

“Leaving Judgment to God”
Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43
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In Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose* there is an exchange in which the wise brother William instructs his novice Adso about the realities of life. They have come to investigate a death at an abbey and now there have been more deaths, almost certainly murders, committed in a Christian community. To make matters worse, some of the brothers are hiding information. Adso has had enough. He is ready to offer judgment. “We are living in a place abandoned by God!” he says. William is not so sure. He has seen many things in his long life. “Have you ever found places where God would have felt at home?” he asks.

Such is the world in which we live. There is evil everywhere we go such that, like young Adso, we are tempted to condemn it, but is this what we should do or should we reserve judgment with brother William, realize there is good and evil everywhere, even within us, and know that while there is no place worthy of God, God comes to us anyway?

This is the quandary Jesus addresses in our reading from Matthew. He tells a parable about weeds growing among wheat, and while workers on the farm offer to go rip them up, the owner says no, they might pull up the wheat with the weeds. They should wait until harvest time when the weeds can be bound and burned.

Lest there be any confusion about what Jesus is talking about, he explains to his disciples that the seed is what he is sowing in the world. Evil has come up in the midst of it, but while some of his followers may want to rout out evil right now, Jesus cautions them to wait until the end of the age, until judgment day, when he will take care of the matter.

Apparently, in Jesus’ time, good and evil are intertwined not only in the world but among his followers, as they are to this day, indeed, they are both in each of us. Thus, separating good from evil is not easy, and human beings are not very good judges of character anyway.

I remember working on Saturdays while I was in seminary at an apple tree farm owned by one of the members of the church I served as youth minister. I was cutting down weeds near the apple trees with a sickle while Cliff, the owner, sprayed the trees with something. At one point, he followed me down a long row of trees to the end and said, “Chris, we’d like to differentiate between the weeds and the apple tree seedlings.” I had noticed that the trees were getting smaller and smaller, but I hadn’t realized that some of those “weeds” I had cut down were seedlings... They looked like weeds to me.

You may be more discerning than me when it comes to plants and trees, it wouldn’t take much, but we all have limitations when it comes to judging other people. We can easily mistake good for evil, particularly if we make hasty judgments based on limited information. One thing I learned from an internship in state parole in Kentucky a very long time ago was to reserve judgment. There were always multiple versions of any story, different perspectives with value.

This is not to say we are always wrong. Sometimes we should trust our gut feeling. A colleague in another setting was walking with his partner to a restaurant on the edge of a rough neighborhood when he saw a shady-looking man bee-bopping his way. He said his gut clenched, and then he mentally chastised himself for being judgmental.

The man said something he could not understand. So, he asked him to repeat himself. The man mumbled something a second time to which Michael, who could be quite demonstrative, said, “I haven’t a clue what you are saying!” at which point the man raised his gun higher and said, “Give me yo money.” After my colleague and his partner handed over what they had, and their new acquaintance bee-bopped away, Michael’s partner, who was more conservative politically than him, said, “So, how do you feel now, O liberal but poor one?”

Sometimes we should trust our gut feeling, but the discernment involved in such moments is not the same thing as a categorical judgment of another person, almost a final judgment. The more significant the judgment, the more information we need and the more time we should take, but we must leave ultimate judgment to God because God is the only one worthy to judge and because people change

and grow over time. Someone who seems hopeless to us in a given moment may in time prove us wrong.

Moses killed a man in anger while living in a foreign land. Imagine how he would fare in this country right now as an outsider. But God ultimately used him to deliver a nation from bondage. When I showed up in a church for the first time at fifteen, with long hair, wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt, and asking probing questions, I don't know what people thought, but they didn't envision a future pastor, yet here I am, for better or worse. Only God is worthy to judge, and not only does God offer grace again and again, God allows space for us to grow over time.

In a sermon entitled "God Is Not Finished" Presbyterian pastor Patrick J. Wilson said this.

Jesus did not say that the kingdom was like a rock, fixed and solid and firm and unchanging. Jesus did not say that the kingdom was like a giant machine, that you put some things in and you get some things out and that what you get out depends upon what you put in. He said it was like an enormous tree that grows out of a tiny seed. A tree that grows so enormous that all the birds of the air can come and find shelter in its branches, even strange little ducks like you and me. He said that God was like a housewife who puts a smidgen of yeast in the three measures of flour and that yeast yields its life into the whole batch of dough. That is the way that the kingdom is, growing from the very beginning into all that God has intended... From the foundation of the world, the very first moment of creation, it is the kingdom that has been on God's mind, and God is infinitely patient as it grows. (Grace Presbyterian Church, Midland Texas, 8-9-81)

God's realm is always growing, ever becoming more, and the same is true of us. God is infinitely patient with our shortcomings because God is not finished with us. So, judgment needs to be left to God.

But what do we make of the darker side of Jesus' parable? The workers are to leave the weeds until harvest time when they will be

bound and burned. That is what you would do with weeds. But then Jesus says more explicitly that when it comes time for human judgment, the Son of Man will send his angels to collect all causes of sin and all evildoers and throw them into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Is he talking about people literally burning eternally? And if he is, what do we make of this? How do we square it with the images of a gracious and loving God and Christ that we find throughout scripture?

Emily Dickinson once expressed horror over a preacher who delivered a terrifying sermon on last judgment by saying, “The subject of perdition seemed to please him, somehow. It seems very solemn to me (*Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris, p. 316).” It is a solemn subject, though some people seem to enjoy it, assuming they will not be among those who burn eternally. And the threat of such a fate can be quite a motivator when it comes to faith, if you buy the premise and are OK with manipulation and coercion.

But what do we make of these images that we find attached to Jesus? We should at least ask whether Jesus is speaking literally or metaphorically. This is a parable, after all, a metaphorical story. The biblical word Gehenna, viewed as a place of judgment for the wicked, comes from the Hebrew Ge Hinnom or the valley of Hinnom. It is a literal valley just outside the Old City of Jerusalem, today a lovely place, but in Jesus’ time it was a garbage dump where some human remains were thrown and burned with the garbage.

If one were trying to picture how bad it would be to spend eternity separated from God, which is what judgment is at its core, this would be an appropriate image. But it doesn’t mean judgment involves a literal, torturous fire. Jesus says what he says, but some interpretation seems appropriate, especially since we hear these words with the baggage of other historical writings in our minds, like Dante’s trilogy and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

It is a matter of interpretation, and since we are leaving judgment to God, we must leave the nature of judgment to God too. Personally, I find it difficult to reconcile eternal torture with the image of a loving God we find in the character of Jesus, and I know fear is a poor

motivator of genuine faith. As one thoughtful writer once said, we can worship the Devil out of fear.

But however we view this imagery, the most helpful part of it is this — the concept of judgment means we are accountable. How we live matters. Someone is assessing our condition, always in the context of grace, but still assessing, and most of us want that - sometimes for ourselves, we want the good to be valued; and sometimes for others, we want evil to have consequences. We want how we live to matter.

Knowing that it does is helpful and trusting that God will take care of judgment lets us off the hook for discernment. It allows us to put energy into making sure we are living the way we ought to be, making sure there isn't any evil in our hearts and lives, which is what we ought to be doing, not judging others.

This doesn't mean we do nothing vis a vis evil in the world. We ought to pray for people who are victimized by terrorism and oppression wherever these horrors exist. We ought to fight for justice in our community, nation, and world. But we may never identify all evil, much less be able to remove it. Some things must be left to God.

But we should be okay with that. God sees so much more than we do, and while God may be more gracious than we would be, in the end, that is good news for us because we need grace too.