

Why Evil Grows Alongside Good

Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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One of the theological classics I read many years ago is titled *Christ and Culture* by the famed theologian H. Richard Niebuhr. It is a comparison of how Christian groups have engaged popular culture through history. How should we live with the rest of the world? What does it mean to be *in* the world but not *of* the world?

Niebuhr identifies five ways the church has engaged culture through history. On one end of the spectrum is *Christ the transformer of culture*. Christians that have identified with this position see the world as basically good, but it has become corrupted by sin. The role of the church, therefore, is to transform the world. This is the perspective that came out of the Protestant Reformation and that characterizes many Protestant churches today, including ours. So you see these churches operating soup kitchens to feed the hungry, erecting hospitals to treat the sick, building houses to shelter people, organizing job training to lift people into meaningful employment, and doing other such things to transform culture for the glory of God.

At the other end of the spectrum is *Christ against culture*. Christians that have identified with this perspective see culture as hopelessly, irreparably corrupted by sin. We cannot operate enough soup kitchens, erect enough hospitals, or build enough houses to redeem culture. It just can't be done. So, these Christians withdraw from culture, separate from it, in order to build a pure church. The Amish and Mennonites do this, as have some forms of the Baptist church, Pentecostals, and the monastic movement.

I was once part of a group that visited a monastery in St. Meinrad, Indiana. Some of us ate lunch with some of the monks. They invited our questions, so I asked this question: How do you expect to influence the world for Christ and the Kingdom of God if you withdraw into your monastery?

One of the brothers answered, “We become the change we want to see in the world. We model it for the rest of the world.”

Which I thought was a pretty good answer. I even thought about becoming a monk. For about two seconds!

It’s an important question. Do we separate ourselves from the world, reject its corruption, and attempt to build a pure church, or do we intermingle with the world, accept its corruption, and try to transform it?

The parable I read earlier addresses this question. It is called The Parable of the Weeds. Some think Jesus told this parable in response to a criticism, possibly by one of the Pharisees. The name “Pharisee” meant “separatist.” Somewhat like monks, the Pharisees tried to live their lives separated from the rest of the world in order to be purely devoted to God and the Law of Moses. The Pharisees originated during a very difficult time for the people of Israel—their exile into a foreign land. An army drove them from their homes, their vineyards, their gardens, their land, and forced them into a foreign land. In exile, they no longer had the Temple in Jerusalem as the center of their faith. So the Pharisees emerged during the exile to refocus the faith of the people. Instead of the Temple, they focused on the Law of Moses, how to live obediently, how, even in a foreign land, to form a pure community of faithfulness to God. To help the people accomplish this, the Pharisees added more and more interpretations to the Law. But by the time of Jesus, the way of the Pharisees, who started with good intentions, had become legalistic and burdensome. All of their extra laws—in an effort to create a pure community—had become oppressive for the people.

So some think a Pharisee asked Jesus a question like this, “If the Kingdom of God, which you preach, is really here, why haven’t the sinners been separated from the saints? Why,” this Pharisee wanted to know, “does the evil continue to grow alongside the good?”

In response to a question like that, Jesus told The Parable of the Weeds. A farmer went out to sow good seed in his garden. But while everyone on the farm was sleeping, an enemy crept in and sowed weeds among the good wheat. The Greek text says that the enemy sowed

zizavia, which likely refers to darnel, a weed that looks a lot like wheat in its early stages of growth. When the farmer looked out and saw the seed coming up, he must have been very pleased. Until his servants came in and told him the bad news. Yes, the wheat was coming up, but alongside it that noxious weed darnel was coming up too.

The servants asked the farmer what he wanted them to do. This is what he told them:

Let them both grow 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."

So Jesus, if the kingdom has come, why haven't the sinners been separated from the saints? Why does evil continue to grow alongside good?

Why? Because God will do the work of separating at the "harvest," at the end of time. God has a plan for the separating, so we need not worry about it. That's God's work not ours.

I sometimes hear the complaint, "Oh, the church is just a bunch of hypocrites." You ever heard that? Church is just a bunch of hypocrites. Well, yes, we do have hypocrites. We always have and we always will. Because it is God's intent that the weeds and the wheat grow together.

Interesting, isn't it? Why would God want it this way?

Is it possible that humans are not capable of carrying out the separation properly? And the reason we are not capable is that we can't see into someone's heart. And besides, don't we all have a little weed in us and a little wheat in us?

Frankly, I don't want to be someone else's judge. That's too big. Think about an eighteen-year-old boy. He's beginning to give his parents trouble. He's drinking under age, smoking a little pot, and hanging around with the wrong crowd. One day he's at church and sees some money that's not being watched. He reaches in and takes \$50 and slips it

into his pocket. What do you do with him? Do you snatch him out and bundle him up to be burned?

That happened here. Many years ago. Before my time. About ten years ago I received an anonymous letter in the mail and a \$50 bill. In the letter, a man explained that as a boy he made some big mistakes. Yes, he got in with the wrong crowd, and one day he stole \$50 from Weatherly Heights Baptist Church. He went on to explain that his life had changed. He wanted to make right a youthful indiscretion, so he returned the \$50.

Aren't we glad no one snatched him out at age eighteen and bundled him up to be burned? We are not capable of carrying out the separation properly, so we must leave that work to God.

And something else. Is it possible that God's intent was never to have a pure community, but rather to have a community that is continually redeeming? I blew it yesterday, but I'm going to get it right today. I blew it for a year, for ten years, but I'm going to try to get it right now...with your help, and your help, and your help, and with God's help. Here's the reality: the purest community isn't pure. There are no pure communities and no pure churches. We are communities of impurity continually being redeemed.

Rather than snatching someone out and bundling them up to be burned, we must pray for one another, support one another, and encourage one another. And trust that God will be merciful with us all.

Why does evil grow alongside good? Because the great work of separation, understanding the human heart, will be done by God in God's time. Our responsibility is to be in the world but not of it. Our responsibility is to operate soup kitchens, care for the sick, build houses, lift people into meaningful employment, and do other things to transform our community for the glory of God.

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, help us to be in the world, a transforming agent, but not of the world. Amen.