

## **YOU LIVE OUT YOUR FAITH DISCERNINGLY**

### **MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-52**

I want to consider two parables with you today. Parable is the name given to a kind of story Jesus told when He was teaching. Parables always tell you something important about God or having a relationship with God. Let me give you a little background. Farming is the context in the first story. In Jesus' day, wheat was an essential crop. But it was common to have this pesky weed called darnel grow up with the wheat. When darnel first germinates it's almost impossible to distinguish it from wheat. In fact, experienced farmers had a hard time telling darnel from wheat until the heads of the two plants emerge. Then, it was pretty easy to tell the difference between them. But, by that time, the roots of the darnel and the wheat had intertwined so if you tried to dig out the darnel weed, you might have damaged the wheat plant. As a result, some farmers just let the two plants grow together until it was time to harvest the wheat. Then they separated the two plants out by hand. Since darnel is mildly poisonous, you had to get rid of it. The wheat was put into the barn and the darnel was bundled up and burned as fuel. I was interested to learn that, yes, back in Jesus' day sometimes people would intentionally plant darnel in someone else's field as an act of hostility. Roman law even had a penalty for such an act.

Fishing is the context for Jesus' second story. A favorite method of commercial fishing in Jesus' day – in the Sea of Galilee, for example - involved the use of a drag net. Two boats would pull a large, square shaped net through the water between them towards the shore. That net did a great job of capturing just about anything and everything that was swimming between those two boats. Some of it was good eating and some of it wasn't. But the fishermen waited until they got the whole net full of creatures to shore before they decided what they were going to sell or eat and what had no value and should just be thrown away.

We're considering several of Jesus' parables. All these stories have one thing in common; each of them is about something Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. What is this Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God is a spiritual realm or place where Jesus is recognized as the King. By a king we mean someone with absolute power, indescribable majesty and limitless authority. The Kingdom of God is the realm where Jesus reigns and rules. Last week I said that the Kingdom of God is, on the one hand, bigger than the physical universe, but, on the other hand, it's small enough to fit inside your spirit and mine. These stories that Jesus tells – the parables - are like windows and doors that open onto this spiritual reality called the Kingdom of God. It's like opening a window in your home so that all the beautiful smells, sights and feel of a glorious spring day can come blowing in. When Jesus is King – when you are living in this thing He calls the Kingdom of God – you live a certain way. Last week we saw that when Jesus is King, you hear God correctly. Today, I want to suggest to you that when Jesus is King, you live out your faith discerningly. You need discernment about some things that affect both today and tomorrow.

## WHAT YOU MUST DISCERN ABOUT TODAY

I hear Jesus saying that you need to be wise about your enemy, first of all. He assumes the existence of a personal devil who is up to no good. Jesus calls him “the enemy.” It’s a potent reminder that you are right in the middle today of a long term spiritual conflict between God and the devil, between good and evil and between right and wrong. Jesus’ story illustrates a verse found elsewhere in God’s Word, “For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:11 NLT) Now, it’s inevitable that if you belong to Jesus, the devil is going to come after you. Because he is Jesus’ enemy, he is your enemy, too. Because he hates Jesus, he hates you, too. Because he wants to destroy anything to do with God, you are in his crosshairs.

When the Merritt family lived in St. Petersburg, Florida, they’d go to the beach. But it was always hard to relax and have a good time, because there were just too many threats: jellyfish, stingrays, sharks, undertow. One time some relatives came and brought their boat with them. They all decided to go out to an island a couple of miles offshore called Egmont Key. They had a great time because they didn’t think they’d have to worry about the normal threats. The water was blue, the sand was white. They all swam with a carefree attitude in the Gulf of Mexico. A few days later they were telling some friends about their wonderful day. They were informed that they’d been swimming in one of the most shark-infested areas around! They were in great danger, but completely oblivious to it. The worst thing you can do is be oblivious to the fact that you’re in a war and you have an enemy.

Being wise about your enemy means recognizing that the devil has a strategy. Jesus’ story teaches that the devil wants to corrupt anything that has to do with God and that he favors using camouflage and the counterfeit. An example of the devil’s methodology might be the influence of someone like an Oprah Winfrey, the TV talk show host. On the one hand, she’s generally perceived as a very positive, wise and spiritually-oriented person. She’s considered to be a great influence on the culture and society. On the other hand, when you begin to examine her spiritual and religious beliefs you discover she’s a major proponent of New Age philosophy and religion. Most people – and many Christians – don’t perceive that her religious beliefs are incompatible with the Christian faith. The devil loves to use attractive, seemingly positive people to spread his lies.

If the devil can do that kind of thing in the cultural arena, you can be sure he can do it in a variety of other arenas as well – even in the Church. The darnel weed looks so much like the stalk of wheat when both plants are young that even a farmer can’t tell the difference! The devil loves to mix in counterfeit Christians with true Christians to hinder God’s work. Sometimes it will be very difficult to tell

the difference between the two. The first Christians had lots of problems with leaders who looked godly and spoke eloquently, but were tools of the devil. Here's how the apostle Paul described them, "They're a sorry bunch—pseudo-apostles, lying preachers, crooked workers—posing as Christ's agents but sham to the core. And no wonder! Satan does it all the time, dressing up as a beautiful angel of light. So it shouldn't surprise us when his servants masquerade as servants of God." (2 Corinthians 11:13-15 MSG)

Discernment will encourage you to be on the alert and keep your guard up. The devil can infiltrate anywhere. Isn't that something Jesus' story suggests? I'm not saying the devil is all powerful. I am saying you're foolish in assuming that on this side of heaven you can find any place of 100% safety from his schemes. The devil can most certainly infiltrate your heart and mind, your marriage, your family, your church, your school, your place of work and your neighborhood. The Bible says, "Stay alert. The Devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping. Keep your guard up." (1 Peter 5:8 MSG)

There's a second strong message in both of Jesus' stories. It, too, demands that you live out your faith discerningly. Here it is: be patient with how God's authority is demonstrated. On a variety of levels it's easy to see that evil has tremendous influence. There is much that is wrong with our world. There is much that is wrong even in the Church of Jesus Christ, in local congregations, in the lives of individual Christians, in your life and mine, too. It can look like the devil is winning at every level. After awhile, it's easy to get discouraged and begin to question whether Jesus is really the King. Is He really in control? How much authority does God really have? Is He truly all powerful? When Jesus is King, you sometimes have to fight off feelings of frustration and cynicism when you observe the powerful influence of evil at every level of life and living. Frustration can lead to apathy in your walk with God. You start to give up, to not care as much and to throw up your hands in resignation. "Who cares?" you say.

Jesus reminds us that God is firmly in control despite appearances. One day everything will be set right. The harvest will come. Evil will be destroyed. Good will triumph. But today you will have to live with some uncertainty. So be patient. You might not be able to figure out if this person is really a follower of Jesus or if that person is a spiritual counterfeit. Weeds and wheat can look remarkably similar until the harvest. Then God Himself will sort it out. I got thinking about this on a very personal level. Isn't it true that each of us is a mixture of weeds and wheat spiritually speaking? There's very good stuff in us spiritually speaking and there's also stuff in us that is, frankly, from the pit of hell itself. Each of us have entrenched areas of sin – attitudes and behavior – that may well take a lifetime to dig up and destroy. On the one hand, Jesus isn't saying you should just passively accept the presence of evil in society, in the church, in the life of a fellow follower of Jesus, or in your own life. No, attack it and defeat it in His power. On the other hand, don't assume because you pull up a few weeds here and there that you got them all. Only God Himself - and only at a time of His

choosing – will dig up and destroy every last manifestation of evil in our culture, in the Church, in your life and my life.

Some of the first Christians were struggling with why Jesus didn't return from heaven right away. The issue here in Jesus' first story is the ongoing presence and power of evil not the second coming of Jesus; nevertheless, the Bible's answer is really the same. It says, "But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.... And remember, the Lord's patience gives people time to be saved...." (2 Peter 3:8-9, 15 NLT)

On March 26, 2000, Seattle's famed Kingdome—home of the Seattle Seahawks, Mariners, and at times, the Super Sonics—was destroyed. Controlled Demolition Incorporated - or CDI - was hired to do the job of imploding the 25,000-ton structure that had marked Seattle's skyline for two dozen years. Extreme measures were taken to ensure no one was hurt. Engineers checked and rechecked the structure. The authorities evacuated several blocks around the Kingdome. Safety measures were in place to allow the countdown to stop at any time if there was a concern about safety. All workers were individually accounted for by radio before the explosives were detonated. A large public address system was used to announce the final countdown. In short, CDI took every reasonable measure and more to warn people of the impending danger. Like the engineers who blew up the Kingdome, God has spared no expense or effort to make sure everybody can get out safely. He patiently warns you through your conscience, through the Word of God, through the Holy Spirit, through the Church, and through his Son.

Isn't it a good thing, after all, that God doesn't dig you up and destroy you just because there's still plenty of spiritual weeds growing in your life? How many of you are glad that God is patient? So, you be patient, too. Be both aggressive and patient. Hang in there. Get some perspective. Trust God. Be wise about your enemy today. Be patient with how God's authority is demonstrated today. When Jesus is King, you live out your faith discerningly. Yes, as it affects today and, also, how it affects tomorrow.

## **WHAT YOU MUST DISCERN ABOUT TOMORROW**

Both of Jesus' stories tell us comfortable and uncomfortable truths about tomorrow. It revolves around the certainty of God's judgment. The harvest in Jesus' first story is Judgment Day. So is the moment, in His second story, when all the fish in the net are drug ashore and the fishermen start to sort them out. Jesus is saying, first of all, that God's judgment is an inevitable and inescapable reckoning. Now, there's comfort in that truth. God will triumph despite today's disappointments. Evil and its consequences will not escape forever. Goodness

and its consequences will not forever go unrewarded. But, there is discomfort in that truth as well. Just like no fish escapes the grasp of the net, no person will escape the certainty of judgment. What will that day mean for you? The Bible says, “And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment....” (Hebrews 9:27 NLT) You know you will die one day. But just as certain as your death is the certainty that you will be judged. The Bible also says, “For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body.” (2 Corinthians 5:10 NLT) What will Judgment Day mean for you personally? When Jesus is King, you live out your faith discerningly.

Jesus’ stories also tell us, secondly, that God’s judgment will involve a complete and final separation. At harvest time, the wheat and the weeds are divided. When the fishermen reach shore, they start dividing up the fish they will keep and those they will throw away. Right now you have to tolerate living in a world, or among other people or even within yourself this exasperating mixture of good and evil, right and wrong, holy and unholy. But there is coming a day when there will be an absolute, final separation. Everything that is of God will be over here; everything that is not of God will be over there... forever. In another parable we’ll consider in June, Jesus makes the same point, “All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left... And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:32-33, 46 NLT) The entire New Testament makes it clear that you will be in one place or the other depending on what you have done with Jesus in this life. Did you apply for citizenship in His Kingdom, so to speak? Did you crown Him as your King in a personal, life-changing way? When Jesus is King, you live out your faith discerningly.

Thirdly, Jesus’ stories imply that God’s judgment will mean indescribable suffering or joy depending on where you spend eternity. What’s all this about “weeping and gnashing of teeth”? Jesus uses that language here and in other places to underline the intensity of suffering that people in hell will experience eternally. There’s been much debate over whether hell will feature literal fire or not. I think that misses the point. For certain, hell will mean such incredible, indescribable suffering that the literal burning of your skin by fire only begins to describe its torment.

I realize that this language and the concepts surrounding it seem to contradict the fact that God is loving and kind. We’ll have to leave a discussion of that issue to another day. I simply want to remind you that it’s Jesus Himself who uses these words and talks about these concepts – loving, gentle, kind Jesus. Even if you haven’t quite figured out how to fit all of this into your picture of God yet, you do well to take Jesus at His word. Jesus always tells the truth. You do not want to go to hell. You do not want anyone else to go to hell. All the more reason to pray faithfully for lost people you know personally. All the more reason

to respond to the divine opportunities God will send your way. All the more reason for you just to take those walks across the room that might turn into a relationship where you can share the good news of Jesus with someone else. When Jesus is King, you live out your faith discerningly.

By the same token, Jesus alludes to the indescribable joy that is reserved for those who spend eternity with the King of King and Lord of Lords. He says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's Kingdom...." (Matthew 13:43 NLT) That sounds wonderful, doesn't it? That experience is reserved for every person for whom Jesus is the King.

He was just a little guy. His mother died when he was just a child. His father, in trying to be both mommy and daddy, had planned a picnic the next day. That little boy had never been on a picnic, so they made their plans, fixed the lunch, and packed the car. Then it was time to go to bed. The little boy just couldn't sleep. He tossed and he turned, but the excitement got to him. Finally, he got out of bed, ran into the room where his dad had already fallen asleep, and shook him. Dad woke up and saw his son. He said to him, "What are you doing up? What's the matter?" The boy said, "I can't sleep." The father asked, "Why can't you sleep?" The boy said, "Daddy, I'm excited about tomorrow." Dad replied, "Well, Son, I'm sure you are, and it's going to be a great day, but it won't be great if we don't get some sleep. So why don't you just run down the hall, get back in bed, and get a good night's rest." So the boy trudged off down the hall to his room and got in bed. Before long, sleep came--to Dad, that is. It wasn't long before back came the little boy. He was pushing and shoving his father. Dad opened his eyes. Harsh words almost blurted out until he saw the expression on the boy's face. Dad asked, "What's the matter now?" The boy said, "Daddy, I just want to thank you for tomorrow."

When I think of the weeds in my own life, when I reflect on the fact that a loving Father wouldn't let me go, but, instead, reached down and invited me into His Kingdom, and when I think of what He has done for me and then realize that He's planning a whole new thing for me that will surpass everything good and wonderful in my past, I can only say, "Father, I want to thank you for tomorrow!"