

What Should be Done About Evil

Good morning, everybody. If you have your bibles, go ahead with me to **Matthew 13**. If you're newer to our church, what we like to **do during this time together** is open up the Scriptures, read a little from them, then talk for a bit about what it all means, and what sort of difference it makes in how we go about life. And as we do that, we believe that even if there are things in this book that are difficult to understand or difficult to hear, there is immense help and hope to be found in it. That's why we spend out time studying it together here on Sundays and throughout the week.

And **lately**, we've been working our way **through Matthew**, a book in the bible all about the life and ministry of Jesus. Last week, we kicked off chapter 13 of Matthew. And chapter 13 is made up almost entirely of *parables*—these short stories Jesus tells to illustrate different aspects of his mission and his message. Today we're actually going to cover **two parables**: the parable of the *wheat and the weeds*, and the parable of the *net*. And the reason we're covering them together is because they're very similar to each other. Some commentators on the book of Matthew actually go so far as to say that they are exactly the *same parable*, just told two different ways. And while I do think there are some differences between them, they certainly hit on very similar themes—so we'll be looking at them together. And as a fair warning, they're both pretty *intense*.

So **first**, let's read the **parable of the net**. That one's in Matthew 13, starting in v. 47. Look with me there:

[47] "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. [48] When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. [49] This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous [50] and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

If you're new, **welcome** to City Church. We're just here to encourage you and celebrate you...and occasionally talk about blazing furnaces where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Some of you brought a friend for the first time today and you're like "really? I brought them on *hell Sunday*?" Yes you did. But all things considered, that's an **intense ending** to a parable, right? Jesus tells a story about how a net is let down into the lake and catches all kinds of fish. Some of them are good for selling and for eating, and some of them *aren't*. But they're *all* in the net. So the fishermen have to then sit down with all the fish, and separate the ones that are good and useful, from the ones that *aren't*. This

is exactly how a lot of fishing worked back in the day—it would've been a very familiar experience to many listening to Jesus tell the story.

And Jesus **uses that story to say** “that’s how it will be at the end of all things, on the day of judgment.” The angels (angels were usually envisioned as God’s *helpers*) will one day separate wicked people from righteous people. And the *wicked* will be thrown into “the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Simple enough. Now, **in this parable, we don’t get much detail** about what happens to the *other* half—the *righteous*. But in our *next* parable, we *will*. So let’s take a look at *it*. Jump up with me to v. 24 of chapter 13:

[24] Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man (a farmer) who sowed good seed in his field. [25] But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. For reference, the specific weeds that Jesus mentions here were almost identical in their appearance to wheat. Very difficult to tell apart. Then v. 26... [26] When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. [27] “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ [28] “An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Okay, then...do you want us to go and pull them (the weeds) up?’ [29] “No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. So... [30] Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”

So **already, based on our understanding of the first parable** about the fish, we might be able to see where *this* parable is going. But we don’t have to *guess* at it, because Jesus just a few verses later is going to explain *this* parable to us in detail. There’s a **brief interlude** with two other parables that we’ll look at next week, and then we find the *explanation* for the parable we just read. Look with me, starting in v. 36:

[36] Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” [37] He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man (that’s Jesus’ name for himself. So the farmer is Jesus). [38] The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, [39] and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

I almost feel like I need to draw like a decoding chart on a white board, but did everybody follow most of that? Basically, the wheat are the people of the *kingdom*—God’s people. And the *weeds* are the “people of the evil one”—those who stand opposed to God’s purposes and kingdom in the world. Then, v. 40:

[40] “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. [41] The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. [42] They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. That verse, v. 42, is almost word-for-word the same as how the *last* parable ended. Did you catch that? Nearly *identical*. But as I mentioned earlier, in *this* parable, we get additional detail about the final destination of the *righteous*—not just that of the wicked: [43] Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Okay. So in front of us this morning, we have two parables. We have the good fish and the bad fish, and then the wheat and weeds. And these are parables that are meant to tell us, on some level, about the ultimate destinations of both the “righteous” and the “wicked.” In terms we’re familiar with, we *could* say that these parables are about heaven and hell. But as soon as I say that, I also realize that means we’ve got some work to do. Because unfortunately for many people, our understandings of heaven and hell have been informed way more by ancient mythology, movies, and Li’l Nas music videos than they have been formed by the bible, even when we don’t realize that has happened. So this *fall*, we’re going to do a series where we help re-examine some of the popular thinking out there on *heaven*. But today, we’re going to talk about *hell*, because that’s a little more of the focus in these two parables. And, you know, because that one’s so much *easier* to talk about.

So what I want to try to do *this morning* is help **realign how we think about hell with what the Scriptures actually teach about it**. And as we do that, I want to try and show you 1) that hell actually answers one of the most pressing, perplexing questions human beings have about the world we live in, and 2) that there is actually immense *hope* to be found in what the bible *teaches* about *hell*. Those sound *audacious* enough goals for you? Okay. Let’s start with #1: that hell actually answers one of the most pressing questions you and I have about the world we live in. I want to look back at that first *question* asked by the servants in the parable of the weeds. Take a look at v. 27:

So when the servants see the *weeds* in the field, along with the wheat, it says...

[27] *"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'"*

Now, you probably don't realize it yet, but **you have likely asked that question before**. Nearly *all* of us have. Obviously not in those exact *words*—but you've likely asked it just the same. Remember: Jesus told us that the *weeds* represent the "people of the evil one." In other words, the weeds are evil *people* doing evil *things* in the world. **So what these servants are asking, essentially, is why God allows evil in his good world.** Or, to put it more like we usually ask it, it'd be something like: if God is all *good* and all *powerful*, why does *evil* exist? Why is there *evil* in a world that *God* meant to be *good*? If God plants *wheat*, why are there still *weeds*? Do you see what they're asking?

This is **the question you and I ask every time** a terrorist blows up a building, or walks into a school or a church and starts shooting. We ask it when genocide is committed against entire people groups in our world. We ask it when billionaires stack their money higher while people right down the street from them die from starvation. We ask it anytime pedophiles are busted with hard drives full of child pornography. We ask it anytime a community leader or a pastor is caught embezzling or harassing or abusing. And the list goes on. **The question** that nearly every single one of us has burning in the back of our minds when things like that happen is this same question: **if God plants good seed, where did all of these weeds come from?** Why does *evil* exist? Where did *evil* come from?

Well, the man in the parable, who we're told represents Jesus, **gives us an answer**. Look at v. 28:

[28] *"An enemy did this," he replied.*

His answer to why there is still evil present in God's good world is simple: **there is an enemy at work**. Now maybe to some of us that seems abundantly obvious. But notice what he *doesn't* say. He doesn't say "don't worry guys—God is in control of the field." He doesn't say "oh you know what? the evil is really just *good* in disguise." He doesn't say "don't worry—God is going to *use* the weeds for incredible things in your life." All of that very well may be *true*, and there may be a time and a place for *saying* things like that. But that's not the answer given *here*. **The answer given here for why there is still evil in God's good world—and specifically why there are evil people—is simply that there is an enemy at work**. There is an enemy who is opposed to God's purposes in the world and wants to do anything he can to resist it, corrupt it, and prevent it. **He is the reason for the weeds. He is the reason for evil's presence in God's good world.**

So then the **follow-up question** we might have is “okay...well why isn’t God *doing* something *about* that, then?” Like, if God cares about what is good and true and righteous in the world—why is he just *letting* evil *coexist* with good? Why let the weeds *grow alongside* the wheat, instead of immediately pulling them *up*? **That’s what prompts** the servants in the story to ask **their next question**, second half of v. 28:

“The servants asked him, ‘Okay, then...do you want us to go and pull them up?’

Or put differently, “God if you’re not going to do something about evil, **we will.**” We will go take out the evil people on our own. **And throughout history**, people have thought it was their job to do precisely that, haven’t they? “Let’s round up the evil people and ship them off. Let’s round up the evil people and *destroy* them. Let’s round up the evil people and torture them or kill them—or bare minimum, permanently shun them.” This is where a lot of *wars* comes from. This is where *genocide* comes from. This is where *persecution* comes from. Where unjust *laws* and *systems* come from. This is even where a lot of *cancel culture* comes from. They come from us believing it is *our* job to round up and *extinguish* people *we consider evil* on God’s behalf. It’s us believing that we—in our limited understanding and discernment—are the *best* ones to be judge, jury, and executioner over other people.

But *notice*: **what’s the farmer’s response** to that question in the *parable*? Does he say “yeah, go for it guys—go wipe ‘em all out for me, that’d be great. Appreciate it.”? Nope. Not at all. *He* says, v. 29:

[29] “No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them.

In other words, **sometimes we’re not the best judges** when it comes to the state and motives of other people’s hearts. One, because we don’t have the direct *window* into their hearts that God does. Two, because we are blinded and biased by the state of *our own* hearts. Which means if I go about assigning the label “evil” to anyone *I think* is evil—and dealing with them harshly according to that label—I’m often gonna get it wrong. I love the way Russian novelist **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** puts it. If you’ve been around our church long, you’ve may have heard this quote before. He says:

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 *this* right here is often **the piece of this conversation we'd prefer to leave out.** For an awful lot of us, I think the question “what should be done about evil?” is always us referring to evil “out there,” right? *Terrorists. Murderers. Abusers. Racists. Corrupt politicians.* **Almost always, when we wonder what God is doing about evil, we're referring to anyone and everything except ourselves.** But here's the cold, hard truth: **every single one of us has participated in evil.** Without exception.

Sure, we may not be sex traffickers, but most of us have been driven by *lust*—which as it turns out, is the very engine that fuels sex trafficking across the globe. Sure, we may not be the billionaires stacking our money while people go hungry. But we *absolutely* have purchased an abundance of things we don't need while others we know *don't* have what they *need*. We may not be *murderers*. But we've harbored resentment and hatred and unforgiveness in our hearts towards people. We've divided and ended friendships because we can't bring ourselves to apologize or forgive. And what mindset do you think eventually drives people to murder? Don't you think it's resentment and hatred in their hearts? Don't you think it's the inability to acknowledge wrong and forgive?

Every single one of us has participated in evil, without exception. And by doing that, **we have unleashed evil** into our world. We have caused harm to ourselves, we've caused harm to other people, and we have broken God's good design for his world. And when we realize *that*, we can no longer pretend that the conversation about evil is a *theoretical* one. It's not *hypothetical*—it's *personal*. **When we ask the question “what is God doing about evil,” we're really asking what he's going to do about us, and others like us.**

So we're **back our original question**, but now with quite a bit more personal *investment in it: what is God going to do about evil?* The Scriptures would teach that he is doing **two main things.** One is that he is on a mission to **root out evil from every human heart** that will allow him to do it. **Through Jesus, God makes a way for the evil in each of our hearts to be confronted, and then extracted.** He makes a way for us to be “*transferred*,” in the words of Colossians, from “the kingdom of darkness, into the kingdom of the Son he loves.”¹ God deals with evil in the human heart by triumphing *over it* through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus. And so for every person that would accept and receive that reality, they can be *transferred* out of evil's control and into Jesus' kingdom. **The first thing God is doing about evil is that he is extracting it from every human heart that will let him.**

¹ Colossians 1:13

But **the second thing** God does about evil is precisely **what these two parables allude to:** that **one day, he will also extract evil from his world entirely.** There will come a day where God will **establish his kingdom,** in its fullness. And in that kingdom, there will be no evil. There will be no pain. There will be no suffering or death or abuse or violence. Which necessarily means that any *source* of those things must be removed. So on that day, God will separate the evil from the good, the wicked from the righteous, *permanently.* He will go and uproot the *weeds,* separate them from the *wheat.* He will separate the *bad* fish from the *good.* From the language of the parable, he **“will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.”** Which means everyone who has not allowed God to uproot evil from their *heart,* will *themselves* be *uprooted* from God’s good world. And they will experience permanent *separation* from the God they rejected.

You see, **sometimes** I think **we see hell as** some sort of **disconnected punishment.** (We believe) If you don’t believe the right things or if you do more bad than good, when you die, God sends you on a one-way trip to a fiery location with Hitler, Hussein and the Southpark characters. But that’s not really how hell is presented to us in the Scriptures. **In the Scriptures, hell is less of a disconnected punishment, and more of a logical conclusion.** The Scriptures teach that God made his world *good.* His intention was that people would walk with him, under his good rule and reign, forever. And eventually, he will *recreate* our world to be precisely that, *perfectly* and *forever.* Which means **if you have decided to live your entire life apart from the good and gracious rule and reign of Jesus, God eventually gives you precisely what you want:** a life *apart* from him.

And **that will also mean** a life *apart* from any of his *grace* or *compassion.* Theologians often talk about the idea of God’s **“common grace.”** And what they mean by that is that all of us, currently, experience certain *benefits* of God’s grace, whether or not we follow Jesus. Things like the goodness and beauty of God’s creation. The sun coming up in the morning. The rain that cools and renews and replenishes the earth. *Relationships* with people who love us and care for us and make us smile and laugh. There are so many aspects of life that God just graciously provides because he is loving, and generous, and compassionate. As Jesus says in the sermon on the mount, “God causes the sun to rise on the evil *and* the good.”

And God’s common grace can also be seen in **how he limits the impact of evil** on our world. In the society we live in, there are *consequences* for a lot of evil. There are laws that prohibit certain behaviors, and that enforce consequences for them. There is a justice system. There are even *social* consequences: if you do something your community sees as unacceptable, you are often confronted or ostracized for it. I’m not

saying any of those systems are perfect—far from it—but I am saying that God in his common grace still often uses systems and structures and humanity to keep evil from running *rampant* in his world. That's part of his common grace towards creation.

But you see, **hell is the absence of all that common grace**. Hell is where evil is allowed to run rampant, unchecked and unregulated, permanently. Where there is nothing to limit people's lust. Nothing to limit people's greed. People's anger. People's injustice. People's abuse. All of it is allowed to have its way on people with no restraint. And hell is where all of God's common grace *gifts* are taken away. And **the Scriptures teach that when you decide to live your life rebelling against God's rule and God's reign, eventually you will experience life outside of his common grace as well**. Every *good* thing that God has generously allowed you to enjoy, despite your opposition to him, will eventually be taken away. And **that, most significantly, is what hell is. It is a permanent separation from God and all that he provides. Hell is when God says "if what you want is to live your life apart from me, okay—I will let you do it**. If you want to resist my grace and compassion, I will let you do it. But I will also not subject my new creation to the evil that comes from your heart."

You know it's *interesting* to me that **we have such a problem** with this idea of God's judgment. Because more often than not, the people we read about in the Scriptures, and specifically, the Old Testament, didn't have much of a problem with it. You know *why* I think that was? Because they were daily confronted with real, undeniable evil. When you encounter real, undeniable evil on a regular basis, the belief that God will not put up with that forever, but will do something about it, is a beautiful thing.

In fact, I would suspect that if you just did a **worldwide survey** on people's feelings about hell and judgment *today*, you might find a *pattern*. I bet you'd find that in places where *safety and security and comfort* are people's primary experience (i.e. for most of us)...we have more of an intellectual *problem* with hell and judgment. And then I bet you'd find that in places where *death and terrorism and persecution* are regular experiences for most people, those people have much *less* of a problem with the reality of judgment. **When you see real, undeniable evil on a regular basis, judgment and justice comes as good news. Because it means evil will not triumph forever. It means that justice will triumph in the end. And that's not separate from the good news of Jesus—it's part of it.**

But you might still be asking, "okay—**but why not now?**" Like, why is God *delaying* the day when justice will be done? Couldn't he just make it all happen *now*? Why be so *slow* about it? And you're not the *only* one to ask that question. Many of the people in the

early Church were wondering the same thing. Here's how **Peter**, one of the early church leaders, responded. We'll put it up on the screen:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

So **what we see as slowness**, according to 2 Peter, is **actually God's patience**. Yeah, if God wanted to, he could destroy all evil and all doers of evil right this very second. Today. In a blink of an eye it could all be gone forever. But that would also mean destroying an awful lot of people that he wants to save. So what he has chosen to do *instead* is to show *patience*—to give more and more people time to *repent*, and to rescue more and more people out of the control of the evil one and into his family. He could be *immediate*. But instead he is patient. *Compassionate. Waiting. Pleading. Calling. Drawing people to himself.* That's who our God is. So **ironically, what we often attribute to God's cruelty or indifference towards evil, is actually his love**. His delay isn't because he *doesn't* care—but because he *does*.

And **in the meantime**, we're told that **God can leverage even the worst** of evil for *good*. Romans 8 tells us that God makes all things work for *good* for those who are called according to his purpose. Even the worst of evil, God can *repurpose*. Even the worst suffering, God can *redeem*. Even the deepest possible pain, God can use. For those who know and follow Jesus, there's no such thing as useless pain.

I once **heard it explained like this**, and it was helpful for me. **This is gonna feel a bit random for a second: how many of you have heard of a form of martial arts called "judo"?** *Judo* is Japanese for "the *gentle way*." Because essentially, what judo does is teaches you how to use your opponent's strength and force *against* them. You take what they meant to harm you, and you use it to defeat them. Judo has very little to do with kicks and punches and aggressive force. It has everything to do with using *technique* to harness your opponent's energy and use it as a force against them.

I mention that because I think that gives us a **really helpful picture** for God's relationship with evil. God is not evil, but he does often leverage and harness the power of evil for *good*. Ultimately, that is what happened at the cross. There, God used the *power* of evil to *defeat* evil. The Scriptures tell us that God used the *cross*—an instrument of evil and torture and death—and he used it to triumph *over* the power of evil once and for all. And one day, he'll put the final nail in the coffin. That's the good news. And if he can do that, he can surely use the evil, the pain, the suffering *you're* currently experiencing, for *good*.

That doesn't mean we'll always fully see it or understand it or recognize it. But it does mean that that's what he is capable of.

Let's pray.