factory stands empty and shuttered because what they claimed to be selling on the outside wasn't actually happening on the inside. So may our lives, both inside and out, reflect an authentic relationship with Christ for it is up to us, the workers, to maintain the field, nurture the wheat, and offer transforming grace to even the worst of the weeds.