

The Bad Seed  
Sermon on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, July 17, 2005

In William March's novel, *The Bad Seed*, and the play and the movie of the same name, evil dwells in the most unlikely of places: a pig-tailed eight-year-old girl named Rhoda Penmark. She is the granddaughter of the famous fictional serial killer, Bessie Denker, and Rhoda proves that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Like her grandmother, Rhoda has no conscience and will kill if necessary to get whatever she wants, whether that be a penmanship medal she felt she should have won, the silence of a janitor who knows more than she wants him to, or an opal pendant. By the time her mother has figured out what's going on, Rhoda has already killed two people. Once her mother has come to the correct conclusions, she has to wrestle with a terrible dilemma. As young as Rhoda is, there are no guarantees that any arrangements made to confine her will prove permanent, and there would be a huge glare of publicity. At the same time, her mother knows full well that Rhoda will certainly kill again and again.

Throughout *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda's mother asks the questions all of us ask: Where does such evil come from and how can it be stopped? Those questions surfaced in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and they resurfaced in the wake of the recent transit system bombings in London. But such questions are not modern, and such evil is not new. Contrary to many assertions, the world did not change forever on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The evil so manifest on that terrible day simply appeared in a different guise than when it appeared in Soviet gulags, Nazi concentration camps, legalized black slavery, the French Revolution, the Crusades, or any number of other systemic atrocities. In light of such evil, past and present, the questions recur: Where does such evil come from? Why does a God who is supposed to be loving and good allow it to continue? Will evil be judged and punished?

Jesus tells this parable in part to answer those questions. A farmer plants his field with good seed. At night an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat. The deception is discovered only when the crop begins to grow, and the servants report it to the landowner. At the end of their report, the servants have some questions: “Master,” they ask, “did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” (Mt. 13:27) Robert Smith says the servants’ questions “betrayed a loss of confidence in the owner by questioning the quality of his seed.”<sup>1</sup> And here is where we ourselves enter the story, for the servants’ questions are our questions, their doubts are our doubts: If God made the world and called it good (Gen. 1:31), from whence does evil—the opposite of good—arise? From where do the weeds of terror and murder and war and hatred come? We see all kinds of bad seeds: spouse abusers, pedophiles, terrorists, and murderers who seem to get by scot free. “It is easy to lose confidence in the way God runs the universe. Why does God permit evil to grow and flourish?”<sup>2</sup>

That question has consumed theologians from the earliest days of the church. In this parable Jesus gives a simple and straightforward answer: “An enemy has done this” (Mt. 13:28). That enemy, the enemy who sows the seeds of evil, is, according to verse 39, the devil. Remember that the enemy came “while everybody was asleep” (13:25), that is, he came at night. This shows us “the sinister character of the enemy: he belongs to the darkness instead of the light.”<sup>3</sup> He is as sinister as he is completely lacking in originality; “the devil does what the Son of Man does: he sows.” And thus “God’s work of sowing is countered by Satanic opposition.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989) 174.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* vol. 2, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 412.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In our day it has become unfashionable to speak of the devil. We prefer to think that actions are misguided, or that crimes arise from a lack of education or stable family background or financial resources, or that terrorism results from insufficiently marketing America and the American dream. But let us give the devil his due: whether he is a person or a personification of evil, the devil is the enemy whose work is to oppose the work of God. And thus, under the cover of night, the enemy sows the seeds of evil throughout the field, which is the world (verse 38). Thus, God is not responsible for the evil that pervades our world. Evil is a deliberate act by an enemy of the kingdom of God.

The question, then, is how shall we respond. Upon learning that an enemy sowed the weeds, the servants eagerly asked their master, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” (13:28). And here the master gives a very surprising answer. We expect him to say, “Of course I want you to gather the weeds. Pull them up by the roots. Kill them and make sure they never come back!” Certainly we want to eradicate the rank weeds of terror and violence and mayhem from the garden of the countries of the world. Fervently we pray for an end to the bombings and shootings and kidnappings that threaten the tender shoots of peace and justice and cooperation.

“Do you want us to go and gather them?” we ask. “Should we send in the Marines? Should we deploy some battalions of special ops forces? Should we use some laser-guided missiles or precision bomb attacks?”

But calmly, and in a measured tone, the master tells his servants that they are not to pull up the weeds, “for in gathering the weeds [they] would uproot the wheat along with them” (13:29). It is an incredible answer: Don’t touch the weeds. “Let both [the weeds and the wheat] 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 barns” (13:30).

Here, in what appears to be a non-answer, a denial of reality, an avoidance of the problem, Jesus does an amazing thing. He promises that evil will be dealt with definitively, and simultaneously “frees us from the burden of having to ‘play God’ and set things right all by ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> The problem of evil is so massive, so pressing, so ominous, that the temptation is to go out there and do something—anything—to address it, particularly when God is maddeningly silent. We desperately want to go pull some weeds, kick some tail, take no prisoners, string ’em up. And God gently, but firmly, says, “No.” Because in our wild desire to do the right thing, we too often do the wrong thing.

As Joachim Jeremias points out, God takes the matter of fighting evil out of our hands for two reasons: First, we simply “are not capable of carrying out the separation [of wheat and weeds] effectively.”<sup>6</sup> Like the weeds whose roots are now intertwined with the roots of the wheat, evil is thoroughly entangled in the world. The danger is that if we start trying to pull up evil root and branch, we are likely to uproot what is good and holy and right at the same time. Moreover, if we destroy what we suspect to be evil, we preclude the possibility of change. The church father Jerome said that the landowner’s caution not to remove the weeds lest the wheat be removed with them “leave[s] room for repentance.”<sup>7</sup> Augustine agreed, reminding us that “[I]n the Lord’s field, which is the church, at times what was grain turns into weeds and at times what were weeds turn into grain, and no one knows what they will be tomorrow.”<sup>8</sup> When we set out on a self-appointed mission to eliminate evil, we also eliminate the chance for grace to work.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 152.

<sup>6</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963) 226.

<sup>7</sup> Jerome, from the “Commentary on Matthew 2.13.29-30” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 1a, Matthew 1-13*, ed. Manlio Simonetti (Downer’s Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 278.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, from “Sermon 73A1,” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, *ibid.*

Second, God takes the matter of fighting evil out of our hands, because now is not the time for evil to be separated from good. The time God has assigned for that separation must be allowed to come in its fullness. But first the seed must ripen, then comes the end, and with the end comes the separation of wheat and weeds. Jesus makes clear that at the harvest, the end of the age, “all causes of sin and all evildoers” will be collected and thrown into the “furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13:41-42).

And thus there is good news for us who wait for the revealing of the Kingdom of Heaven in its fullness. Evil is not random or rootless or the work of God. Rather, it is the work of an enemy, an enemy who opposes God. God is not unmindful of the evil that is present in our world; that evil and those who perpetrate it will be punished in the justice of God. And because God will execute his justice, we are freed from that burden. We are freed not only to pray that God’s kingdom come and God’s will be done, but to live in peace and harmony with our brothers and sisters, growing together with them until God’s final harvest, when “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (13:43).