

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Catholic Bible Study

· SESSION TWO ·

The Kingdom and Its Enemies

The Weeds among the Wheat · The Dragnet · The Barren Fig Tree

“The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels.”

Matthew 13:39 (RSV2CE)

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE · WITH PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION

SESSION OVERVIEW

Last week we heard that the Kingdom has come, that it is growing, and that it requires reception. This week we hear the question every thoughtful Christian eventually asks: if the Kingdom has come, why is there still so much evil in the world? Why does the Church contain hypocrites? Why do prayers go unanswered? Why does God seem to wait? Jesus answers not with a theology lecture but with three parables: the Weeds among the Wheat, the Dragnet, and the Barren Fig Tree. Read together they hold three truths in tension. The evil is real. A sorting is coming. The waiting has a purpose.

The pastoral danger to avoid is the slide into either of two opposite errors. Presumption says God will sort it all out, so nothing I do matters. Despair says the evil is too great and the Church too corrupt for the Kingdom to be real. Jesus refuses both. The weeds will be gathered. The fig tree will be examined. The waiting is not God's indifference; it is God's patience, and the patience has a horizon.

Audience note: high-school and young-adult participants almost always come to this session with a story: someone who claimed Christ but did not live it, a Catholic who deeply hurt them, scandals in the wider Church, hypocrisy among people they loved. The session's success depends on letting that real experience meet Jesus' real words. Do not rush past the wounds. Do not rush past the warnings.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Weeds among the Wheat: a mixed world, a mixed Church, on the way to harvest

The Greek word for the weed in Matthew 13:24-30 is *zizanian* (Mt 13:25, 27, 29, 30, 36, 38, 40), commonly identified with darnel (*Lolium temulentum*), a grass that in its early growth is almost indistinguishable

from wheat. The botanical detail is theologically important: premature human judgment about who is in and who is out of the Kingdom will be unreliable, because what looks like a weed may be wheat in process, and what looks like wheat may not finish as wheat. The image is not arbitrary; it is precisely the image Jesus needed.

Note that Jesus himself identifies the field as “the world” (Mt 13:38); the parable directly concerns the mixed condition of the world until the final judgment. Because the Church on earth shares in that mixed condition, St. Augustine and the Catholic tradition draw a legitimate analogous application to the pilgrim Church.

St. Augustine used this parable as one of his central arguments in the long Donatist controversy. The Donatists were a North African rigorist movement who insisted that the visible Church must be free of any sinner, especially those who had compromised under persecution. Against them, St. Augustine argued that the Church on earth is a mixed reality, a *corpus permixtum* (a “mixed body”), and will remain so until the harvest (see *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* IV.10-11; *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 6.2 and 45.10). The standard summary of his teaching, often passed on as a near-quotation, is that many whom the Church visibly numbers among her own do not finally belong to God, and many whom God numbers among his own are not yet visibly within the Church. The pastoral consequence: human attempts to manufacture a perfectly pure visible Church by sorting out the weeds will damage the wheat. The judgment of souls belongs to God.

This is not a counsel of complacency. The complement, drawn out by St. John Chrysostom and consistent with St. Augustine, is that the weed can become wheat through repentance. The command not to pull up the weeds prematurely is itself an act of mercy toward those who have not yet come to conversion. The delay is pastoral, not permissive. The harvest is real. The mercy is real. Both at once.

The Dragnet: every kind, then sorted

The Dragnet (Mt 13:47-50) is the same teaching from a different angle. The Greek word is *sagēnē*, a long dragnet pulled between two boats or from the shore, gathering every kind of fish (Mt 13:47). The sorting happens not in the water but on the shore: the good are kept, the bad are discarded, and Jesus interprets the parable himself in vv. 49-50. Its emphasis differs slightly from the Weeds. The Weeds presses against premature judgment within the Church; the Dragnet presses against the sentimentalism that imagines no final sorting at all. Both parables resist the same pastoral error from opposite sides: the Weeds against the rigorist who would sort too soon, the Dragnet against the universalist who imagines no sorting will ever happen. Jesus holds both.

The Barren Fig Tree: extended mercy, but not unlimited

The Barren Fig Tree appears only in Luke (13:6-9), and its placement matters: it comes immediately after Jesus’ sharp call to repentance in Luke 13:1-5, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” The fig tree with no fruit is not a symbol of hopelessness; it is a symbol of extended, costly mercy. The owner is ready to cut it down. The vinedresser intercedes for one more year, offering to dig and fertilize at his own labor, buying time for the tree to bear fruit.

The fig tree is a consistent Old Testament image for Israel (Hos 9:10; Jer 8:13; Mic 7:1). Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree (Mt 21:18-22; Mk 11:12-14, 20-21) and this parable have often been read together as a thematic pair: a prophetic warning, especially concerning unfruitful Israel and its leadership, against the appearance of life without fruit. The Church’s tradition has often read the vinedresser as Christ

himself, the merciful intercessor between divine justice and the unrepentant heart, and as a model for every priest, parent, and disciple who stands between God and another soul, asking for one more year.

The pastoral force of the parable is the tension built into its open ending. The vinedresser asks for one more year, and the conditional is real: “if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down” (Lk 13:9). God’s patience is real, but the time it gives us in this life is not unlimited. Both the mercy and the deadline are pastoral truths. Take both seriously.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

These passages are the deep roots of Session 2’s parables. This is where they are developed in full; in the discussion the group will read the fig-tree texts and find the connection for themselves.

GENESIS 3:15 (RSV2CE)

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

The two seeds in the field of the Weeds parable have their deepest root here, in what Catholic tradition calls the *protoevangelium*, the first hint of the Gospel. There are two lines in human history, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent; the conflict between them runs through Scripture; it is decisively won by Christ in his Cross and Resurrection, and that victory will be fully manifested only at the final harvest.

HOSEA 9:10 (RSV2CE)

“Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to Baal, and became detestable like the thing they loved.”

God’s memory of a fruitful Israel is set against the present barrenness. The Barren Fig Tree is grief as much as warning: God remembers what the tree was once, which is exactly why he cannot accept the unfruitfulness now.

ISAIAH 5:1-2, 7 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard ... He dugged it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines ... he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes ... For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel.”

Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard is the framework behind every parable about fruitless plants in the Gospels. God invests, plants, prunes, and waits. The expectation of fruit is not arbitrary; it is the right consequence of God’s investment in his people.

JEREMIAH 8:13 (RSV2CE)

“When I would gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even

the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.”

Jeremiah’s prophetic complaint is the literary substrate of the Barren Fig Tree. God comes seeking fruit and finds none; the prophet’s grief becomes the owner’s grief in the parable.

ZEPHANIAH 1:14-15 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast ... a day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom.”

The eschatological sorting in the Dragnet draws on the Old Testament Day of the Lord tradition. Jesus’ reference to “the close of the age” (Mt 13:49) is not a private innovation; it is the prophetic Day of the Lord, now identified with his own coming.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

Method: *Direct quotations appear in quotation marks with a specific source citation. Where a Father’s teaching is faithfully represented but no single quotable line fits, it is given as paraphrase, without quotation marks, with citation to the work where it appears.*

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

St. Augustine’s sustained engagement with this parable comes through his anti-Donatist writings (especially *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* IV.10-11) and his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (notably 6.2 and 45.10). The teaching: the Church on earth is a *corpus permixtum*, a mixed body of saints and sinners, and human attempts to sort the visible Church into a perfectly pure community will damage the wheat along with the weeds. Judgment of souls belongs to God at the harvest.

He adds, against complacency, that the weed can become wheat: the forbearance of the Lord is the time of conversion (cf. 2 Pet 3:9). Pastoral patience and pastoral urgency are not opposites for St. Augustine; they are the same posture before different aspects of the same reality.

St. John Chrysostom (347–407)

St. John Chrysostom treats the Weeds parable in his *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, Homilies 46-47. His pastoral concern is that harsh discipline within the Church risks destroying souls who could have been converted. He dwells on the command, “Let both grow together until the harvest” (Mt 13:30): the patience is not indifference but the gift of time for repentance, and he presses his congregation to use the time well.

On the Dragnet he emphasizes the seriousness of the closing image: the furnace of fire is Jesus’ own language, and the preacher who softens it is unfaithful to his Master. The patience that holds back the harvest does not eliminate it.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

In his *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 13, St. Thomas gathers the Fathers’ teaching on the Weeds, above all St. Augustine’s: the Church’s authority to discipline does not extend to certain identification of those finally

outside grace, both because of the risk of harming those who could yet repent and because apparent weeds cannot be identified with the certainty ultimate judgment requires. On how God's patience and final justice belong together, his treatment in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21 (on God's justice and mercy) is illuminating: mercy and justice are not opposed in God but perfectly one. Applied to these parables, this suggests that God's patience toward the still-living sinner is mercy and justice acting together: the time before the harvest is time given for conversion.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 827

"Christ, holy, innocent, and undefiled, knew nothing of sin, but came only to expiate the sins of the people. The Church, however, clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal."

CCC 1040

"The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. ... Then through his Son Jesus Christ he will pronounce the final word on all history. We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation and understand the marvelous ways by which his Providence led everything towards its final end."

CCC 1861

"Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. ... If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back."

SESSION GOALS AND TIME ESTIMATE

Goals for the leader

1. Address the real scandal of evil in the world and in the Church honestly and theologically. 2. Hold both poles together: God is patient, and God's patience is not infinite. 3. Direct attention inward, away from judgment of others and toward the soil of one's own heart. 4. Let the open ending of the Barren Fig Tree do its work: the parable is unfinished because the response is ours.

Time estimate (90 minutes)



Opening prayer and check-in: 10 min



The Weeds among the Wheat (read, three-tier discussion): 30 min



The Dragnet (read, brief discussion): 12 min



The Barren Fig Tree (read, Old Testament discovery, discussion): 23 min



Application and concrete commitment: 10 min



Closing prayer: 5 min

The Weeds discussion will run long if anyone in the group has been hurt by the Church. Let it, and draw from Going Deeper if the Dragnet runs short.

PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

“Lord of the harvest, you sowed good seed in the world and in your Church. We confess that we have sometimes been quick to pull up the weeds we saw, and slow to examine the soil of our own hearts. Give us the patience that is yours, the urgency that is yours, and the trust that you will sort all things rightly in the end. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Check-In (5–10 min)

Briefly: how did last session’s practice land? Did you notice anything when you prayed “Lord, make me good soil today” before opening Scripture?

READ ALOUD

Last week we heard that the Kingdom is here, growing, and asking to be received. This week we ask the question that always follows. If the Kingdom has come, why is there still so much evil in the world? Why does the Church contain hypocrites? Why does God seem to wait? Jesus does not avoid this. He gives us three parables tonight, and his answer holds three truths in tension. The evil is real. A sorting is coming. The waiting has a purpose.

PART ONE · THE WEEDS AMONG THE WHEAT (MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43)

Have someone read Matthew 13:24-30 aloud, then 13:36-43.

MATTHEW 13:24-30 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“Another parable he put before them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the

wheat, and went away.’ ... 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.’”

MATTHEW 13:38-40 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“The field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one ... Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age.”

READ ALOUD

The Greek word for the weed is *zizanion*, commonly identified with darnel. In its early growth darnel is almost identical to wheat; you cannot reliably tell them apart until both are mature and the heads form. Keep that detail in mind as you read: the servants are being asked to sort a field in which the weeds and the wheat look nearly the same.

Q1. [TEXT] The owner gives a precise reason for not pulling up the weeds immediately. What is it? What does that reason imply about the relationship between the wheat and the weeds in the field?

Leader note: His reason is that the wheat may be uprooted along with the weeds (Mt 13:29): sorting now risks harming the wheat, so the sorting is deferred to the harvest. This sets up everything else in the discussion.

Q2. [TEXT] Read 13:38 carefully. The field is the world, not the Church, the world. How does this clarify what kind of sorting Jesus is, and is not, describing?

Leader note: Jesus describes a sorting at the close of the age, across all of humanity. The parable is not primarily a license for the Church to refuse all discipline of its own members; it is a check on humans appointing themselves as the final judges of which souls are in the Kingdom. There is real Church discipline (cf. Mt 18:15-17), and there is also a final judgment that belongs only to God.

Q3. [TRADITION] St. Augustine used this parable against a rigorist movement that wanted a Church free of any visible sinner. His teaching is that the Church on earth is a mixed body and will be until the harvest. What does this teaching protect us from in our own day, and what does it not give us permission to do?

Leader note: It protects us from the impulse to play God, declaring confidently who is and is not saved. It does not give us permission to ignore real sin, to abandon Church discipline, or to imagine everyone will be in the barn at the harvest. St. Augustine's teaching holds both: the Church is mixed, and the harvest is real.

Q4. [TRADITION] St. John Chrysostom's pastoral point is that the weed can become wheat through repentance, so the owner's patience is not indifference but the gift of time. How does this change the way you read the delay between now and the end?

Leader note: The delay is mercy, the time God gives for conversion. 2 Peter 3:9 makes it explicit: "The Lord is not slow about his promise ... but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." The patience has a purpose, and the purpose is salvation.

Q5. [LIFE] Have you ever been disillusioned or hurt by something you witnessed in the Church or among Christians? You do not have to share the details. What did that experience do to your faith?

Leader note: This is the deepest pastoral question of the session; give it room. Some will need to speak; some will not. Do not rush, do not minimize, and do not theologize prematurely. Real hurt deserves real listening before it deserves explanation.

Q6. [LIFE] Is there someone in your life right now whom you have privately sorted into the “weed” category? What would it mean this week to leave that judgment to God and pray for them as if they were wheat in process?

Leader note: A quiet, convicting question. The point is to relocate the judgment from us to God, not to deny the reality of sin. We can recognize a person’s present condition without claiming authority to declare their final state. Pray for them as if St. Augustine’s hope is true, because it is.

PART TWO · THE DRAGNET (MATTHEW 13:47-50)

Have someone read Matthew 13:47-50 aloud.

MATTHEW 13:47-50 (RSV2CE)

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.”

Q7. [TEXT] The Weeds parable presses against premature judgment within the Church. The Dragnet presses against something else. What does it press against, and how do the two parables together correct opposite errors?

Leader note: The Dragnet presses against the sentimentalism that imagines no final sorting will ever happen. The Weeds corrects the rigorist; the Dragnet corrects the universalist. Jesus refuses both errors. The waiting is real (Weeds) and the sorting is real (Dragnet). Both at once.

Q8. [LIFE] The Dragnet ends with imagery as serious as anything Jesus says, and he is not speaking hypothetically. What does it mean for you, personally, that there is a final sorting and that it is not yet complete?

Leader note: Do not soften this. The eschatological urgency is Jesus’ own. Most people in the room have heard “judgment” used as a club and have quietly set it aside; Jesus does not let us. The proper response is not fear but sober vigilance and renewed conversion. That the sorting is not yet complete is itself good news: there is still time.

PART THREE · THE BARREN FIG TREE (LUKE 13:6-9)

Have someone read Luke 13:1-9 aloud, including the call to repentance that introduces the parable.

LUKE 13:6-9 (RSV2CE)

“And he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and

good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

READ ALOUD

Jesus’ hearers did not meet the fig tree for the first time in this parable. It was one of the oldest images in their Scriptures, and knowing what it meant to the prophets changes how the parable lands. Read the next two passages slowly before answering.

Have someone read Hosea 9:10 and then Jeremiah 8:13 aloud.

HOSEA 9:10 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor ... and became detestable like the thing they loved.”

JEREMIAH 8:13 (RSV2CE)

“When I would gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.”

Q9. [TRADITION] In these two passages, what does the fig tree (and its fruit) stand for? And notice God’s tone when he comes seeking fruit and finds none: is it only anger, or is there something else in it? What does that add to the parable in Luke?

Leader note: In both prophets the fig tree is Israel, and God’s tone is grief as much as judgment: in Hosea he remembers the joy of first finding Israel, “like the first fruit on the fig tree.” Let the group hear that the owner in Luke is not a cold judge but a God who remembers what the tree was meant to be. God cannot accept the barrenness precisely because he remembers the fruit.

Q10. [TRADITION] The vinedresser intercedes for one more year and offers his own labor to make the tree fruitful. Whom has the Church’s tradition seen in this figure, and what does that reading invite us to see in the work of Christ for us?

Leader note: The tradition has often read the vinedresser as Christ himself, the intercessor whose labor digs around our hearts and applies what is needed to bring forth fruit. He buys time for us at his own cost, then asks us to use it. This reading sees the entire mission of Christ as the vinedresser’s plea on behalf of the unfruitful tree.

Q11. [LIFE] The patience in this parable is real, and it is not without end. Where has God been patient with you, tending the soil and waiting for fruit that is not there yet? What would it look like this week to respond to that patience rather than presume on it?

Leader note: The closing personal question. Land it gently and seriously together. Many will recognize an area where God has been waiting on them; the session’s task is to convert that recognition into a small, concrete response this week.

APPLICATION AND CLOSING

CLOSING CHALLENGE

This week, do two things. First, take the person you have privately sorted as a “weed” and pray for them by name every day. Pray as if grace can still reach them; do not assume their final state. Second,

examine your own fig tree: where has God been patient with you? Take that one area and respond to his patience this week, in confession, in prayer, in a concrete change. Do not wait for a more convenient season.

Scripture Memory

2 PETER 3:9 (RSV2CE)

“The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

Closing Prayer

“Lord of the harvest, we confess that we are often more concerned with the weeds around us than the fruit within us. Forgive us for the judgments we have made about other souls, judgments that belong only to you. Forgive us also for the seasons when we have presumed on your patience, remaining barren while you have been tending us. Give us the grace to bear fruit in the time that remains. We ask this through Christ our Lord, the Vinedresser who bought our time at the cost of his life. Amen.”

GOING DEEPER (OPTIONAL)

Use any of these as your group has time and interest.

QGD1. [TEXT] Compare Matthew 13:24-30 (the parable) with Matthew 13:36-43 (Jesus’ own interpretation). Which details does Jesus interpret, and which does he leave alone? What does his selectivity tell you about how to read his other parables?

Leader note: Jesus interprets the field, the seed, the weeds, the harvest, the reapers, the burning, and the barn. He does not interpret the sleeping of the men or the going away of the enemy. The lesson: not every detail of a parable bears allegorical weight. Read parables for the central teaching, not as elaborate codes.

QGD2. [TRADITION] Read CCC 827 and CCC 1428 together. The Church is “at once holy and always in need of purification.” How is this the same teaching as the Weeds parable, expressed in the Catechism’s own voice?

Leader note: Both say that the Church on earth contains real holiness and real sin, and the right response is neither to pretend the sin away nor the holiness away, but to walk the path of ongoing penance and renewal until the harvest. The Catechism expresses in doctrinal language the truth St. Augustine drew from the Weeds parable and applied to the Church: holiness and sin mingled until the harvest, met by penance and renewal rather than premature sorting.

QGD3. [LIFE] Are there areas of your life where you have been treating God’s patience as if it were permission rather than mercy? What would change if you took the conditional in Luke 13:9 (“if not, you can cut it down”) seriously?

Leader note: Many people slide from “God is patient” to “God is indifferent” without noticing; the parable will not let us. The patience has a purpose, and the purpose is fruit.

QGD4. [TRADITION] These parables speak of a final sorting: wheat to the barn, weeds burned. Where does the Catholic doctrine of purgatory fit alongside them, and what does it preserve about both the seriousness of sin and the mercy of God?

Leader note: *Handle the distinction carefully: the Weeds and Dragnet describe the final, definitive sorting (heaven and hell), not purgatory. Purgatory is a distinct but complementary doctrine (CCC 1030-1032): it holds together that nothing impure can enter God's presence and that his mercy purifies those who die in his grace but imperfectly. Set beside the parables, purgatory completes the picture of how justice and mercy cohere without softening the reality of the final judgment the parables proclaim.*

SCRIPTURE INDEX FOR THIS SESSION

Primary parables: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 | Matthew 13:47-50 | Luke 13:6-9

Old Testament background: Genesis 3:15 | Hosea 9:10 | Isaiah 5:1-7 | Jeremiah 8:13 | Zephaniah 1:14-15

New Testament support: Matthew 18:15-17 | Matthew 21:18-22 | 2 Peter 3:9 | Revelation 14:14-20

Catechism: CCC 827, 1030-1032, 1040, 1428, 1861

Sources cited: St. Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* IV.10-11, and *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 6.2 and 45.10 | St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, Hom. 46-47 | St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 13, and *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21.