

Are we in or out? (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)

In Matthew, the actions of the community of faith do not affect the coming of the kingdom—but they do matter.

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Despite the interpretation offered in verses 18–23, I don't think this parable is a word about personal salvation. This is a word about the coming of God's kingdom for all. The victory of the kingdom of God is sure. The message of the parable is not an appeal to work hard to bring in the harvest. The kingdom of God will come, and according to Matthew, quite frankly we will have nothing to do with it. The seed has been sown by the Son of Man, who accompanies the community of faith throughout history. The harvest is God's doing.

God is faithful. God is with us. That is assured. What is less assured is this: Are we with God? Are we in or are we out?

What if this parable is not as concerned with us and our individual actions as we often think? When we get to the fourth place the seeds land—the good soil—we are told that this soil brings forth a harvest, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. That is enough to overcome any of the lost seeds from the first three places they land.

God is faithful. God is with us. Our victory in God is assured. Are we in or are we out?

I was only a little over a year out of seminary and newly ordained when my friend from college called me and said that the guy she met on the internet and had been dating for only just a little while had asked her to marry him. Would I come out to Arizona and officiate the wedding?

Presbyterian rules outlining how we should be decent and in order about these things swirled around in my head. And although it is true that we are required to counsel the couple before we officiate the wedding, if I'm honest, I was using that as an excuse to keep myself from getting involved in something I was dubious about. I was too busy judging the wedding to participate in the wedding.

I have only a few regrets in life, and that decision is one of them. Every year on their anniversary—24 years now—my friend posts pictures from that day, including the one that has the officiant in it, the officiant that could have been me. That should have been me.

The wedding was always going to happen, whether I participated or not. My friend asked if I was in or out, and I chose out.

Here's the tricky thing about the Gospel of Matthew. The responses and actions of the community of faith do not affect the final coming of the kingdom, and yet the choices we make are ultimately still very important. That's because Matthew's theology, which is admittedly *not* Reformed theology, is that believers cannot just assume that we are the good soil. We don't impact the coming of the Kingdom, but our actions and choices can determine which side we are on at the final harvest.

The good news is that God's kingdom is coming, with or without our help. The bad news is that God is paying attention to whether we're in or we're out.

What's a freaked-out community of faith to do? Fortunately, Matthew gives us this answer too, in his portrayal of the Sower coming to gather the harvest. It can be found in chapter 25, when the Son of Man separates the sheep from the goats: "For I was hungry and you gave me food" (25:31).

God is faithful. God is with us. Our victory in God is assured. But God still calls us to be the good soil.