

Introduction

I cannot tell you how many times my wife and I have heard a variation of this theme: “J-T and Dawnae, I met the *perfect* person for your church!” In the early days of New City I usually thought, “Oh, good! We need help!” Over time, however, enough of a pattern emerged whenever I heard this declaration I soon began to ask myself a series of questions—and don’t hear these questions as disparaging in any way. I’m quite thrilled that such folk are expected to be “perfect” for New City.

Whenever someone says this to us I ask, “Why is this person the ‘perfect’ person for New City? Is she a recovering drug addict? A drug dealer? Did he just get out of prison?” I didn’t wonder those questions because I was opposed in any way to have such folk join us here at New City Church. Quite the opposite! We welcome all who would come to Jesus, regardless of his or her background or current struggles. We absolutely do not have a filter for which sort of sinners we “allow” here and which we, uh, *send elsewhere*.

Frankly, I love that part of our diversity here at New City is a diversity of sins we struggle with, whether lust or anger or pride or envy or indifference. We all struggle with something in our lives, and we struggle differently.

After hearing this far too many times I was struck by questions I left unasked: “Why wouldn’t she be a perfect fit at *your* church? Why wouldn’t *your* church be able to welcome and love and care for someone whom the Lord Jesus has rescued from great depravity, even if he just got out of prison? Is it that *your church* isn’t welcoming of folk who may have a shady past that is different from *your* shady past?”

I have to confess that I get angry now whenever I hear this. It is only the Spirit’s work in me that prevents me from snapping on people. The gospel of Jesus is *good news*. The church of Jesus is where broken people are reminded of the healing offered by Jesus. There is often this subtle and largely unspoken understanding some have that—apparently!—only certain churches are where sinners hear good news while other churches are for those who...I don’t know! Don’t need to hear good news? Here’s what Jesus said.

Mk 2:15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹⁷ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Mark 2:15–17

While Jesus was eating in the home of Matthew—a Jew who collected taxes from his fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman empire—others wondered why Jesus would dare eat with

such people, people who, no doubt, would be *perfect* for New City. When Jesus hears this nonsense, he restates what was a common saying among both Jews and non-Jews in the first century: healthy people don't need a doctor. His point is this: all those who are questioning why he would eat with tax collectors and sinners *think* they do not need him and so they will never come to him for healing. In other words, the so-called "healthy" people are the most unhealthy of all.

We're in the final week of our series, "Beyond Labels: Who is New City?" So far we've seen that we embrace several lower-case labels: catholic, not Catholic; reformed, not Reformed; baptist, not Baptist; presbyterian, not Presbyterian; orthodox, not Orthodox; charismatic, not Charismatic. If you have not felt uncomfortable or at least challenged at some point in this series, you're in luck: I'm an equal-opportunity offender.

Over the first six sermons in this series, we saw we embrace the lower-case label, not the capitalized label. We are, for example, *catholic*, but we are not *Catholic*, for to be capital-C Catholic means to be *Roman* Catholic. We are not that. When we assemble in the name of Jesus we are the *whole* church, for the Lord is here in his fullness. The word catholic means "according to the whole". We assemble according to the whole church.

This week we will see that we are Christian, not christian—but we are capital C Christian and not lower-case c christian. That is, we do not embrace lower case christianity, which is little more than cultural Christianity, and cultural Christianity can hardly be said to be authentic and true Christianity.

To get there, let's take a look at a parable Jesus taught his disciples. We're in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13.

Mt 13:24 He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ 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 13:24–30

The Planting

Jesus often taught in parables. In parables he used commonly recognized and immediately understood metaphors and illustrations to teach an important truth. Sometimes his disciples didn't understand the truth so he had to explain them. In this parable he compares the kingdom of heaven to a field of grain. More accurately, he compared the kingdom of heaven to *a man* who sowed good seed in a field. This is because the kingdom is found in a person. We're immediately confronted with the identity of the man in the parable. He is the landowner.

Jesus said the man sowed good seed in his field. This was important. There were two sources of seed. One either purchased seed from others or kept part of a previous year's harvest for future planting. You have to have seed in order to grow a crop. If the source of your seed is not good, your crop will not be good. In this case, the landowner is sure he has sown good seed. That is, what he planted was good seed, most likely from a previous year's harvest.

The very fact that the landowner has workers working for him tells us this is not a small plot in the back wherein a homeowner plants just enough for his family. This is a much larger operation and it was more important to ensure good seed was planted. The man *knows* the seed was good seed and not filled with weeds.

When his men were sleeping, which likely just means at night when no one was around, the man's enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. Seed was planted by hand. A field would be plowed in one direction and then seed cast about by hand. The field was often then plowed perpendicular to the original plowing to turn over the soil to bury the seed. The man's enemy came at night and cast seed by hand all over his field. Much would have fallen into the uneven soil where it would germinate and grow.

The next morning no one would have noticed. Footprints in the loose soil would not have given anything away as there would be footprints no matter what. Some time passed and in verse 26 Jesus says the plants came up and bore grain, and the weeds appeared also.

It is only when the plants had grown that anyone would have discovered the attack. The leaves of wheat plants are slightly different from those of darnel—the weed that the enemy sowed. Darnel is a rye grass, often called tare. Rye grass can have a fungus that is poisonous to humans and can spread to wheat. If allowed to continue growing alongside the wheat, it could damage the wheat and ruin some of the crop.

The workers were puzzled. They asked the man in verse 27 whether his seed had been good seed. If his seed had been good seed, how does the field have so many weeds?! They genuinely do not know! The landowner knows, however. He declares, "An enemy has done this."

This seems improbable. Why would a farmer plant weed seed in another farmer's field? That seems so very petty. It does, yet Rome had a law against such a practice. Why would they issue a law for a non-existent problem? As petty as it sounds to us, there must have been petty folk in ancient Rome, for they outlawed the practice.

The owner knew what had happened. His servants want to address the issue immediately: "Do you want us to go and gather them?" They want to march out into that field and begin ripping up the enemy's weeds. Who knows what they might do with them once they have them! They're upset, and rightly so.

If Jesus is the owner of the field in the parable, then the disciples are the servants. We know what sort they are. They don't tolerate any rivals. In Mark's Gospel he shares an interesting story.

Mk 9:38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."

Mark 9:38–39

In this case the other person was doing the work of Jesus, but wasn't one of the Twelve. John, clearly speaking on behalf of the Twelve, said they tried to stop him! If they got upset at someone doing the same work as they, surely someone working in opposition to them *must* be stopped! In Jesus' parable it would involve ripping up entire weed plants by the root. In his parable the men are willing and eager to do this.

The Harvest

In the parable the man refuses to allow his servants to tear out all the weeds, for a simple reason: they could easily uproot the wheat. The problem with weeds, and what often makes them so nasty to get out of your lawn, is they tend to have very hardy root systems. The roots of the darnel plant are much hardier than those of wheat. If they were to start yanking out the much larger and much deeper roots of weeds, surely they would damage the wheat.

The man tells them to leave them alone, to let them grow until harvest. When it is time for harvest he—the landowner—will tell the reapers to gather the weeds first and tie them into bundles and pile them up for burning, but then the harvesters would harvest the wheat and store the wheat in his barn.

Notice the harvesters are not the workers. The man tells his workers that when the harvest comes, he will give the *harvesters* instructions about handling the dangerous weeds. The harvesters are a separate group! They will reap the harvest, not the workers. He's indicating it will *never* be their job to separate the wheat from the weeds. So whose job is it? The disciples don't understand this parable so they asked Jesus to explain it.

Mt 13:36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Matthew 13:36–43

I am convinced that Matthew included Jesus' explanation of the parable because he knew how easily he and his fellow apostles misunderstood it and how easily we today can misunderstand it. There is a significant detail Jesus includes in his explanation that may not be immediately obvious to us: what is the field? *It is not the local church.*

Jesus is not saying we should allow weeds to grow in the local church. When a plant in the garden that is the local church reveals itself as a weed and not as wheat we are obligated to the Lord to do the work of weeding. Again I point us back to the awful task we as a church had to undertake when we excommunicated a member who demonstrated he was not, in fact, a true believer.

We show patience and love and we walk alongside those who are struggling to follow Jesus. “Church discipline” is never the first step. It’s never the second step. Or the third, fourth, or fifth. In the sense of excommunication it is always the last step and it is never a step for a believer who is struggling to follow Jesus. It is a final step reserved for those who refuse to struggle to follow Jesus and thereby demonstrate they are not believers at all. We received that person into membership believing he was a true believer but we had to remove him from membership when it was clear he was not.

This parable is not about that. It is significant that Jesus doesn’t say the field in the parable is the local church but instead says it is the world. Followers of Jesus are sent out into God’s good world where they live and grow as the good seed he has planted.

This highlights another error we are prone to make. The seed isn’t the gospel of Jesus. It is in another parable, but not this one. He said “the good seed is the sons of the kingdom” and Jesus is the one who plants them. His people are to live in the world, living among the weeds, but living faithfully. His people are to bear fruit, but they are the seed he has sown. Being the wheat in God’s world means it isn’t our responsibility to separate the wheat and the weeds. We certainly nourish and care for the wheat, but judgment for the weeds does not belong to us.

This is what Paul was getting at in his letter to the Corinthians when he told them to remove the man who refused repentance over his sexual immorality.

¹ Cor 5:9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

1 Corinthians 5:9–13

In his parable Jesus is teaching his disciples they are not to be judges of the world. They are not to condemn the lost. They are to be faithful seed. As a local church they must seek to remain faithful even in the midst of a culture that may well be hostile to them. They are to care for one another by fulfilling the work given to them. What is that work? What is their job, and therefore our job? Making disciples. *Period.* We are responsible to make disciples, not to make culture acceptable to us.

Christian, not christian

This is where many go astray. Many begin to think their job as followers of Jesus, as God’s seed planted in his world, is to clean up the place, to uproot evil and make the world more *christian*—lower-case c christian. That is, they want a culture that pays lip-service to Christ. Often they dream of a time when the culture had more of an appearance of Christian faith, but that has always been a mirage.

This is why New City is capital C Christian, not lower-case c christian. We are not merely cultural Christians, which are no Christians at all. Lower-case c christians are concerned first and foremost with *christianizing* the culture. They don't want to be offended by those who do not believe in Jesus, or by those who do not share their faith in Jesus and therefore do not share their sense of ethics. This leads to one of two approaches to the broader culture in which we live.

On the one hand are those who stand in constant hostility with unbelievers. Rather than get to know their neighbors and love them as themselves, they view their neighbors with hostility and suspicion. They might be *one of those*—you know, those with an agenda to destroy this country. Their entire persona, their public faith, is seen as being in opposition to evil in the world. Everything about them is centered on opposing the evil weeds planted in God's world.

Oftentimes this angry opposition to evil in the world causes them to embrace the spirit of antichrist by pursuing power to achieve their goals. In Philippians Paul tells the Christians—capital C Christians—to have the mind of Christ, for the Son of God did not consider power to be the means of accomplishing his purposes, but instead took on the form of a servant and gave up power and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Rather than insisting on his rights, the Lord gave up his rights. He refused to use power to bring about his purposes.

This is the warning throughout the book of Revelation. John warns believers to not worship *power*. He wrote this:

Rev 13:4 And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

Revelation 13:4

The people worshiped the dragon, Satan, by worshiping the beast, which is empire—military power. How did they worship the beast? They praised the beast for having such power! Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it? It's a rhetorical question: no one is like the beast, for no one can stand up to the beast!

In the parable the man's workers were prone to this response. They wanted to march into the field and tear out all the weeds, and having accomplished that, who knows what they would do in retribution to the enemy who planted the weeds in the first place. They wanted to meet force with greater force! The parable is clear: it is not their responsibility to execute judgment!

To be lower-case c christian is to embrace the spirit of hostility against unbelievers, to carry an attitude of judgment to anyone who does not believe as we do. Lower-case c christian can also move in another direction. On the one hand are those who would use power to accomplish their goals. On the other hand are those who see the weeds in the world and rather than seek to bring about change through force, they reject any involvement whatsoever and so they isolate themselves.

There are those who avoid any involvement with neighbors and co-workers, beyond acknowledging them as necessary. You have to work together and collaborate on a project, but once 5:00 hits, you won't see them again until Monday morning. They withdraw into

a christian subculture where they have Christian schools and listen to Christian radio and go to Christian activities and enjoy donuts at Christian donut shops. They strive to only be around those who are just like them and so avoid any potential contamination with non-Christians.

In the parable not only are the workers to leave the weeds alone, they must allow the wheat to grow where it was planted. They are told by the landowner to let them grow side-by-side. In the end those who harvest the crop will sort them out. In other words, it is the will of the landowner that his wheat grow alongside the weeds, not to uproot the wheat and transplant it into wheat-only fields, for there is only one field.

The truth is those who would use power to force cultural change and those who would ignore the culture are doing the same thing. They are refusing to live where they're planted. What I mean is this: the Lord Jesus has planted each one of us and has placed us in various spheres of influence. You regularly engage with people I may never meet and I engage with folk you may never meet. This includes friends and family and neighbors and co-workers.

We are not to withdraw from this engagement. We are to live faithfully where we are planted. We are not to hide our nature as wheat, but are to remain faithful, even when the weeds around us express hostility. We are also not to be antagonistic toward the weeds. While the weeds may be hostile, we must never be. In the previous chapter Matthew records Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus.

Mt 12:18 “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; ²⁰ a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; ²¹ and in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

Matthew 12:18–21

This must be *our* posture. This is the approach we are to take. We must be as gentle as Jesus. He was not a loud blowhard, casting aspersions wherever he went. Some like to point to Jesus flipping tables in the temple and calling Pharisees whitewashed tombs. They completely miss the fact that Jesus never did this to tax collectors and sinners but to religious hypocrites who utterly lacked love for others.

Application

New City Church is capital C Christian because we follow a capital C Christ. We follow a Savior who is able to save the worst of sinners, whether that sinner's sin is sexual immorality or pride, whether greed or laziness, whether arrogance or selfishness. Whenever people have said to us, “I met the *perfect* person for your church”, the truth is they have, for they've met sinners in need of a Savior, and we know a great Savior.

If you want to know who is New City, know that we're not trying to impress you. We don't seek to have the perfectly crafted “worship experience”, with fog machines and colored lights, with impeccably timed transitions and clever props. We're not trying to compete with

what you're bumpin' on your Spotify playlist. I'm certainly not trying to give a polished TED Talk, offering advice for how to maximize your joy in life.

New City is capital C Christian because all we have is a capital C Christ. All we have is the one who plants wheat in his good world and though his enemy is ever at work raising up weeds who try to choke out the life of the wheat, we have a great Farmer who knows how to cause his crop to grow.

Here's what is so amazing about the Lord Jesus as the great Farmer of God's world: the good seed he sows in his world actually starts out as weeds. He changes weeds into wheat. He transforms useless and poisonous rye grass that is good for nothing and makes it into grow into a crop that is useful. He takes the worst of sinners and transforms them into a beautiful treasure he delights in.

Whether your background is sordid and vile or appears on the surface to be neat and tidy, you're welcome here. Whether you come from a swinging background or gang violence or years of greed and selfishness, you're welcome here. Whether you were filled with pride and anger and hate for others or you were stingy and mean or you were filled with envy or you looked down on anyone whose sins were not as pretty as your own, you're welcome here. Our sins are *not* the same, but our Savior *is*.

This is who New City is. We are a church filled with stories of God's grace and mercy poured out on *sinners*. Some of our sinners grew up in Christian homes and "rebelled" as ten-year-old kids by drinking a beer under the porch with the neighbor kid. Some of our sinners come from decadent and extensive sexual immorality. Some of our sinners have been rescued from pride, whether that pride was in thinking too much of one's self or in thinking of one's self too much. Some of our sinners lived a life with no love for others or a life filled with an uncontrollable rage, even if that rage were merely on the inside and never resulted in hands being thrown.

What we are not, and what we must never become is "used-to" Christians. Dan coined that phrase several years ago and it has stuck with me. He said many Christians are "used-to" Christians: they *used to* struggle with pride or they *used to* struggle with lust or they *used to* struggle with anger, but now Jesus! hashtag-blessed and highly favored!

We have a woman in our church who was shushed at another church for sharing the incredible ways God has saved her. Far better to pretend that she, well, *I don't know what she was supposed to pretend*. Far better to pretend she wasn't saved from great sin?

Listen, when we won't let others tell their stories of God's amazing grace, we are shushing God. When we won't let others tell the story of *what sort of weed they had been*, we're robbing God of his glory. When Paul tells the Corinthians that in Christ they are a new creation, inherent in that declaration is they are not what they once were. The miracle is seen in the transformation, and the transformation is only visible when you know what a person once was.

This doesn't mean we should share every lurid detail, but if you don't share *any* of the things from which God has saved you, why are you robbing him of his glory? He is a great Savior. We should tell stories of his great salvation.

If you're struggling with sin, Christian, you are welcome here. We will walk alongside you and help you follow Christ and we will remind you what a great Savior he is. If you don't feel like struggling with sin, Christian, you are welcome here. We will walk alongside you with patience and understanding and we will spur you on to faithfulness. If you don't

struggle with sin, it's okay that you're not a Christian. You're still welcome here. We will walk with you, too, pointing you to Christ and urging you to repent and believe and join the rest of us in our struggle with sin. Your struggle will likely be different than my struggle and my struggle is different from her struggle and her struggle is different from their struggle, but through it all we strive to be capital C Christians who follow a capital C Christ.

We are capital C Christians because we have nowhere else to turn. Cultural christianity cannot save us. Withdrawing from culture cannot save us. Attacking and seeking to dominate culture cannot save us. Only Christ can save us. Only Christ can give us hope. Only Christ can transform us and make us into the men and women we desperately desire to be. He's all we and so he's all we offer.