Here is another parable he gave them: “The kingdom of Heaven is like this. A man sowed his field with good seed; but while everyone was asleep his enemy came, sowed darnel among the wheat, and made off. When the corn sprouted and began to fill out, the darnel could be seen among it. The farmer’s men went to their master and said, “Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? So where has the darnel come from?” “This is an enemy’s doing,” he replied. “Well then,” they said, “shall we go and gather the darnel?” “No,” he answered; “in gathering it you might pull up the wheat at the same time. Let them both grow together till harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the darnel first, and tie it in bundles for burning; then collect the wheat into my barn.’”

(Matthew 13:24-30 REV)

Matthew sets this parable in the context of Jesus’ “day of parables,” talking to a group of followers near the lake of Galilee. Immediately before this parable is the parable of the sower and its interpretation. Following this parable Jesus told the twin parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. In this setting Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of Heaven.

The first verse of this parable sets up the story. First of all, it identifies the subject as the “kingdom of Heaven.” The kingdom is like the situation described in this story; literally, “it is the case with … as with …” (Hagner 383). The parable is a “genuine metaphor;” “the kingdom … is described by the entire parable of the weeds” (The New Interpreter’s Bible 308). This verse also talks about the sower sowing good seed. This good seed “is a symbol of the word of God” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, 308), or perhaps of the disciples (Albright and Mann 169). The interpretation credited to Jesus in Mathew 13:37-43 makes the following equations: “The sower = the Son of man (Jesus),” “The field = the world,” “The good seed = the children of the kingdom” (Hultgren 297).

The second verse thickens the plot of the parable. First, everyone went to sleep. “Elsewhere in the NT … sleep is a metaphor for spiritual sloth or neglect,” but here “it means simply ‘at night’”
When in the natural course of events, people slept, an enemy came and sowed darnel. “No one knows who can be blamed for sowing the weeds, except that it was an enemy” (Hultgren 296). Jesus identifies “the enemy” as “the devil” in his interpretation (Hultgren 297). Because the words literally mean enemy “man,” it “stands in some tension with the interpretation of the enemy as the devil” (Hagner 383).

The weeds are more specifically darnel, “a common weed that plagued grainfields” — one that resembled wheat (Hagner 383). Although Jesus identifies “the weeds” as “the children of the evil one” (Hultgren 297), Albright and Mann claim that “there is a direct equation between weeds and the Pharisees” (169).

The next verse basically says, “With the passing of time, the fruit-bearing wheatsalks appeared, but so too did the weeds” (Hagner 383). The unrighteous and the righteous both grow up together.

The next verse adds a new character — the servants, who pose two questions. Hagner interprets “the master as Jesus and the servants as his disciples” (383). The servants ask, “Was it your fault?” and “Where did this ‘evil’ come from?”

Verse 28 has two parts. In the first part, the master claims that an enemy is responsible. “The weeds in this instance are not the result of natural processes but of a deliberate attempt to ruin the work of the master of the house who planted good seed” (Hagner 383). In the second part, the servants ask what they should do about the problem.

30. The master answers his servants’ question. He tells them to let both weeds and wheat grow together. “The problem lay not in the difficulty of distinguishing the two but rather in the fact that the weeds would be so closely intermingled with the wheat that some of the latter would inevitably be pulled up with the former and thus be destroyed” (Hagner 384). “The wise farmer knows
better than to follow the suggestions of his well-meaning servants” (Crossan 83). The rejection of the master to the servants’ request “is not to be interpreted as a call to passivity in the face of evil,” but a “reminder that the servants do not finally have the ability to get rid of all the weeds and that sometimes attempts to pluck up weeds cause more harm than good” (The New Interpreter’s Bible 311).

The last verse introduces another new character and predicts the ultimate outcome. The new characters are the reapers, “who will resolve the problem by separating the weeds and the wheat” (Hultgren 296). Jesus’ interpretation identifies “the reapers” as “the angels” (Hultgren 297). The farmer’s decision to allow both to grow is justified because, as a result, his wheat is safe and he gets “some free kindling as well. His enemy is doubly outwitted” (Crossan 83).

The harvest “is a biblical symbol for the final judgment” (Hultgren 297). The description of the weeds being burned must be read in a context in which “fire is constantly used in Matthew to describe the judgment” (Albright and Mann 169), or “divine punishment” (Hultgren 297). Crossan claims that we should not just take this literally. Jesus, as a “wise man,” simply taught the farmer “what to do if ever he found himself in such an agricultural crisis” (63).

Hagner claims that “the key point here, which will be developed further in this chapter, is that it is not yet the time of the harvest and thus not yet the time for the separating of the weeds from the wheat” (384).

The New Interpreter’s Bible claims that there are many points in this parable. One is that this parable is “a declaration against the building of boundaries and efforts to have a ‘pure’ community, which is God’s business and will be settled at the eschatological judgment” (308). Another is that “good mixes in with the bad,” and “evil is temporary; only good endures” (311). A last thing is that this parable poses the question, “Are you the good seed sown by the exalted Son of Man, or the evil seed sown by Satan?” (308).
Blomberg summarizes the parable as “(1) God permits the righteous and the wicked to coexist in the world, sometimes superficially indistinguishable from one another, until the end of the age. (2) The wicked will eventually be separated out, judged and destroyed. (3) The righteous will be gathered together, rewarded and brought into God’s presence” (198). From this he comes to the resolution that “to conclude that a ‘mixed church’ was inevitable, however, and to use this parable as a justification for doing nothing to attempt to purify the church goes well beyond anything demanded by the imagery of the narrative” (Blomberg 200).

Hultgren finds two points in this parable. One is that “the kingdom ‘has become like’ ... a world in which the children of the kingdom and the children of evil reside together” (Hultgren 297). Thus, “even the most discerning are not always good at making judgment; one does not know the heart” (Hultgren 302). “Both patience and warning are canonical themes” of this parable (Hultgren 302).

This parable is open to different interpretations; many lessons can be learned from it. The best way to interpret it would be to follow the lead of Matthew 13:37–43, Jesus’ own interpretation. He says that he is the sower, the righteous are the good seed, the field is the world, the devil is the enemy, the bad seed are the unrighteous, the harvest is the end time, and the reapers are the angels. Thus, Jesus has put the righteous in the world, but the devil is responsible for the presence of the unrighteous. They coexist together, and only at the end times will the angels separate them. In this separating judgment, the unrighteous will be cast out, and the righteous will be saved. Humans are not competent to do the separating; this is God’s responsibility. Because of the way the world has been constituted, there will be both good and evil in the world until the end. The righteous will be rewarded and the evil will be punished. For the mean time, the best we can do is to decide and make sure we are doing what we’re supposed to be doing and leave the judgment to God.