

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

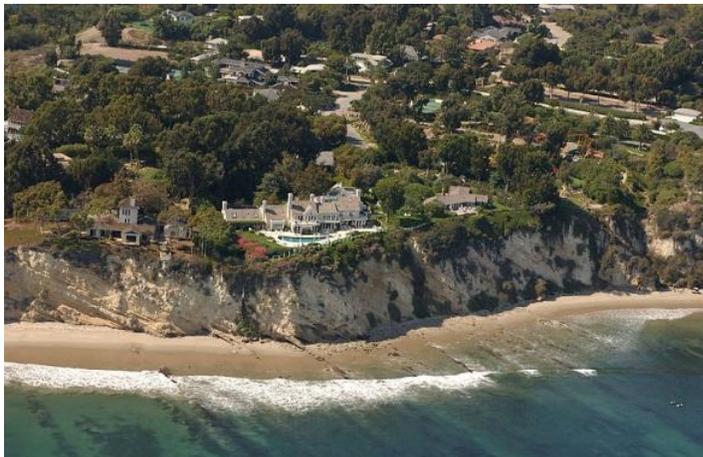
<sup>24</sup>He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup>but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. <sup>26</sup>So when the plants came up and bore grain, 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.’”

<sup>36</sup>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!

## WHY I DON'T WEED THE GARDEN

The most obvious reason that I don't weed my garden is that I don't have a garden. I have no desire to plant a garden. It's not one of my hobbies at this time, but I've thought about gardening some day, when I retire, and then I will most certainly weed that garden. But let me explain to you why I don't weed the garden that Jesus is describing in today's parable, and to do so, allow me to tell you a couple stories. The first is about Barbara Streisand and the second is about a toad...(advance)



This is a picture of Barbara Streisand's Malibu estate. Back in 2003, a photographer named Kenneth Adelman took this photograph as part the California Coastal Records Project (CCRP) in order to document coastal erosion and hopefully influence government policy on the matter. Adelman published the photo on the CCRP website, and Streisand sued Adelman for publishing the photo saying that it was an invasion of privacy. News of the lawsuit brought public attention not only to the case but to the photo which Streisand and her attorneys were trying to suppress, and, to coin another modern phrase, the photograph "went viral." Before the lawsuit was filed, hardly anyone visited the CCRP website, but in the month following the lawsuit, Adelman's website of coastal photographs received over 400,000 visits, mostly by those who wanted to see Ms. Streisand's estate. To make matters even worse, Streisand lost the case, AND a new phrase entered popular vocabulary: the Streisand Effect.



Here's a similar story; this is about the noble cane toad, which proved to be an effective way for Puerto Rico to combat a pest known as the cane beetle which was decimating their cane sugar crop at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The toad was imported from Hawaii, let loose in Puerto Rico, and the problem with the cane beetle was solved...in Puerto Rico. Now Australia also had a problem with the cane beetle and figured what works in Puerto Rico with work for them. And so the toad was introduced into Queensland Australia in 1935 in hopes of saving their sugar cane crop from the pesky cane beetle. But in Australia the cane toad was not quite as cooperative with the sugar farmers. The toad avoided the sugar cane in the day because the cane fields did not provide the toad with adequate protection from predators; thus the cane beetles were able to lay their eggs in the plant's roots in the day, during the toad's absence and dwell in the top of the sugar cane at night, and the toad, whose talents do not include climbing sugar cane, could not prey upon the beetle. What's worse is that the local snakes, crocodiles, dingoes, and family pets that decided to prey upon the cane toad became sick and died from the toxin it secreted, thus placing the toad at the top of the food chain, mostly likely followed by the cane beetle. The adventures of the cane toad in Australia, like the story of Barbara Streisand's attempt to suppress release of the photo of her Malibu estate, is another example of an attempted solution to a problem that ended up making a problem even worse.

The point should be clear. Even our most thought-out actions can bring disastrous results. This is the more obvious point that Jesus is making in today's parable, and it's certainly a point we should take to heart. A farmer's enemy sows weeds among his wheat, and the slaves want to pull the weeds, but the wise farmer tells them not to because by the time the problem is identified, the roots of both the wheat and the weeds are so intertwined that uprooting one would uproot the other. Rather than saving the wheat crop, the act of weeding the fields would actually destroy the crop. Sometimes it's best to leave the problem alone to avoid making it worse. I used to think of myself as mechanically inclined, so when there was an issue with my car's alternator I would attempt to fix it and thus create a new problem with the solenoid – I also learned what a Jesus spring was; it's that little spring that you don't notice until it springs out of your car, and you're completely lost without it. Fixing my car was like attempting to heal a blind man and making him lame at the same time. I got better...or wiser, in my endeavors, learning to discern what I could and could not fix, and really thinking through the entire repair process before embarking on it, making sure I had an exit strategy should disaster strike – like a towing service, or a ride to work, and enough money to pay for the additional repairs. I learned that solutions are often more complicated than I could anticipate, and sometimes the best thing to do is to do nothing but leave it to someone else. Jesus is telling us in this parable that when it comes to weeding the giant garden that we call humanity, it's best to leave it to God.

But there's another point to this parable; it's the more serious point that is not as obvious to us, but should not be missed, so those of us with ears, let us listen! There is an enemy who sows weeds among the wheat. It's strange first of all that the master knows that the weeds were sown by an enemy as weeds tend to show up in gardens whether someone sows them or not. It's even stranger that this enemy actually sows these weeds. I mean, if our enemy wants to wipe out the farmer's wheat, he could do it in a much simpler manner. He could let the wheat mature and then go pull it out of the ground. He could spray some Roundup on the field. He could go and steal the wheat by night at harvest time – that would be a simpler, or perhaps more profitable way of subverting the farmer. But instead he sows a weed (called zazonion, which we call bearded darnel) that, in its youth looks just like wheat. What kind of enemy would go to such extreme measures as sowing this particular weed among this farmer's wheat? This is not simply an act of vandalism or wonton destruction; this is intentional deception. And for what reason? These are questions that would leave Jesus' audience scratching its collective head. I think Jesus is making two very important points here; first that the enemy is worse than we might imagine, and second, that **good and evil** are not always clearly distinguishable. On the first point, it seems that the enemy is not simply trying to hurt **the farmer** – he wants to **frustrate him as well**; he doesn't want to simply kill the wheat; he wants to **hurt** the wheat by allowing it to grow while robbing it of nutrients, by inhibiting its growth. By the time anyone recognizes the difference between the two, their roots are so intertwined that you can't simply eradicate the weeds, which go on taking water and nutrients from the soil which would have made the wheat stronger and healthier. That is simply evil; it wants to do more than stop the good; it wants to **strangle** the good.

On the second point, evil becomes so systematized, so entwined in our lives and in our culture that it becomes impossible for us to eliminate it, even when we recognize it. Think of nations ruled by despots and military thugs. To bring war upon them may succeed in eliminating the

evil, but how many innocent lives will be lost? And once that evil regime is kicked out of power, is there any guarantee that the regime that replaces it will be any less evil? Clearly there are circumstances when nations must rise against nations to thwart an obvious evil, but often our intervention ends up making matters worse than they were before we intervened.

To complicate things even more, the roots of good and evil are intertwined **WITHIN** us. Each one of us is a combination of good and evil. A recent study by social scientists at the University of Michigan tried to determine the effect that facts had on political beliefs. They studied conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans who held certain beliefs that were not supported by facts, and when they presented these opinionated people with facts, what they found was surprising and frightening. You'd think that when confronted by facts these people would adjust their beliefs to be in sync with those facts, but instead they found that those people ignored the facts and became even more entrenched in their flawed beliefs. Truth didn't matter! What the scientists concluded was that the subjects rejected the facts because it was too stressful for them to change their belief systems. It would have been too much of a blow to their egos, or it would have meant that they would have to change their lifestyles. It's easier to reject the facts than it is to change beliefs or behavior. This plays out in the church as well, where organizations like the Ku Klux Klan originated, where it's easier for a congregation to maintain their white supremacist belief than it is for them to change their beliefs and thus their way of life. **Rather than the facts dictating their beliefs, their beliefs dictate the "facts."** And while I hope none of us are white supremacists, or black supremacists, or Asian supremacists, we are all susceptible to distorting facts to accommodate wrong beliefs. So in all humility we must ask ourselves, "Are we really fit to judge the wheat from the weeds around us if we can't distinguish the wheat from the weeds within us?"

Some people are more able than others to make such distinctions, and sometimes we must act against obvious evil. This parable is not a call to inaction, to acquiescence, to be stepped on or allow others to be stepped on. Sometimes it's clear that we have to act. But be careful! Remember the Streisand Effect, and recognize that you may not be the best judge of good or evil. That's what this parable warns us of. Rather than spending a lot of your time and energy trying to change others, you will be better off spending that time and energy in changing yourself. Try your best to eradicate the weeds that grow in your own heart; try to be the wheat that the Master plants, that will be gathered up and carried into the kingdom when the harvest season comes. That means earnestly and passionately seeking God's will, through prayer, through scripture, and through honest discussions with others. But know that evil will exist in this world, and you won't always be able to eradicate it. Some evil will simply go on growing with the good until the end of time. Only God is qualified as ultimate judge. Let him weed the garden.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we so often lack both the wisdom and the heart to know what actions to take to glorify you, so help us in our discernment. Let us not only weigh the costs and consequences of our actions but also the motives which are too often selfish and hateful. Help us to surrender our pride by surrendering our will to you. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.