

# YOUR FIELD

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Have you heard it said, “Bloom where you are planted”?

## Good Seed

Jesus once told a story to the crowd about a farmer who planted good seed in his field, but as it grew up, his servants discovered weeds in the field, too.

After He had left the crowd and gone into the house, His disciples asked Him to explain the story to them.

*Jesus replied, “The Son of Man is the farmer who plants the good seed. The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom.” (Matthew 13:37-38)*

He was actually revealing the method of His mission. To reach the world, He first gathers good seed, and then He plants that seed in His field.

The seed that He plants is people—Kingdom people, people who have aligned with His Kingdom by their faith in Him. Are you a Kingdom person? That’s more than a Christian-in-name, and more than a churchgoer. It’s a person who has entered God’s Kingdom through a new birth—a fresh spiritual beginning. That can be you! Put your trust in Jesus Christ.

And if that’s you, you are His seed. Seed for the sowing. He has planted you in His field, which is the whole world.

Some of you imagine that you just blew into Marin County by accident. Some of you have told yourself that this is just a temporary stopover (you have bigger plans).

I’m telling you, you have been planted here by the Great Cultivator. This is now *your* field, whether for a short time or a long time. It’s yours to inhabit, yours to cultivate, to turn into a garden, so that you can raise much fruit for God’s glory.

The plants that you will cultivate are also people—people who also are growing from the Master’s good seeds. However, there are thorns and weeds and rocks in the ground, too. And sometimes water is scarce. So this field really needs your attention. Just to get close to the plants the Lord is growing can be a challenge.

Paul asked, “How shall they believe if they do not hear? And how shall they hear if someone does not tell them?” Your field needs you. Your world needs *you* to reach out. There are people in your circle of acquaintances who may not hear the Gospel from any other source but you.

## **Sharing Effectively**

Tim did an excellent job of reminding us of the only effective manner of sharing the Good News with others: “with gentleness and respect.” Gentleness is the opposite of harshness and heavy-handedness. Respect is the opposite of a know-it-all or holier-than-thou attitude.

I conducted a wedding last Sunday afternoon for a lovely unchurched couple. The groom had been raised in the Jewish tradition, his bride had been raised in the church. I met a family member who belongs to a Reformed Presbyterian Church and is a born-again believer. He was eager to share his credentials with me, which included several years of leading Bible studies for prison inmates. He asked if I would like to have the couple in our church, adding, “Because I can be direct!” My response was, “I would love to be their pastor, as the Holy Spirit leads.”

I understood his meaning. “Direct” meant aggressively straightforward. And before we left the party, he managed to buttonhole me in the bride’s presence and loudly ask me what time our Sunday service started.

One can be direct and still be gentle and respectful. Or one can be direct and let the chips fall where they may. Do you recognize the difference?

I’ve done the latter, and I will tell you it is possible to make a point and miss the target. It is possible to win an argument and lose an opportunity.

Our task is not to convince people against their will, but to win them. “Winsome” describes the right attitude, for the word is a contraction of two words: win some. If you want to win some people to Christ, you must learn to be winsome in your manner of sharing.

It is good to know the truth, is it not? And it is good to maintain your balance in a challenging conversation. But if you are pleased with yourself for knowing the truth or coming out on top of the argument, you have forfeited gentleness and respect; you have not been winsome.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the greatest Friend anyone can know. I believe He is the perfect Savior. I believe He is just what everyone needs to make their life complete and meaningful. And that is what I want others to discover and enjoy.

If you’re here today as a visitor, I want you to know that Jesus is not out to reform you; He wants to transform you. He is here not to break your will, but to show you that his plan for you

is better than anything you've ever dreamed. He loves you and invites you to entrust your life to Him. He already gave His life for you, and will grant you all the benefits that provides in exchange.

## **Where You Need to Be**

My message today is about "Your Field, Your Neighborhood." We're going to discover that God's providence (His provide-ence) for your life is strong. He knows just who you are, what you're capable of, and where you need to be. And He is not mistaken.

Of course, His perspective of these things is a lot higher than ours. He sees the end of our lives, as well as the beginnings. He has the complete lesson plan; all we have is a seat assignment in the classroom. He knows the objectives for the morning, and also for the afternoon and evening. We just have a blank notebook and a pencil. The question is, will you let Him teach the class? Will you let Him choose the object lessons? Will you let Him lead the way?

I took a young girl I am related to, who shall remain nameless, to a trout farm for her first fishing experience. "Before we begin," I started, "let me tell you something about fishing." She interrupted with a set jaw, scowling up at me disapprovingly through her eyebrows, and said, "Papa, I *know* how to fish!"

I appreciate the attitude—spunky, ready-for-anything. But it can be costly, because observation alone cannot teach us all that we need to learn. Reading alone cannot reveal all that we need to understand. Even previous experience can be a poor teacher.

When you face circumstances in your life that mystify or perplex you, or seem inappropriate or unjust, would you respond by childishly assuming and asserting that you know what you need; that this is the wrong lesson and the wrong class for you? Or are you willing to trust God's loving providence and see where the lesson will take you?

Let's begin with a small lesson in Greek!

## **Going in Circles**

An *oikos* is the ancient Greek equivalent of a house, home, or household. From this word we get the English prefix eco- as in ecology, economics, and ecosystem.

An *oikos* was the basic unit of society in most Greek city-states, and included the head of the *oikos* (usually the oldest male—dad, granddad, or great-granddad), his extended family (wife, children, grandchildren, and other relatives), and slaves or servants, all of whom were living together in one domestic setting.

Let's summarize your *oikos* as your circle of natural relationships. Actually, you have more than one: you have a circle of family members, a circle of friends, and one or more circles of acquaintances (schoolmates, co-workers, club members, or sports team).

Jesus once said, "*A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family*" (Mark 6:4). That's the word—*oikos*.

You didn't get to choose your family; if you had, you would have chosen the wrong one! God chose the perfect family for you. You may not understand that yet, because the criteria He used are not the ones you would have used.

You might have looked for richer, or handsomer, or kinder, or more generous, or more playful—you know, all those pleasant qualities that make life soft and easy.

But God knew what you really needed—and it wasn't "soft and easy." Because He doesn't want lazy kids. He wants "more than conquerors."

He wants kids like David, who won't run from the lion or the bear, but will stay and defend his sheep. David, who would not kill Saul when he had the chance, because Saul was God's king, even though he had been wicked. He respected God, therefore, he respected the king.

He wants kids like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—you probably know the latter three as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—kids who won't trade their faithfulness to God under any threat or pressure.

He wants kids like Dani. Dani and Tia's Muslim parents accepted the couples' decision to become Christians, but Tia's brother reacted with anger. "Every time I'm at my parents' place, my brother insults me. At first, I was angry, but God reminds me to keep calm," shares Tia.

As Dani was chopping wood in front of his home, out of the corner of his eye, he saw his brother-in-law coming toward him with a large knife clenched threateningly in his fist.

"Help me, Lord; I am in danger," Dani prayed. Tightening his grip on the axe he held, he stood and braced himself. Suddenly he heard a voice that he recognized. It spoke softly, "Do not repay evil with evil."

What he did next no one could have expected. Dropping his axe, Dani invited his would-be attacker into his home for tea. The once hate-filled brother-in-law was stunned and quietly departed without a fight.

The entire village was in shock. Everyone wanted Dani to retaliate. Their culture dictated it. Unable to understand his response, they shouted demands that Dani pursue his brother-in-law

and kill him. “I am changed,” Dani explains, “I depend on God’s wisdom and do not want to do what evil wanted. If I had to die, I believe that God has a good plan behind it.”

This was not the first time Dani had heard that voice. “Before we got married, Tia asked me to read the Bible to her,” he recalls. “When my eyes fell on the Beatitudes, my heart skipped; the words were so beautiful. Before, I thought everything could only be resolved with violence. The way of peace in the Bible was new to me.”

“I have learned to love my brother-in-law. I pray that one day, Jesus will speak to his heart,” Dani adds.

Sometimes you marry into the circle; that may be even more of a missionary challenge! A new culture—every family has its own language of shared memories and characters and griefs.

God has set you up. Placed you in just the right position to reach people for Him. Prepared you to be just the right person to reach them. Human logic may disagree, but divine wisdom never fails.

If someone is in your circle, don’t write them off. And don’t write yourself off, either. One way or another, God wants to use you.

It’s not necessarily the things you agree with others about or share an interest in that provide the connection; sometimes, it’s opposites that attract. God may use you to reach the person who grates on your nerves, if you let the Holy Spirit guide you. God may even use that person to reach you, if you let them.

Toss aside your prejudices. They’re induced by pride or fear. They cloud your perspective and muffle the voice of God.

You may have experienced dishonor in the family circle, like Jesus did. You may have been sowing for years without any noticeable growth (the soil is so hard). I want to share with you a story to encourage your patience—one of Jesus’ stories.

## **Making the Most of Your Circles**

Luke 13

<sup>6</sup> Then Jesus told this story: “A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. (Like the old adage, “A watched pot never boils.”) <sup>7</sup> Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s just taking up space in the garden.’ (Have you felt like some people are “just taking up space” in your life? There’s no fruit, only frustration.)

<sup>8</sup> *“The gardener answered, ‘Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. <sup>9</sup> If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.’ ”*

Here’s your answer! Give it another chance—but don’t just sit around idly waiting. Give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer.

What does that mean in terms of your *oikos* or field of service?

It means you have to give that someone—that “barren tree” in your circle—special attention. You must intentionally love them as Christ would.

That means more than just “not hating” them. It also means not ignoring them, not smirking behind their backs, not sighing in disgust at things they say or do, and not poking fun at them—even if others do.

In fact, it means more than any negatives you might imagine. It means thinking positively of them, speaking positively of them, and doing something positive for them—sensitively doing something for them, intentionally doing something for them. Love is an active verb.

How do you deal with “hard cases”? You plow around them and give them extra fertilizer.

### **Plowing for Jesus**

Here’s how you do that:

A plow has a point that digs and two fins that turn the soil, leaving a furrow for planting seeds. In Biblical terms, the point is truth and the fins are grace and compassion. Note: it’s two parts kindness to one part truth. This threesome break up stony hearts and turn them into good and receptive soil.

These Old Testament verses express the spiritual impact of plowing:

Jeremiah 4

<sup>3</sup> *This is what the Lord says to the people of Judah and Jerusalem: “Plow up the hard ground of your hearts! Do not waste your good seed among thorns.*

Hosea 10

<sup>12</sup> *I said, ‘Plant the good seeds of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and shower righteousness upon you.’*

Though these words direct people who know the Lord to plow their own hearts, you can create a similar impact in the hearts of those who do not know the Lord, if you will show them grace and compassion, for *“it is [godly] kindness that leads [people] to repentance”* (Romans 2:4).

The Sword of the Spirit must be beaten into a plowshare. God’s Word is not to be used as a sword against men, but against demons. With men, it is to be used as a plow (with twice as much kindness as truth), turning the soil of their hearts to let in fresh moisture and air and light. This is painstaking work, but absolutely necessary to produce good fruit.

Sharing “the truth in love”—when and how the Spirit directs—can open the eyes of the blind to the truth.

However, seeing is one thing; responding is another. Therefore, we should not only plow but also fertilize.

This describes the effect of intercessory prayer. It is your prayers that make your deeds and words potent. It is your prayers that continue to press the truth upon the hearts of the people you have spoken with, long after you are gone from their presence.

And the ingredient that makes your prayers powerful is self-sacrifice. To fertilize the soil something must die, a compost must be created.

For a fourth year Jesus taught and prayed for the nation of Israel to return to God, and many believed in Him. But after He had died and was buried, the effect was magnified.

The apostles to whom He had entrusted His message also “gave themselves” to the Word and to prayer, and the effect is recorded in Acts 6:7 (MSG), *“The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith.”*

You, too, must surrender your life to the control and direction of the Holy Spirit. If Christ’s message is living in you, then it will be life-giving to others. That may mean sacrificing your desire and immediate benefit for the sake of someone else—for their benefit. Ask yourself, “What is the most winsome behavior and response I can offer?”

## **Where You’re Planted**

In summary, you start where you have been planted. Take an interest in other people, find ways to encourage them in their life pursuits and support them in their troubles. Work in your established circles, walk in the Spirit’s anointing, and sow God’s living (life-giving) words.

With your family, it's usually best to practice loving them and serving them, before you try talking to them about Jesus. Let your deeds demonstrate your humility and love, and make an entrance for your words.

Where you live, begin to pray for the neighbor on your right and the neighbor on your left. Ask God to open a door of conversation with them about significant matters and follow His lead.

At work, pray for the co-worker in the next cubicle or at the next desk or across the lunch-room. Ask the Holy Spirit to introduce you and open a door of conversation about significant matters.

After you have prayed and felt the gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit, start up a conversation and see if the Lord blesses and uses it.

Work at building friendships—making new ones, maintaining and strengthening old ones—friendships for Jesus. Think of them as your field.

A great journey is made up of many small steps. Each small step can be significant. Recall how a little gesture of caring has brightened your whole day and turned your world rightside up again. Then do the same for others.

Each time you reach out to someone—each time you make yourself Good News to them or bring the Good News to them—you are working your field for the Lord.

You are a blessed man or woman, if when the Lord Jesus returns, He finds you doing your job!