

# Burn the Weeds

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Text: Matt 13:24-30, 36-43

Years ago, in another place, a teenager wrote me a letter to tell my why she was leaving the church. I appreciated the letter, on the one hand, because most people who stop attending church just vanish without any explanation. There have been times when someone stopped attending church that I tried to contact them to see if there was a reason. Perhaps I had offended them. If that were the case, I always appreciate the opportunity to apologize and clear the air, so that at least we part as friends. But most people simply don't respond. They don't answer the phone. They don't respond to e-mails or letters, and when I try to visit, they're always too busy at that moment. It is refreshing when someone takes the time and has the courtesy to let me know why they quit attending or choose to go somewhere else. It's always disappointing to me when someone leaves, but it takes a bit of the sting away when they tell me why.

This young lady wrote me a rather long letter explaining why she was leaving. Among her reasons was my encouragement to "be like Jesus." In her mind, that meant growing a beard and dressing in floor-length robe and sandals. She took the "be like Jesus" bit literally, as a way to dress. That's not what we mean, and I'm sure I needn't explain it this morning. But the "biggie" for her was "all the hypocrites in the church." Well, that was a small village church made up mostly of people whose faith I had grown to admire. One of them was a sweet lady by the name of Alta who was the consummate prayer warrior. I am still convinced that when Alta prayed, God stopped everything to listen to her. Alta knew how to pray. I preached a sermon from the Lord's Prayer, and Alta came up afterward and said, "Pastor, I'm so confused. I don't know how to pray." The accusation of hypocrisy bothered me so I did something I'd never done before or since – I asked the young lady to name the hypocrites in the church. Just name one, I asked her. Do you know what? She couldn't.

You see, it's a very common accusation: all the hypocrites in church. It's an easy accusation to make, and honestly quite judgmental. But the truth is, most people who make the accusation couldn't name even one such person. They don't attend church and they don't want to, so they make up an excuse they cannot support with even one fact.

I saw a news article on social media about a man who had committed sexual crimes. One person responded, "I'll bet he goes to church." They don't know and they have nothing to base their accusations on. When we developed our sexual awareness class, one of the illustrations given to us as a reason for insurance was a youth pastor in Alaska. His crime affected more than the church. People in the community knew the church as "that church." We are aware of the investigation into certain Catholic priests and bishops and how that has tarred the whole Body of Christ. The truth is, though, that it was an extremely tiny minority of priests and only two or three bishops. One is too

many, but the reason it was even news is that is unusual. Most priests are moral, upright, and pure in their behaviour. The cases of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker made the news a couple decades ago. But most pastors are moral, upright, and godly and would never think of doing what they did. The reason they were in the news is that they were an anomaly. The tens of thousands of good pastors, the tens of thousands of good priests, are simply not news. In fact, they're kind of boring.

The same is true of hypocrites in the church. I'm sure they are out there, somewhere. But I would challenge anyone to name one. They are an anomaly. Let me tell you why.

Our definition of hypocrite is wrong. We define it so loosely that it could apply to every single one of us. We don't live up to what we believe. We believe in a bigger God than we pray to. We believe in a greater salvation than we live. And we believe that we ought to live holy lives before God – and we all know we fall far short. But that's not hypocrisy. That's spiritual growth. I want to be more than I am, and by God's grace and the Holy Spirit's power, I am growing into that new man. New believers aren't hypocrites just because they aren't sudden saints. Growing Christians aren't hypocrites just because their dream is bigger than their reality, or their new-found faith is weak. Wounded believers aren't hypocrites just because they are struggling with doubt. We wound and maim those who simply don't measure up, when we are unaware of how God is working in their lives.

The word *hypocrite* comes from a Greek word that means an actor, someone wearing a mask. They pretend to be what they aren't. They proclaim a faith they don't really believe. They are actors, and liars. We may call them "pretend Christians." They go to church because it's the politically-correct thing to do. In one town, there was a very good church with a very good pastor. But it was the church you attended to be seen, to rub shoulders with the important people of that town. There were quite a number who attended that church to curry favor with the mayor or with the police chief, or with some rich person in the community. They were the pretend Christians.

Now I have spent a lot of time here because that's partly what Jesus' parable is about. This is a parable about hypocrites in the church. It's also a parable about false teachers in the church. This is the second kingdom parable, and we'll talk more about that next week. But in light of what we know, let's take a closer look at the parable of the weeds, or tares (KJV).

This farmer sows his field with good seed, expecting a good crop. But late one night, an enemy sneaks in and contaminates the field with a weed. The tares, or weeds, we suspect, was a plant known as dandelion. It has other names, cockle, dandelion ryegrass, or poison dandelion. It grows a stalk like wheat, and the head has a similar appearance, but not quite the same. When the seed germinates and the stalks come up, then the farmer discovers that his field has been polluted. What to do? The dandelion competes for water and for nutrients from the soil. It crowds out and weakens the wheat. The farm hands offer a very logical solution: Let's just go pull all the dandelion.

That's what some have tried to do in the church: just pull the weeds. Except it isn't as easy as that. You see, in a field of wheat, roots interlace. The farmer knows that if you start pulling out the dandelion, because of their root systems, you will be pulling out the wheat, as well. In the church, there are relationships, interlacing root systems, if you will. Some are family. Some are just good friends. And when you expel the hypocrites, good folk alongside take offense and leave with them.

Sometimes, there is a problem person in the church – and there are a lot of ways a person might be a problem. But when you start trying to weed out the problems, you end up interfering in a whole web of relationships. You don't just weed out problem people, you end up losing good folks who are part of that web of relationships.

Sadly, sometimes you have to remove a problem and just take your lumps. I had to fire a worker. There were good reasons, that meant this person had to resign a ministry position. When he left the church, several good families left with him. And I could not tell them why I'd had to let this person go. He had developed relationships in such a way that those good folks were almost forced to take sides. He proclaimed to them his innocence and I was the bad guy.

In another church, before I was pastor there, there was a man who was teaching Sunday School. He openly declared that he was going to change the church from Nazarene to Baptist. The pastor had to relieve him of his duties. When he left, other families left with him. That same church had a man by the name of Fred, who was a tyrant and made it his job to police the church and the pastor. He became such a problem that people were almost afraid to move lest they stir Fred's anger. Finally, the pastor was forced to expel Fred. The sad part is that his wife, Pearl, was a sweet and gentle lady whom everyone loved. When Fred left, his wife also left. I never met Fred, but I met Pearl. Her sorrow over the incident was still evident years later. The point is that when you pull the weeds, you end up losing some of the wheat as well. Sometimes, it is necessary to "pull the weeds" to save the church.

But, importantly, this is not a church parable but a kingdom parable. It's not a lesson on discipline in the church. It is a picture of the kingdom of God. In many of the parables, there is a protagonist who represents God or Christ himself. In this case, it is the farmer. Who are the laborers? Jesus says it is his angels. We ought to leave it to them, because our inclination is to sit in judgment on those who we think don't measure up. They're not Christian enough, whatever that may mean. Perhaps they don't live the way we think they should live. Or they use language we think is inappropriate for a Christian. Or they don't dress the way we think Christians ought to dress. Maybe they have habits we think are unseemly for a Christian. Whatever, we often want to say, "Well, that's not a real Christian." Or, as I began, we want to declare that they are hypocrites.

There's something vital that we need to keep in mind here, and it's a lesson we find in 1 Samuel 16. Samuel was mourning over the failures of King Saul when God told him, in essence, get over it and go anoint a new king to take Saul's place. God directed Samuel to Jesse in Bethlehem and told him that one of Jesse's sons would be the new king. So Samuel had Jesse bring out his sons. The tall, handsome, muscular young men stood one by one in front of Samuel, only for the old judge to hear God say, "Not this one." Seven strapping country boys. Confused, Samuel asked Jesse if that was all of them. "No," Jesse said, the youngest is out watching the sheep. He was the one. But here's God's word on the matter, verse 7, *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance nor his height ... The LORD does not look on the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."*

God doesn't see people the way we see them. He sees their hearts. They don't look "right" to us, or they don't act "right" as we think they ought to act. But God knows what we don't know.

And believe me, God knows a hypocrite when he sees one. God knows the phonies. God knows who's in church just for the show and who wears the label just for respectability. God knows the genuine from the fake. They may fool us, and we are fooled all the time, but they don't fool God. We may judge people by their denomination or by their methods. We may judge the music they use and the translation of the Bible they choose. But God knows their hearts.

So the farmer tells his workers, "No, just leave the field alone. Let the weeds grow with the wheat. Wait until the harvest. Then we'll pull the weeds out and burn them, and harvest the wheat and bring it into the barn."

It occurs to me that there is good news for us there. We can relax. We don't have to protect the church from hypocrites. We don't have to protect the church from people who dress differently, think differently, act oddly. In fact, we don't have to protect the kingdom at all. We don't have to warn the world about phony Christians. God relieves us of that burden, setting us free to live out the Christian life the best *we* can. I don't have to tend your fire. God set me free to tend my own fire and make sure mine is burning brightly. I don't have to wash your windows. God set me free to be sure my own windows are clean and clear. I don't have to worry about how you live out the Christian life. God set me free to simply be the best Christian I can be.

That doesn't mean I don't have to encourage you. That doesn't mean I don't have to witness anymore. That doesn't mean I don't have to pray for you. That doesn't mean that we each walk alone. It doesn't mean I don't pick you up when you fall or help you carry your burdens. But it does mean that I no longer have to worry about judging you. God has reserved that responsibility for himself.

Because the final lesson of the parable is this: There is a judgment, a day when God calls in the harvest. And in that day, God will decide who are the phonies, who are the fakes, who are the weeds, who is the cause of sin. And God will decide who is genuine, who is the wheat. This is important for us today. We need to understand that there is a Judge and there is a Judgment. This is not a hell-fire sermon, but it stands as a warning to us. We need to decide which side we are on, and not worry so much about which side someone else in the church is on. It also means that we can trust God with his kingdom. He knows who is his. He knows your heart.