

Farming today: sowing

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Date: 18 April 2013

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[0 : 00] So we continue this morning in a short series with the title Farming Today.! How does God's Kingdom grow? We looked at that four weeks or so ago and we were saying! This is a very good question for us. How do people become Christians?

And therefore how do churches grow? And what can we expect? How does this all operate? And we looked at the parable of the sower and we see how in great detail the Lord Jesus Christ speaks upon this matter and talks about the analogy of farming.

It's a great biblical picture, farming, and we do well to understand more about it. The Bible encourages us to think like farmers. So the passage we've read had language in that way. Also 2 Timothy chapter 2 verses 6 and 7. And you'll always find the page in the church Bible referenced in brackets afterwards. 2 Timothy 2 verses 6 and 7.

Paul is addressing a leader in one of the churches and he says, You need to think like a farmer. The hard-working farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.

[1 : 22] Reflects on what I'm saying for the Lord will give you insight into all this. We need to think in that way.

There's a process that is taking place. There is a spiritual process. It has always been this way. It will always be this way until the day comes when Jesus returns.

There will be ploughing. There will be sowing. There will be reaping. And there will be a celebration. And today we're thinking of the issue of sowing. There's a field ready to be seeded.

Here's some seed. And we have an expectation of a crop. And this is a timeless picture, isn't it? In every land. Doesn't matter how your food is packaged.

Nevertheless, it has to go through a process like this. And it doesn't matter in a way how our church life is packaged. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental process which needs to take place for people to become Christians and for people to grow as Christians.

[2 : 33] And if you want to be a farmer, you need to be schooled. Many farmers actually take after their parents, don't they? They follow in the family business.

But if you're new to the game, or even if you're not new to the game, perhaps you want to go to somewhere like Plumpton College. Where they teach you how to be a farmer. And it's a very impressive place.

Great work is done there. And they'll tell you about sowing. And you have to answer all these sorts of questions. What, why, where, when, how?

These are good questions to ask about the issue of sowing. And we're going to take each of those questions in turn as we look at what the Bible has to say upon this topic. And the first is, well, what, what is this sowing?

What is, and what is the seed? Very helpfully, the Lord Jesus Christ, in this parable of the sower, tells us exactly what the seed is. And I have it up on the screen here.

[3 : 36] The message about the kingdom. That's the seed. Mark says, it's the word. Luke says, it's the word of God. So it has word content.

It is something which can be spoken and something which can be read. It has content to it. Can I suggest some of the contents of the word of God?

It's something about God being the one who has made everybody and keeps everybody.

Everybody's life is in the hand of God. It's something about the fact that men and women are at a distance from God.

Something has happened which is desperately sad. Something which the Bible describes as the fall. And we are still living with the effects of the fall.

Every generation lives with the effects of this separation between God and man. This has come about because of man's rebellion against God.

[4 : 41] The Bible calls this sin. And we are still suffering in the same kind of way. In 2013, as our first parents. Is there an answer to this?

Many people have sought answers to it. Through philosophy and education and good works and all the rest. But no one has been able to achieve it. How can man know God? Well, God has the answer and he sent his son Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the answer. Because only he can deal with the problem of sin and the judgment that sin deserves. Because he has taken that problem upon himself.

Jesus became sin for us. So that upon the cross of Calvary, God his father looked upon him and saw sin. And there he punished sin. So completely and utterly that Jesus could say, it is finished. And God could reward his son by raising him from the dead. So he now is a living saviour. One who is rewarded to a place of authority and power and given the name that is above every other name.

[5 : 51] We don't see all the completeness of that yet. But one day this same Jesus who was crucified is coming back. And he will reign and rule.

And every eye shall see him. And every knee shall bow before him. And at that time there will be a time of judgment. Where both punishment and reward will be meted out.

And so those who know him and those who have experienced his grace. Because it is grace that causes us to come to know him at all. We shall be with him forever.

And those who don't know him shall be separated from him. And this is something of the content of the word. Which is the seed. But interestingly seed is also about deeds.

Galatians 6 verse 9. Might turn to that. But it talks in such language. About. The way in which.

[6 : 56] Sowing can be likened to deeds. Let us not become weary in doing good. For at the proper time we will reap a harvest.

If we do not give up. The Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus. Said to his followers. That others may see your good deeds.

And praise your father in heaven. As they see the behavior of his people. There will be praise given to God in heaven. That's a harvest. And this is sowing.

So there is sowing by word. And sowing by deed. It's a great. A big area isn't it. It isn't just limited to a few little sentences. To do with a gospel presentation.

But it's the bigness of people's lives. Being lived out to the praise of God's glory. So that others. Might live to the praise of God's glory. And that the name of Jesus Christ.

[7 : 58] Would be made very great in Brighton. Why? Why is there this process?

It is because it is God's purpose. It is the way God works. It's the way God has decided. To do. His work in this world. God doesn't work in a kind of.

Science fiction epic kind of way. Where he zaps. Zaps. Zaps. And things just change overnight.

There is something more subtle. And gentle. And long term. About the workings of God.

Seeds are sown in people's lives. They're tiny. And yet. In time. They bear a great fruit. And we are called to be co-workers.

In that process. As God sows his seeds in people's lives. And he's doing that all the time. There are plenty of people out there. In whom God is sowing his seeds now.

[8 : 55] They're not in church yet. But God is sowing his seeds in their lives. Through circumstances. Through conversation. But we are called to be co-workers.

We're called to have the privilege. Of working alongside. Our great God and Father. Jesus said of his own father. My father is always at his work.

He saw himself as being a co-worker with his father. On his life on earth. And so are we. And that's what we're called to do. And one might say very.

Very simply and straightforwardly. We sow to see a harvest. Farmers sow the seed. Not because they enjoy sowing. But because they want to see a harvest. They actually want to see an outcome. We sow a seed. In other people's lives. Because we want to see an outcome. And there is going to be a harvest. It's promised. It will happen.

[9 : 58] And there is a fundamental connection. Between seed being sowed. And a harvest being reaped. If you don't sow the right sort of seed. You won't get the right sort of crop. Where?

Where should seed be sown? Where should seed be sown? Well I was thinking of the allotment. Every day on the train.

The south of Croydon. There's a wonderful allotment. Passed by on the east side of the railway line. And like most allotments. It's a wonderful hodgepodge. Different personalities.

Reflected in odd scarecrows. Tumble down sheds. Things that don't look quite right. As it were. It doesn't look like a farm. It's got personalities stamped all over it.

Has anybody got an allotment here? Anyone like to have an allotment? Ah yes. Michael might have an allotment. You are definitely an allotment person Mike. Some people like allotments.

[11:00] That's their place for getting away. It's their own space. You can decide exactly what you want to do in your little space. It's amazing how people can feed their families out of one allotment.

Steve and Brenda have got an allotment but it happens to be their back garden. Same theory. Same idea. It's your own space. And you know the Bible has much to say about sowing in our own field.

What seed are you sowing in your life? This is a bit of an earlier section in Galatians.

And it's worth us looking at that. Galatians 6, 7 and 8. Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

The man who sows to please his sinful nature from that nature will reap destruction. The one who sows to please the spirit from the spirit will reap eternal life.

[12:00] I find that a very challenging verse because it's essentially saying that we're all sowing seed in our allotments. None of us are excused or separated from that reality because we're all doing something in our lives.

And the question that Paul is putting to us here is what kind of seed are you sowing in your life? If you're sowing to please your sinful nature, you will reap a harvest.

But it won't be the harvest that you want. If you're sowing to please the spirit, the spirit of God, well the spirit of God will give to you the harvest of eternal life.

Well that's a challenging thought, isn't it? It's a challenging thought for us today. It causes us to think and ask the question very fundamentally, what seeds am I sowing in my life?

Come on to the thorny issue of spiritual discipline. I say it's a thorny issue. It wasn't a thorny issue in past days, but the word discipline has connotations of restriction, connotation of sort of living by works rather than grace and so forth.

[13:23] But I would rather trust the Bible and the saints of old who recognize that actually spiritual discipline was very important in their lives because if we aren't disciplined in our lives, actually the seed that will be sown in our lives is going to be a negative seed.

This is an interesting paraphrase from the message on 1 Timothy 4, 7 to 9. Exercise daily in God. No spiritual flabbiness please. Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever.

You can count on this. Take it to heart. If Paul needed it and Timothy needed it, I'm very sure we need it as well.

But take some seriousness from this point. I want to introduce you to this rather interesting man, Jonathan Edwards, a towering figure of the 18th century America, still widely read because of his philosophical understanding.

[14:43] As a very young man, he became a Christian. And one of the things he did when he started out on the Christian life was to begin to write down some personal resolutions.

In the end, he wrote 70 resolutions, things that he would determine to live his life by. He looks a bit funny there because he's got one of these weeks.

And he's looking a bit serious there, but don't be put off. This man is worth listening to. This is what he said when he was 20 years old.

I resolved to inquire every night before I go to bed whether I have acted in the best way I possibly could with respect to eating and drinking. Seems a little bit legalistic.

Jonathan Edwards didn't think so. He is the theologian par excellence of grace. But he said, God's grace needs to work in conjunction with my discipline.

[15:48] He also said, resolve never to do anything which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life. Resolve never to speak evil of anyone so that it shall tend to his dishonor more or less upon no account except for some real good.

I'll be very careful the way I speak about somebody else unless I really have to for some great good. Probably wouldn't go far wrong, would we, if we applied some of those principles in our own personal lives.

Especially when others don't see us. So, there's the analogy of elopment. How about the church? Church field.

There's a lot of sowing to be done in church life. We did a lot of sowing last weekend as we met together. And, there's a great challenge and encouragement given in the word of God to the way that we relate to one another.

How we encourage one another. How we build each other up. How we're thoughtful. How we care. How we strengthen and support. Weep with those who weep.

[17 : 00] Rejoice with those who rejoice. How we pray for one another. How we bear with one another because we're not easy to get on with. There's a lot of sowing to be done.

All of which makes us richer, fuller, stronger people. As a result of the way that we live and operate within the life of the church. And then we have a field which is the world.

That was the parable of the sower. The field is the world. And everywhere we are provides opportunity for sowing good seed. It's a great opportunity.

And it falls to every single one of us that we have opportunity to sow seed for the good of all. Now when? When should we be sowing?

At all times. Again, in Timothy we read this, so proclaim the message with intensity. Keep on your watch. Challenge, warn, and urge your people.

[18 : 02] Don't ever quit. Just keep it simple. You're going to find that there will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching. So Paul wrote to Timothy who was operating in a church environment.

And he said to Timothy, watch out because there will be times in church life when people just don't want to listen to sound teaching. And there's plenty of history that displays that reality.

So, as other versions of the Bible put it, preach the word in season and out of season. When it's convenient for people and when it's not.

When they like it and when they don't like it. And that's not a bad pattern to follow in terms of our relationships in the world as well.

We're kind of always on duty. It's kind of always an opportunity for us to be sowing the seed of God's truth in the circumstances of life.

[19 : 14] And that's what Peter says here. 1 Peter 3.15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.

And that's a challenge but it's a good thing a good place to be isn't it? So, if I were to say suddenly at this particular moment let's just stop the preaching and I want somebody to come and give some message some testimony the reason the hope they have within them well we should be ready for that.

I want to speak in particular about application of this. How are we to do this sowing work?

We must do this carefully and well. We are building for eternity. We're going to turn back to 1 Corinthians chapter 3.

Paul is speaking about a foundation that's been laid in people's lives which is Jesus Christ and then he talks about how we build on that foundation.

[20 : 34] If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones wood, hail, straw and there's a difference between those two groups his work will be shown for what it is because the day will bring it to light.

It will be revealed with fire and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. We are not to be shoddy builders.

All those TV programs that you see out there shoddy builders plenty of them we're not slip shod we're not to just do the bare minimum as it were but we're to be careful sowers in our work because we know that what is to be done has to stand the test of the day of judgment.

It is therefore extremely important that we are thorough in our dealing with the truth of God's word and that we are plain and straightforward and comprehensive in that.

Therefore it is an obligation for all of us to understand the gospel to understand the nature of the gospel and the content of the gospel because we can't sow well in other people's lives if we are muddled and unclear on that and this is part of the process as we meet together like this is for us all to be better understanding the nature of the gospel.

[22 : 05] Paul was very encouraged in his spirit when he thought about some of the people that he'd encountered in his life because he was confident that they would be his joy and crown when Jesus returned.

He was confident that they were going to actually be around the throne of Jesus Christ and that he would be there to see that because he knew that he had not failed to declare the whole counsel of God.

So you need very much to pray for the elders of this church that the whole counsel of God should be fully and constantly expressed. Many temptations not to do so.

But we do need to do so. And there are many temptations for us to become a bit wobbly at the edges on these matters and just to follow the prevailing thought patterns of our age.

We need to read our Bibles and ask for the help of the Holy Spirit that he would give us grace and courage to receive what he has to say rather than man's interpretation.

[23 : 19] We're building for eternity in our own lives, in the lives of our fellow believers and in the world. We have to build thoughtfully. We have to sow thoughtfully.

We have to ask the question, what is going on? We have to look in ourselves and say, what is going on in my life? Self-examination.

Am I just getting into habits of thought and behavior which are clearly at some distance from the patterns of the Word of God? These are painful things to do.

And our lives are busy. But there is a case and a time and a place for actually asking those questions. We need to know what's going on in other people's lives sufficiently to be able to pray and effectively engage with them in church life.

Are people drifting away from God? Are they becoming to live on the edges of church life and they're not really demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit in their lives?

[24 : 20] seeing the telltale signs? Well is that your responsibility? Is there something to be done there? Yes it is. At the very least there's a prayer to be prayed. Some encouragement to be brought.

Are you your brother's keeper? Yes you are. We're all bound up together in this family and we're to look out for each other. And then we should be thoughtful about what is going on out there as it were.

What is happening in our children's lives at this time? Can we see? Ask for God's help to have some understanding of what is happening in their lives.

Our work colleagues, student friends, casual acquaintances, neighbours, friends. Is there something that provides a way into their lives?

Something that we can use, we can build upon? There is a time for speaking in a certain way, there is a time for speaking in another way, there is a time to be silent.

[25 : 29] And all that is part of the sowing process. There are times of complete opportunity, times when the shutters seem down. And we need to know the difference between those two times, and to live appropriately.

This is a work of years. This is a work of years. I mean, the whole picture of sowing suggests that there is a patience. I think it's in James at some point where the writer says something like, doesn't the farmer wait in patience for the harvest?

You can't sow one day and expect the harvest to be there the next. It is a work that takes its time. does anybody remember this?

Probably not very good on the screen up there. Harringay 1954. Was anybody at Harringay 1954? Do you know somebody who was there? Ann knows somebody who was there?

Or were you there yourself, Ann? Billy Graham crusade.

[26 : 45] You were there, were you? Well, praise the Lord. 1954, March the 1st. Ray knows somebody or knew about it at the time. And your dad was there.

Interesting. My great uncle Joe. Well, isn't that an extraordinary thing?

50 years next year is the anniversary of the Harringay crusade, which sort of lodges at the back of my mind. I was very small at the time.

I didn't know about it. But it was actually very seminal at the time. It was the start of the whole idea of international crusades. Billy Graham came over here. For 12 weeks, the Harringay Greyhound stadium building was filled with people, 12,000 people every night, 12 weeks, he had invitations to bring the message of the gospel to the queen.

And on the last day there was a grand meeting at Wembley stadium with 120,000 people there. And it's reckoned that over the course of that 12 weeks of crusade time, there was 1.75 million people, some of them might have been the same, who actually heard the message of the gospel.

[28 : 07] Fantastic. And there's undoubted fruit from that time. Undoubted fruit. So I painted in glowing colours. But I want to say to you, in my humble opinion, this would not work today.

This would not work today. Who are the people who would be willing to go to Haringey Stadium in 2013 from Brighton to listen to an American evangelist?

It's only 50 years. 60. Thank you. It's only 60 years.

straightforward message was preached. People came forward in their hundreds. There might be fruit today.

It's always the expectation as I stand here. There's somebody out there. Might become a Christian. Can it happen? Yes. Yes. But statistically in Britain in 2013, it takes nine years from first contact to Christian conversion.

[29 : 31] That's statistically. Okay. So it doesn't mean everybody takes nine years. But it implies that the seed that we're sowing in 2013 may not bear fruit until 2022.

And it begs the question, what seed were we sowing in 2004? So we have to sow patiently, knowing that the results will not necessarily be immediate.

and recognize that whatever plans and programs and booklets and conversations one might have with people, that we live in a time in this country and in this city at this time where the work of sowing has to be done with extreme patience.

And if we grasp hold of that, it will at least protect us from vast discouragement. Because it's easy to say, I've sown the seed, where is the fruit?

God knows. God knows. So we sow sacrificially because others may see the fruit of our sowing.

[31 : 14] What's the average length of time that people stay in the Brighton area? It probably increases as you get older. So something like Maureen, you're bright and born and bred.

You're here the whole of your life and you probably will be here the whole of your life. But Adam and Rachel are here with us for a few years and they're saying goodbye to them.

And we have lots of internationals flowing through and then going on their way. If you're a young professional in Brighton and Hove, how long will you stay here?

Well, you might like the place so much, you stay on, just like many students have done there.

Plenty of people are having to move around because of jobs. Because of their life situations.

In order to get a house that they can afford. Because of the size of family they have. So these are big realities. So I look out on this congregation and how many of us will be around in nine years time?

[32 : 21] We don't know the answer to that, do we? We don't know the answer to it. But if I was to take a photograph in 2004 having stood up here, well how many of that congregation in 2004, April the 14th, are now sitting in these chairs?

Probably quite a lot. But there are many people who have actually moved on, haven't they, to other places, other situations. So we sow the seed. And I think of the internationals work that takes place here.

We know they're only here for a few weeks and months. But it can be very discouraging if you're working in an international cafe, because you just don't know if what you're doing is of any real worth.

You're sowing seed and you have to think to yourself, I am passing on this seed bed to somebody else. And they in turn may have to pass it on to someone else and someone else and then eventually someone will have the privilege of seeing a harvest.

harvest. And so it is as we build in church life that as we inch up in numbers then people leave.

[33 : 34] And that is the way and it can feel like we're kind of treading water. But we're part of a process, a worldwide process, and that gives us encouragement, especially when we hear reports back from other lands of people who have been here and they look back with great fondness upon their years.

Because at that time the word of God was sown in their lives in a comprehensive strong way so that they have endured. They're still following the Lord Jesus.

Isn't that encouraging? We need to have those sorts of gatherings every so often to remind us. We did have one, didn't we, last year, when we did that very same thing and said, well, who was there?

And people said from the 1980s, they were just saying, yeah, it was a great time, very important time for them. And it's so good to see those people who guard on, some have become pastors of churches, carrying on as solid Christians, not all, but many.

And that's encouraging because it makes us see that what we do is not just for our eyes only.

There'll be some surprising and glorious gatherings around the throne of God in the coming days. [34 : 47] things. And we have to sow prayerfully. We have to sow prayerfully because it's easy for us to lose sight of what's going on and we have to keep on asking God to do his work in people's lives.

And I would like us to be very, very specific and personal in our praying when we meet together for prayer times, that we would have names up on the board. Spoken to Ben and Annie and spoken to Catherine and I've given them some names of people saying we need to be on the case for these people.

These are all people who have been brought into our church's experiences somewhere or other. I take that as God's hand and I say, right, we need to have these people in our sights.

We need to be praying for these people by name, praying for a mighty work of God in their lives.

We're not going to be the victim of the statistic.

Lots of these are young people. Young people, they're everywhere. I don't just mean young people everywhere, but they're everywhere in their lives. What is it that's going to cause them to show a genuine long-term deep interest in Jesus Christ?

[36 : 07] When there's so much else, sort of coming at them through all quarters? God, we're praying that this will become a big issue for them.

How can my life be related properly to God? That this should be the big issue for them. Praying for these youngsters, praying for 20-year-olds, the 30-year-olds.

Where are the 30-year-olds in churches? Many of them aren't there at all. Where are the 30-year-old men in churches?

That's a really declining group there. So we need to pray, not just for the group, we need to pray by name, urgently, repeatedly, that the seed that's been sown in these people's lives would bear its fruit, that God would cause it to be so.

And we do so with expectancy. We look forward to fruit. That actually is the whole drift of the Bible. I don't see any exclusions here, I don't see anything which says there are times when God's word brings fruit, and there are other times when it doesn't.

[37 : 28] I don't actually see that exclusion. There may be a difference in time, but I don't see there be any difference in the reality that the farmer who sows the seed in a spiritual sense should expect to see fruit.

And this is our closing passage that we're looking at here. 1 Corinthians 9 verse 10. He's referring back to the Old Testament there.

Well, this was written for us because when the ploughman ploughs and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. There's a harvest, and as I said before, no farmer goes out there just to be a sort of photo opportunity so that we can see the sowing process. It's actually a hard-nosed business. It's actually about being profitable. It's actually about the future of the farm. It's actually about a harvest being there, massive machines coming along, picking it all up, putting it in there, selling it off, and starting all over again.

And there is this process. And we are privileged to be called to be part of that sowing process, in the expectation that there will be a harvest.

[38 : 55] harvest. And I suggest that if we take some of these things to heart, and to apply them in our lives, that we will be privileged to see part of that harvest.

May God grant that it should be so. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you that you have caused us to live in these days. And we ask that we would live faithfully and appropriately and with lives dedicated to you in the days that you have granted to us now.

We pray that if you have been sowing seeds in our own lives, which we have just been sitting on, as it were, and not doing anything about, we do pray that you would give us grace to respond properly to that.

We pray that if there is some sowing of seed that we could be doing in church life and we just have not responded to that call from you, that you would help us to respond and say, yes, I'll do that.

I'll see that brother or sister or I'll write a note or I'll pray a prayer. Our Father, we ask that you would make us quite deliberate and thoughtful as we sow seed in the communities in which you have placed us, our families, our neighbourhoods, our student world, our work world, our retirement world, the everyday of Brighton life.

[40 : 18] We pray that we would be faithful and living for you in those environments and ever ready to give a reason for the hope that's in us. These are our prayers, Father, and we bring this to you because we would love to see the harvest brought in to the praise and the glory of the one to whom praise and glory is due, Jesus Christ.

We ask this in his name. Amen.