

GATHERING GOOD SEED

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God has brought us into a “Year of Harvest.” However, before a harvest can take place, a great deal of preparatory work is necessary. So, let’s think about this together.

Last month we heard various voices on the theme “Preparing the Workers.” Part of the message that came through clearly was this: You cannot do *everything*, but you *can* do *something*. One person with God is a majority in any situation. Be that one person and do something in His name.

Jesus said, “The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. Therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into His harvest fields.” (Matthew 9:) We have been doing just that.

This month we will be speaking to you about “Preparing the Field.” The “field” refers generally to those persons who are unchurched. They may never have heard about Jesus’ saving grace. They may have heard and rejected. They may have heard and accepted, but wandered away or been driven off by the bad behavior of some Christians. Others simply cannot see the point of committing themselves to a group of “strangers.” In any case, they are out of church today. A great many of them, by God’s providence, are open to hearing the Good News today, if it is presented authentically and appropriately. They will be our focus.

We cannot open people’s hearts to the Message about Christ, but the Holy Spirit can. We cannot convince people of the realities of sin and judgment to come, but the Holy Spirit can. We cannot persuade people to put their trust in Jesus, but the Holy Spirit can.

John 16:7-8

⁷ *But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don’t, the Advocate won’t come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you.* ⁸ *And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of the coming judgment.*

So, what *can* we do?

Like John the Baptist, and Isaiah before him, we can help prepare the way for the Lord.

Matthew 3:3

*The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John (the Baptist) when he said,
“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming!
Clear the road for him!’ ”*

If we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we can make the pathway to Him as straight and smooth as possible. We can help clear the boulders from the road. Here are three “boulders” that we will address this month:

Personal Pain

Hearts are closed and hardened. Why? Because of threatening or hurtful circumstances. In an effort to protect themselves from more pain, they close their hearts, especially to God who gets so close. (Luke 21:26)

Spiritual Blindness

Eyes are shut — blinded or blindered. Why? Because there is an enemy of God’s salvation plan. The devil has “*blinded the minds*” of those “*who do not believe*” lest they should see the light of the Gospel and pursue it. (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Mental Preoccupation

Minds are preoccupied. The rapid pace and complexity of modern life keeps many from thoughtful reflection. A myriad of entertainment possibilities endlessly distract our attention from what is most important.

And what is most important? Your relationship with God is most important!

Most people live as though God did not exist, or as if He is but one of many options. Therefore, if they give Him any time at all, it is often the “leftovers” — squeezing Him into a quick read of a one-page devotional, or postponing Him until the never-arriving “tomorrow.”

But the truth is that God is your Maker. And He didn't just make you and walk away. He gives you every breath you draw. He is your Sustainer; He is the reason you get up after being knocked down. He is your Healer; He is the reason that your body mends and your mind relaxes. He is your Counselor; He guides in paths that are right and good. He is your Savior; He repeatedly forgives you as you struggle to learn His ways. He is your Strengthener; it is He who gives you the courage to move forward.

He is our very Life. Yet, many are unaware or choose to ignore Him. Even so, He loves us devotedly, and saves all who come to Him.

Curiosity

It is our first task, as workers in the Lord's harvest field to turn people's disinterest into curiosity. To awaken their awareness of God. To whet their spiritual appetite. To nurture in them a thirst for God.

This is the theme of our Sundays together this month. And today I want to address three questions:

What can I do to *prepare myself* to work in the fields of harvest?

Of what must I be *aware*, as I work among the unchurched?

How shall I *gather good seed* to sow into their lives?

Preparation

What can I do to *prepare myself* to work in the fields of harvest?

The main thing I must do is to get to know God — personally, comfortably, joyously, continually.

If my knowledge of God is primarily second-hand — through the feeding of a pastor, or the reading of books, or the admonitions of parents or friends — I will be largely ineffective in bringing people to know God for themselves. I must know Him myself, if I am to represent Him accurately.

Slogans and clichés will not suffice. For me to represent God accurately means to show and share how He has worked in *my* life, *my* circumstances, *my* quandaries.

I must also learn to know Him comfortably. When you first approached God for yourself, you may have felt uncomfortable — how to approach Him, or how He might respond. It is important for you to learn to be comfortable in His presence, which will only come as such things do, with frequency and persistence.

God has made you for His joy and your deepest joy will be found in Him.

Psalm 16:11

You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

Enjoying God *is* the “path of life.”

And you must learn to know God continually, because He is so great. Returning to Him again and Again. Spending time in His presence. Pursuing God with all your heart.

This is the way to prepare yourself — continually.

Awareness

Of what must I be *aware*, as I work among the unchurched?

You must become aware of their conditions. Be observant and listen closely and you will discover that they are hurting, afraid, guarded, confused, misinformed, opposed to their own interests. This is the human condition apart from God.

These conditions are usually masked — few people want to be known in this way — but the Holy Spirit will show you. These are the doorways into people’s hearts. Approach them gently. Treat them respectfully.

1 Peter 3:15

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

Notice that this verse directs us to answer when asked. Your sensitive awareness will encourage people to ask for your insights and counsel. Wait for them to do so. Do not push yourself upon them. If you have to push, you have taken the necessary time to heighten your awareness.

Gathering

How shall I *gather good seed* to sow into their lives? Paul tells the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 9:10) that it is God “*who supplies seed to the sower.*” This is one reason that self-preparation in the knowledge of God is essential: He provides the seed for sowing into the lives of others. This is where I will spend the bulk of my time today. I offer you seven ways.

1. Read the Bible. The Bible is not only the record of God’s actions and His communications to humankind, it is also the principal channel through which the Holy Spirit speaks today.

In explaining His story about the sower and the various soils that caught the seed, Jesus said, “*The seed is the word of God*” (Luke 8:11). Then, we must become well-acquainted with God’s Word in order to have seed to sow.

1. Read the Bible. Then re-read it. And read it again. At least once a year, read it through, if you hope to be ready and useful in the fields. And don’t just read, but *think* about what you read, especially when the Holy Spirit highlights a verse for you. Pause and consider what it could mean for you. If you do not immediately grasp its purpose, just tuck it away for later meditation. Keep paper and pen nearby (or the electronic equivalent). Write down your questions concerning what you read, and make note of the revelations you receive.

Finally, purpose to practice what God tells you.

James 1:22

But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.

2. Reflect on your own journey. Your own spiritual path is like a ladder of multiple steps. By reflection, become acquainted with the process by which God led you to Himself. While it will not be the same as another’s, it will be similar in many ways. Discern the essential components, and you will be prepared to illustrate the path that

others are walking, helping them to see where they have been, how God has been working, and what steps may be next for them.

Our rushing world leaves little time for reflection. Responsibilities and endless entertainment possibilities crowd out quiet times of reflection, leaving us very shallow, whimsical people. You must make time to be quiet, to meet with God, and to reflect.

3. Weave your story with His. I have outlined the Gospel for you this way:

- A. God (His unending love and justice)
- B. Man (our compelling need because of sin)
- C. Christ (His loving sacrifice to save us)
- D. Response (transferring our trust to Christ)

Now, weave your story into those four themes. Be prepared to briefly describe how you discovered God's love and justice in your life experience, how you became aware of your own sinfulness, and so on.

Identify some Scripture verses that describe the steps you took toward God, so that your story and the Scripture are a blended narrative, and not just a stark list.

4. Prepare an answer for common arguments (contentions). If you have spent time becoming aware of people's conditions and struggles, you will also be familiar with their complaints. Now, prepare biblical (though not necessarily word-for-word quotations) responses. Such response must not dismiss their complaints, but while recognizing them (even identifying with them) help them to move forward and not remain stuck there.

Trite slogans and clichés will not do; a compassionate, personal response is needed. Use part of your story or your personal viewpoint to describe a way out.

1 Corinthians 10:13

The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

This is what you want to try to do for those God gives you to speak with.

5. Be authentic. No one wants to be your "project." Be genuine in your interest. If you are not naturally interested in what interests another person, ask yourself, "Am I willing to become interested?" Invite them to tell you about their interests.

Be genuine in your conversation. You can admit to your likes and dislikes, without reproving them for feeling differently. You can admit your faults when necessary. These measures help you both find "level ground" to stand on. When things are said or done with which you differ, protect the dignity of the other person, even if you must express your contrasting point of view. Don't pretend to be a know-it-all. Value your relationship more than your "rightness" in a discussion. Ending a relationship while winning a point is usually a poor choice.

6. Learn to ask questions that will leave them thinking and coming back for more. Many Christians (not to mention people in general) have been trained to provide answers. Answers, answers, answers — end of discussion. Instead, your aim should be to keep the discussion going. People need time to process new information before making new decisions. Keep the conversation "alive" long enough for that to happen. You needn't answer every last question. It's far better to lead them to find the answers for themselves.

Jesus often answered a question with a question of His own, making people think through His point, and discover for themselves what God was doing or saying in their lives. You can learn the same technique. Learn to ask open-ended questions, that cannot be answered with a statement of fact or a "yes" or "no." Ask questions that will force people to reflect, to think, to search, to argue with themselves, to discover on their own.

When a conversation comes to a natural pause, before you will meet and speak another time, try to leave them with a question to ponder, something related to the immediate subject. Suggest that you may discuss it next time, or whenever they're ready.

Why leave them thinking? Because the Holy Spirit can do a far better job of convincing them of the truth as they brood over your question!

7. Be patient. Fruit-growing takes time. Harvest is seasonal. It may not be your task to pick the fruit, but only to sow seed or water the soil, or test the fruit's readiness and encourage its development. Don't be in a hurry. You may be anxious to see people "get saved," but God is constantly working in their lives (not only when you are with them) to lead them to that very crucial conversion. You cannot do it better than He, so trust His timing and His method. Your anxiety only makes people nervous; your patience is a sign of your confidence in God, and it breeds confidence in others.

In these seven ways you may "gather good seed" to sow in people's hearts, as the Lord awakens them to His saving love. Practice, practice, practice... as you depend on the Holy Spirit's guidance and help.

As I said earlier, it is our first task, as workers in the Lord's harvest field to turn people's disinterest into curiosity. To awaken their awareness of God. To whet their spiritual appetite. To nurture in them a thirst for God.

We will discuss other tasks, too, but if you overlook this one, or try to make a shortcut around it, the fruit will suffer and you will be disappointed. So, prepare to give your best for the Master; He has given His all for you.