

Ephesians 4:22-32

22 So get rid of your old self, which made you live as you used to - the old self that was being destroyed by its deceitful desires. 23 Your hearts and minds must be made completely new, 24 and you must put on the new self, which is created in God's likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy. 25 No more lying, then! Each of you must tell the truth to the other believer, because we are all members together in the body of Christ. 26 If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day. 27 Don't give the Devil a chance. 28 If you used to rob, you must stop robbing and start working, in order to earn an honest living for yourself and to be able to help the poor. 29 Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you. 30 And do not make God's Holy Spirit sad; for the Spirit is God's mark of ownership on you, a guarantee that the Day will come when God will set you free. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort. 32 Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-51

24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like this. A man sowed good seed in his field. 25 One night, when everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. 26 When the plants grew and the heads of grain began to form, then the weeds showed up. 27 The man's servants came to him and said, "Sir, it was good seed you sowed in your field; where did the weeds come from?" 28 "It was some enemy who did this," he answered. "Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?" they asked him. 29 "No," he answered, "because as you gather the weeds you might pull up some of the wheat along with them. 30 Let the wheat and the weeds both grow together until harvest. Then I will tell the harvest workers to pull up the weeds first, tie them in bundles and burn them, and then to gather in the wheat and put it in my barn." 36 When Jesus had left the crowd and gone indoors, his disciples came to him and said, "Tell us what the parable about the weeds in the field means." 37 Jesus answered, "The man who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world; the good seed is the people who belong to the kingdom; the weeds are the people who belong to the evil one; 39 and the enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvest workers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are gathered up and burned in the fire, so the same thing will happen at the end of the age: 41 the Son of Man will send out his angels to gather up out of his kingdom all those who cause people to sin and all others who do evil things, 42 and they will throw them into the fiery furnace, where they will cry and gnash their teeth. 43 Then God's people will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Listen, then, if you have ears! 47 "Also, the kingdom of heaven is like this. Some fishermen throw their net out in the lake and catch all kinds of fish. 48 When the net is full, they pull it to shore and sit

down to divide the fish: the good ones go into the buckets, the worthless ones are thrown away. 49 It will be like this at the end of the age: the angels will go out and gather up the evil people from among the good 50 and will throw them into the fiery furnace, where they will cry and gnash their teeth. 51 "Do you understand these things?" Jesus asked them. "Yes," they answered.

Focus: The kingdom of heaven: Getting ready for the harvest

Function: To help listeners understand God's grace for everyone to know Christ and be fruitful in Christ before the harvest time.

Today we hear another two parables of Matthew 13 about the kingdom of heaven. The first parable is back to the seed-sowing setting. This time, a man sowed good seeds in the field, but subsequently, the evil one came in the night and sowed bad seeds of weeds among them. It may be a relatively common situation in farming during Jesus's time when crops of wheat got infested by weeds. So, we hear the servants in the parable asked, "Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?" Indeed, according to our typical gardening experience, it's easier to get rid of weeds early than later, right? It would be easy to pull out any young plants without damaging the crop.

However, in the original Greek text, the word which is translated as weeds is ζιζανία (zizania), meaning bearded darnel. Interestingly, when sprouted, the darnel plants look like wheat; we can only tell them apart when they bear seeds or grains. In addition, the darnel seeds are considered poisonous and cause hallucinations when consumed in large amounts. And the darnel is regarded as a nasty weed whose roots will surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and water, making it impossible to uproot without damaging the good crop.

So bearing these in mind, what would we do if we were left to manage the field? Will you comb the field and pull out all the darnels?

Or will you do as Jesus instructed, let the weeds grow with the wheat, and they will be separated during harvesting?

It is to our benefit that this parable is explained - that the sower is Jesus, the field represents the world, the good seeds are the people of the kingdom of heaven, while the weeds are people following the evil one. At harvest time, that is, the end of the age, Jesus will send out his angels to gather up out of his kingdom all those who cause people to sin and all others who do evil things, leaving God's people celebrating in the kingdom.

In our current context, to whom do we allude the wheat (that is, people of the kingdom) and the weeds (that is, people following the evil one) to? Are you the good seeds, the Wheat? Of course, that's how we see ourselves.

Perhaps the most straightforward way is to see the wheat as Christians and the weeds as non-Christians. However, are all Christians good, moral, just, virtuous, godly and God-centred people, while non-Christians are wicked, immoral, unjust, unvirtuous, worldly and self-centred? I seriously don't think so. Such thinking only puts Christians on a higher moral standard than non-Christians and with a condemning attitude towards non-Christians. The fact is that Christians and non-Christians are sinners; all are the same, just as the wheat and the darnel look identical.

The key issue lies with our ideology of sin. When we consider any immoral, shameful, harmful, alienating, wicked, or selfish actions, thoughts, or words as sin, we are judging people with a moral ruler we have set up using the Bible.

However, when we consider the fall of Adam and Eve as the fall of humanity, what had they done exactly to trigger sin? Genesis 3 tells us that Adam & Eve defied God's instruction and ate the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. Consequently, God judged them for their disobedience. In other words, sin begins with our disobedience to God.

Who among us has not disobeyed God before? The moment we lost our cool and were rude to someone. When we had a heated argument with someone in an event such that anger caused us to be reluctant to forgive. Those times we had treated other people's life issues as gossip topics. The moment we were judgmental or prejudiced about someone. The list goes on. The reality is that no matter how "Christian" we are, we still disobey God now and then, don't we?

So, my point is this: Sin begins with disobeying God, and there's no minor or major sin. Every person is the same, susceptible to sin and needs God's mercy and grace. So, the wheat and the weeds are the same, planted in the field and will face the harvest one day. The fruit they yield will make a difference. For example, a God-centred person will press on to be after God's heart, living a life following God's desire and Jesus' teaching. On the other hand, a self-centred person will focus on worldly pleasures and achievements to satisfy oneself, even at the expense of stepping over others. But these are not predestined! We can change!

The critical difference between Christians and non-Christians is understanding the good news and having a relationship with God through Christ and life in Christ. With the life in Christ, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, guiding our way and nurturing our spirit, helping us to be fruitful in life as our life is filled with the Spirit's gift of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Therefore, we should not judge one another, for we are all as guilty and fallen. God is the only Judge. John 8 gives us an excellent example of Jesus's embracing and non-judging love. When the people brought before him a woman caught in the act of

adultery, Jesus didn't condemn her nor cast a stone at her, but asked her to go and sin no more.

In the parable, when the sower rejected his servants' request to pull out the weeds, he said, "No, because as you gather the weeds, you might pull up some of the wheat along with them. Let the wheat and the weeds both grow together until harvest. ..." The sower wants his servants to be patient and wait until the harvest, when they can see the difference by the grains, wheat or darnel seeds. Such patience is not an excuse for inaction or conflict avoidance, but grace.

God is gracious, and all God's creations are good by nature basically. Though poisonous when consumed in excess, the darnel seeds appeared to have medicinal properties for treating dizziness, insomnia, and certain skin conditions. The darnel plants serve a good purpose as fodder to feed cattle & other livestock and also for erosion control. Similarly, the Dandelion is also considered to be a stubborn weed since its feather-like seed spreads it like wildfire, but its leaves, stems, flowers, and roots have medicinal purposes too. And likewise, the opium poppy is being used medicinally worldwide as morphine and codeine for pain control despite being addictive and harmful to our health when used in excess. Well, just as "A broken clock is right twice a day," there is something good in all people, even when they are considered wicked, unreliable, untrustworthy, etc.

Christ is graciously giving all people time to become fruitful in him before the harvest, and we know that God is gracious, merciful and compassionate. In 1 Timothy 2:4, Paul reassures us that God "wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth." In 2 Peter 3:9, Peter also reassures us, "God is not slow to do what God has promised, as some think. Instead, God is patient with us, because God does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins."

Therefore, how should we respond, then? In today's first reading from Ephesians 4, Paul urges us to get rid of our old self, that is, our old worldly lifestyle, and have our hearts and minds renewed by Christ. We are to put on the new self that is created in God's likeness and rooted in the life of Christ.

And when we are in Christ, we are joined together by the Holy Spirit as the body of Christ. Therefore, we are to do our part in helping one another grow spiritually, grow stronger in faith, and grow in relationship with God. And through our love and friendship, and sharing of our experience of God, we actively share the good news and God's love with those who have not yet known Jesus and God.

Today's second parable, the Parable of Fish & Net, follows the same focus as the Parable of the Wheat & Weeds. The net signifies the kingdom of heaven that Jesus has brought forth. The kingdom has already come for all humanity; everyone is included. But its hiddenness needs the eyes of faith to discover, understand and participate in. Hence all people are given time to recognise its presence and prosper

through Christ and his teaching because God is gracious. At the fullness of time, the end of the age, like the net drawn to reveal, the kingdom will be fully revealed for people who are ready, who have lived according to God's desire, to enjoy God's eternal presence, but unfortunately, those not prepared will miss out.

So, in summary, the kingdom of heaven is graceful, encompassing all people now. We are all given time to experience the love and presence of God through Christ, and be ambassadors for Christ to reach out and help others to experience the same too. May we be fruitful and ready for the harvest. Amen.