

Session 2: Limitations

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We are continuing our module looking at what it takes to sustain a lifetime of service. It takes character and it takes commitment, but it also takes wisdom, and in the parables, Jesus gives us wisdom for sustaining a lifetime of service.

God gets His work done in the world is the sowing of the Word of God. This is the only seed that will produce the fruit of a God-centred life. You sow the seed as a parent in the life of your children, as a ministry leader, or as a pastor, church planter or cross-cultural missionary, and here is what will happen. Some people will be more responsive than others. Some people will show no interest whatsoever. Some people will be immediately enthusiastic, but then they will fall away because they're not rooted. Some people will profess faith, but the Word will be choked in them because it has to compete with other dreams, commitments and priorities. The Parable of the Sower makes it clear that you will see these discouraging responses in your ministry of the Word, so don't be surprised when you do. But Jesus makes it clear that the Word of God faithfully sown will produce an abundant harvest over time.

Today we come to a second parable in which our Lord tells us more about the experience of a true Christian in this world. In the first parable, our Lord spoke about four different kinds of soil. Now it is as if the lens zooms in on the good soil. The other three: the path, the rocky ground, and the thorns drop out of sight. So now we are looking at the good soil. Picture a beautiful field with furrows ploughed in straight lines; rich dark soil and lots of good seed in the ground.

Now what happens with the good soil? The good soil will produce an abundant crop. But that is only half of the story. There is more to be said and so we have this second parable in which our Lord focuses in on the experience of a true believer in this world.

✎ *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."*

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Matthew 13:24–43

We've seen in the Parable of the Sower that when the living seed of the Word of God is sown in good soil there will be a harvest. But that's only half the story. There's more to be said and we have this second parable in which our Lord tells us about the weeds that grow along with the wheat.

Seven Elements of Our Lord's Story

1. The Owner

📖 *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. (v24)*

📖 *"The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man." (v37)*

Notice that the one who sows the good seed owns the field. It is 'his field' (v24). Then, we are told that the field is 'the world' (v38). So, this sower of good seed is the owner of the whole world. Notice that Jesus says the one who sows the good seed, the owner of the world, is the *Son of Man* (v37).

Jesus used this name 'Son of Man' to refer to Himself. It comes from Daniel 7:13-14 and when you read these verses you see just how significant it is that Jesus took this name as the one by which He most often described Himself.

📖 *"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Daniel 7:13-14*

Jesus is saying, 'That is who I am!' I am the One who will be presented before the Ancient of Days. I am the One who will be served by people from all nations. I am the one whose kingdom will never pass away! Jesus says about Himself things that only God could say and He says them because He is God. He is God with us. Notice, *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field"* (v24) and *"The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man"* (v37).

So Jesus says, 'The whole world is My field!' He lays claim to sovereign rule over the entire planet. It was Abraham Kuyper who said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

Jesus Christ lays claim to every life! He lays claim not only to every life, but to every part of your life: Mind, heart, will, strength, talent, energy. He lays claim to every stage of life:

Childhood, youth, young adulthood, middle life, old age. And He is sovereign over every part of your ministry and that includes the gifts that you have and the ones you don't, the challenges you face and the fruit that you will bear.

2. The Enemy

📖 *...while his men were sleeping his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away*
Matthew 13:25

📖 *The enemy... is the devil*
Matthew 13:39

The Owner of the field has an enemy, and you cannot understand the world as it is without taking into account the enemy and his work. Jesus tells us that this enemy is the devil (v39). Jesus knows His enemy well. He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. He came into the world to destroy the devil and all of His works (1 John 3:8; Hebrews 2:14). The power of this enemy is so great and the work of this enemy so vast that it took God Himself to come and deal with the enemy and all his works.

3. The Seed

📖 *...the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one.*
Matthew 13:38

In the Parable of the Sower that we looked at last time the seed was the Word of God, growing in the hearts of people. But here, the picture changes. In this second parable, the seed is people who are growing where they are planted in the world.

There are two kinds of seed. The different seeds are different kinds of people. The good seed is 'sons of the kingdom' - that is people who live under the rule of God in their lives. The weeds are the 'sons of the evil one' - that is people who, like the evil one, place themselves on the throne of their own lives.

Notice the destructiveness of Satan's work. He sows weeds in Christ's field. He has no positive objective in mind. The motivating force of all his activity is simply to destroy the harvest. There is a foul maliciousness here. The devil is a destroyer. Satan could sow a whole field of weeds in another place, but he has no interest in that. All that matters to him is that he will bring destruction to the field that belongs to Christ, to blight His harvest, to entangle the roots of His people.

4. The Field

📖 *The field is the world.*
Matthew 13:38

These words are crucial to understanding what this parable is about. It is surprising how many writers treat this as a parable about the church. They make the point that there can never be a pure church. It is certainly true that there will never be a pure church this side of heaven and clearly there are applications of this parable, as from every other part of Scripture for the church.

One obvious application is that the church should exercise great caution in regard to discipline. There are times when the elders of the church must exercise discipline for the protection of the church. But surely this parable reminds us that it would be very unwise for elders of a church to think that they could root out everything that is displeasing to God in the church. If they tried to do that, they would find themselves pulling up the whole field!

So, there are lessons for the church here. But the parable is not about the church. It is about the kingdom. Jesus says, *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field."* So, this parable is about what the reign of God in the world looks like. Jesus says quite clearly, "The field is the world!"

5. The Question

📖 *Master did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?* **Matthew 13:27**

This is the central question in the parable and it's a question that all of us must face. If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world? If Jesus triumphed over evil on the cross why is it flourishing today?

You look at the weeds of evil in the world and wonder, how can there be a God who is good when the field of His world is in a mess like this? Is God really in control? How can we believe in a sovereign God in a world like this?

You may remember that this was John the Baptist's question. He had been the forerunner of Jesus. His message was, 'Prepare the way of the Lord!' He said about Jesus,

📖 *His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* **Matthew 3:12**

But a few years later, John is in prison. And he began to wonder if Jesus was really the promised Messiah, so he sent messengers to Jesus with a question. “*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*” (Matthew 11:3). People had assumed that when the Messiah came it would be ‘game over’ for evil. But in this parable Jesus tells a different story. The good seed was planted, but evil continued and the two have been growing together ever since. Today we look at the world and see this perplexing mixture of good and of evil, and Jesus is telling us that this is exactly what we should expect!

6. The Growth

 *Let both grow together until harvest.*
Matthew 13:30

Evil will grow alongside good until the return of Christ. That is the teaching of Jesus, and we need this wisdom if we are to sustain a lifetime of ministry.

The twentieth century started with extraordinary humanistic optimism. Charles Darwin had caught the imagination of millions with his origin of the species. The human race is evolving, we are getting better and better moving towards a golden age.

But within fourteen years of the turn of the century, there was appalling loss of life in the trenches of the first World War. But then people said, this will be the war to end all wars. But within 20 years, it had started again. Before we were half-way through this great new century and we had two world wars, the like of which had never been seen before.

Then there was the cold war. The whole world on the brink of annihilation. Then as we got near the end of what had been the bloodiest century in human history, there seemed to be a shining hope. The Berlin wall came down. Now there was going to be a new world order, the 21st century, this would be the one that would bring peace and the kind of world we could all enjoy. But instead we were faced with an entirely new kind of war. The war on terror.

Look at world history and you will see that every time evil gets pushed down, it rises up again in another even more sinister form. Jesus is telling us that this is the world in which we will live until He comes again.

The world never changes and if you start out with the aim of changing the world you’re going to be frustrated and disappointed and it’s going to be hard for you to sustain ministry for a lifetime.

The world never changes. Until Christ returns it will always be a field in which the wheat grows alongside the weeds. But here's the good news! There will be a harvest! It is worth planting the good seed because God will make it grow even in this troubled world. The good seed and the weeds are growing together. The world is getting better, and it is getting worse at the same time! And Jesus says, this is a picture of what will happen until He returns.

7. The Harvest

📖 *...at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn,'*
Matthew 13:30.

This is a clear description of the Day of Judgement. And that day has not yet come. Until it does, the world's going to look like a weed infested field. But Jesus is telling us that that day will come, and when it does, the weeds will be gathered and bound together in bundles.

Matthew Henry says, "Sinners of the same sort will be bundled together in the great day." A bundle of cynics, a bundle of blasphemers, a bundle of cowards, liars, hypocrites. And then Jesus says that He will gather the wheat into His barn.

In the Old Testament there's a lovely story in which Abigail said to David that his life would be, "*...bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the LORD your God*" (1 Samuel 25:29).

As a believer that's going to be true of you. You will be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God.

So here are seven elements in Jesus' story: the owner, the enemy, the field, the seed, the question, the growth and the harvest. What do we learn from this story that will help us to sustain a lifetime of ministry.

Three Applications from our Lord's Story

a. Bloom Where You Are Planted

Remember that there is no ideal place to do ministry. Wherever you go in this world, the wheat and the weeds grow together. It's so easy to become enchanted with the idea that if you were just in another ministry, in another church, oh things would be so much better. But remember that there are no

weed-free fields. So, stay engaged where God has rooted you down. Resist the temptation to move on when you encounter difficulties. Wherever Christ puts you, Satan will sow his weeds. So, stay where the Lord has placed you and bloom where you are planted. Christ anticipates that your roots as a believer will be intertwined with the roots of people whose nature is very different from yours. That will be true at school and in business.

b. Focus on Sowing Seeds, Not on Pulling Weeds

Jesus said, *“Let both grow together until the harvest.”* This does not mean that you stop caring about a person’s spiritual condition, but Jesus makes it clear that in this world the wheat needs to grow alongside the weeds until the Son of Man comes. We have a big enough challenge on our hands trying to deal with sin in our own hearts, in our own families and in our own churches. And yes, Jesus makes it clear that we are to have the influence of salt and light in the world, but in this parable, Jesus makes it clear that it is not in our power or in our calling to root out evil from the world.

c. Anticipate the Harvest

“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v43). Christ will bring in a great harvest. He will bring His people home. And on that day, the believers you have served will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. On that day there will be bundles of wheat and bundles of weeds. But remember that by God’s grace, as J.C. Ryle said, “Some who are weeds today may be wheat tomorrow.”

The purpose of this module is to help you sustain a lifetime of ministry and these parables of Jesus help us to set realistic expectations and to understand the limitations of the ministries to which Christ calls us. Next time we’re going to look at the parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven. And we’re going to see the progress you can expect to see as you give yourself to serving the Lord.

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