

OUR MINISTRY TO THE WORLD

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Our theme Our Mission to the World and deal with the theme The Laws of Sowing and Reaping.

Last Sunday I preached on the theme Our Mission to Our Community. As in so many areas at Newport Mesa Christian Center we have sought to have a balance to both minister to our community and minister to our world. I think again it is difficult for a local church to keep a balance in any number of areas. Certainly if we have a heart for missions we want to jump and put all of our eggs in that basket so to speak. There are other churches that say, We've got so many needs here, how can we possibly take on support for a missionary anywhere. We've tried to say God calls us to do both. He calls us to Judea and Samaria. But he calls us also to the end of the world.

As a church we have sought to corporately demonstrate what we've asked persons on an individual basis to do. For example in the general fund of the church which is the tithes and offerings. You give that are undesignated. The first thing that is done every Monday morning after the offering is counted is a check is written for the exact amount to the penny of ten percent of that offering goes into the tithe fund for the support of other ministries at home and abroad. Then in addition to that we ask persons to join in making a faith promise commitment and giving to missions. Then in addition to that many of you are designating specific missionary offerings for persons the Lord has laid on your heart. Last year the Lord enabled us to place fourth of all the ten thousand plus churches throughout the United States in giving to World Missions. We say that not as grounds for boasting but as grounds for gratitude that this congregation has seen a vision for the world and has helped.

We believe deeply in the scriptures it is more blessed to give than to receive. And also in the scripture that says, The liberal soul shall be made fat."

As I think about missions I especially want to address the theme of sowing and reaping. I realize that in a message like this it is important that I not only communicate a clear note in respect to missions but it is important that coming as we do from our busy worlds during the week God also shares a personal word to our own heart about spiritual truths. I guess I want to proceed on two tracks. To minister to you one to one as a person in my message but also to put before you this theme of the necessity of involvement in the harvest.

As I look through the scripture I find and I'm sure there are more than this but I find five specific laws that relate to sowing and reaping. It's these I want to put before you today.

The first law is obvious. It's the law of sowing and reaping that most of us would immediately respond to if we were asked what is the law of the harvest? The law is simply this: you reap what you sow.

Of course our scripture reference for that would have to come from Galatians 6, verses 6-10. The most familiar passage on sowing and reaping. "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. A man [or a woman] reaps what he/she sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature from that nature will reap destruction. The one who sows to please the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not be weary in doing good. For at the proper time you will reap a harvest if

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you do not give up. Therefore as we have opportunity let us do good to all people especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

Paul’s clearly enunciating the spiritual principle that if we sow to the flesh, that is to the sinful human nature, we’re going to reap that in our life. But as spiritual people we are sowing a harvest that will reach out and benefit the whole family of believers.

We understand how this principle of sowing and reaping applies to our personal lives. For good or for ill. If we sow encouragement we reap encouragement. If we sow criticism we reap negativity. If we sow acts of love we reap acts of generosity. If we sow in stinginess of affection or any other way then we reap that in our life. It’s so difficult to love unloving people. The reason why that is so is because again the law of you reap what you sow. It is easy to love people who are sowing love.

On the other hand if we have been sowing bitterness or anger in our life we have to deal with the crop that that produces. As one person said, “The thorns that I have reaped are of the tree I planted. They have torn me and I bleed. I should have known what fruit would spring from such a bitter seed.”

I think this principle of sowing and reaping as it applies to mission it seems obvious that there is no harvest unless there is a time of sowing. Indeed throughout the missionary families that this church is involved in there are some that are in the process of the harvest where there is a great reaping going on. El Salvador is one of those countries where there is a tremendous ingathering of thousands of people per year into the kingdom of God. There are other countries where the harvest is simply at the level of seedtime and sowing. But if we do not sow there will never be a time a reaping.

Last fall I was in Guatemala speaking at the Central American Wycliff Bible translators retreat. I met a couple of missionaries that had been in Guatemala for over 40 years. Some of you may know them. They went down and began translating the Bible in an Indian tribe that flourished. I think the largest Indian tribe in Guatemala when they began. They were struggling to learn the language. The village they were living in was very hostile to them and very non-receptive to them. They were going through a lot of crisis in trying to break through. They were having a difficult time even finding out how to correctly translate the two most essential words in the Christian language – the word “God” and the word “love.”

In the middle of this process having already lived there a year and half the church that supported them the most, their home church, wrote them letter: We have been reading a publication and it said we should write all off our missionaries and find out how many souls they had seen come to the Lord in their ministry this last year. Then we’re going to take the missionary dollars we are giving and allocate them according to the number of souls that are won. You’re going to get more support if you have a lot of souls won. But if you haven’t won anyone the inference is you’re not an effective missionary and therefore you can look for diminished support.

They were crushed. They hadn’t won anyone to the Lord. They’d been there a year and a half and they still hadn’t found out the name for God or the name for love. They did suffer the loss of support from that church. God met their need by raising up other churches and other friends to help support them. But today all through Guatemala there are thousands of those Indian people in that tribe that have come to faith in Christ because the seed was put into the ground. We can

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never judge the success of a ministry at home or abroad by the particular size it is right now. It may be in the seedtime.

But sow seed we must because in order to get the harvest there must be seed in the ground.

The second law of sowing is almost it seems a contradiction of the first. That is sometimes we reap where we have not sown. Jesus says in John 4:37-38 "Thus the saying: one sows and another reaps is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." All of us in our life can point to situations I think if we take a moment to consider it all of advantages that we have reaped because someone else has sown for us.

Some time ago was in the northeastern corner of Ohio. I so badly wanted to go to Cleveland where my grandfather Oliver lived and raised his family. I had never seen the home he'd lived in. I have never visited his grave. I'm not sure I could even find it. But my grandfather Oliver for whom my middle name is given was a man of great prayer and a tremendous street evangelist and personal soul winner. It was his praying and his evangelism that caused his whole family with the exception of one child to come into the kingdom of God. All across that family today there are grandchildren and great grandchildren serving the Lord because he sowed righteousness. He sowed prayer. He sowed concern. He sowed sacrifice. He instilled a strength in his family that is continuing now through the fourth generation.

I have reaped where I did not sow. The heritage I have I am not the person who was responsible for it. It was given to me as a gift from the Lord.

The church that we're a part of. My stepmother and her first husband came to Costa Mesa in 1940 and the Lord helped them acquire a patch of ground that was about an acre and a third. They cashed in an insurance policy for \$150 to buy that land. They labored for 30 years to pastor a church here in Costa Mesa and got it off the ground and got it started. We would never be where we are in ministry in this community today had they not stayed faithfully for decades at the business of sowing. And we today are reaping where others have sowed.

I might also say that there are negative things we reap that others have sowed. You may have come from a very disturbed family background and you've had to wrestle in your life with things that other people have put there that you've never asked for. But whether it's negative or positive the fact is that all of us are reaping where we did not sow. All of the benefits that we receive in the gospel of Jesus Christ have come to us because of the sowing efforts of others. We can reach for the hymnal or Bible and the minute we pick those instruments of worship and study up we see that we're being given something that others have sowed. It was because of Wycliff was willing to face martyrdom and because other Bible translators did the same thing that we are able to have in our hands today the scripture. We are debtors because we have reaped where others have sown.

Then I think the third law of sowing and reaping is not only do we reap what we sow and sometimes we reap where we have not sown but the third law of the harvest is often we sow where we will not reap.

If it's true that we reap where we don't sow, it's also true that we must sow where we will not reap. If there is to be a good harvest for others tomorrow then I must sow good seed today.

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I think it was Martin Luther was asked, what would you do if you knew that today was the day you were going to be called home. He said, "I'd go out and plant a tree." I like that kind of philosophy. It says I'm not here just in life for myself. I'm concerned about what is coming down the road.

I think in regard to world missions the hidden peoples and there is a whole study of missions that have identified target groups within the culture and the five billion people in this world that are essentially without a gospel witness. There is no cultural bridge of communication. There is no missionary working with them. There has been no penetration of that particular ethnic or cultural or language group with the gospel. Those groups are called hidden peoples. If those hidden people are ever to have a harvest toward the gospel someone must sow among them.

This last year I was asked to conduct a communion service at Southern California College here in this facility in their chapel time. As we came to the time of communion I had asked a number of students quietly beforehand to be prepared when I said a particular phrase to stand up and respond to it. No one was programmed to the fact that this was going to happen. I wanted the impact of this to sink in on this communion service because it was in this generation of student body that we're going to see tomorrow's missionaries. There is a point that ministers often do in a communion service, simply look across the audience after the elements have been distributed and say, Is there any who has not been served? The purpose for that is to perhaps pick up the one person or the row that somehow had been missed. It gives people the chance to raise their hand. Sometimes I will do that as pastors but most of the time I won't because I realize in this church the people passing the elements have spotted everybody.

But that question – Is there any who have not been served? – It was at that point that various people in that chapel that day began getting up. When I asked the question someone stood up and said, "I represent the hundred thousand Tibetans in India. We have not been served." Another person stood up and said, "I represent the six thousand Hopi Indians in Arizona. We have not been served." A third person said, "I represent the 850,000 university students in the German Federal Republic. We have not been served." Another person said, "I speak as a spokesman for the Dinka of Sudan. There are 1,940,000 of us. We have not been served." Another said, "I represent the 50,000 Spanish racetrack residents in the United States. We have not been served." I speak for the 1,500,000 people of Senegal. We have not been served. It can go on and on.

Paul uses the analogy of sowing and reaping when he asks the Corinthians to give an offering for the Judean Christians. He says to them, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness." He's telling these Corinthian believers join with all the other churches in giving an offering to the Jerusalem saints. You will not reap what you're sowing. They're going to reap it. But I'm asking God to simply multiply the source of your own seed. As you give it multiply your seed.

There is a rule I guess in farming that says don't be cheap with the seed. If you're going to have a good harvest you've got to be generous with seed.

I think back in the years I have been involved in supporting missions. I think back to my first faith promise as pastor of this church. Every time an opportunity has come along to evaluate a

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faith promise to missions I've asked the Lord to help me, to have the faith to increase it. And to increase the supply of seed so that now 16 years later I'm at a place where I'm able to give 40 times more than the commitment I was able to give 16 years ago. But I want the Lord to increase that seed because I have a concern that others reap where I am sowing. That to me is part of being a Christian. Having this altruism. This sense that I don't have to benefit from everything. I don't always have to give in order to get blessed back. I just want to be concerned with the work of the Lord. I know that there are people who are reaping today where I have not sown. But I want to sow. I don't have to reap it always.

Then the fourth law of the harvest is you always reap more than you sow. Most of us are not farmers. I'm not either. I'm taking this on faith. The crop that comes out of the ground is way out of proportion to the quantity of the seed that is invested in the ground. It is always the case. You reap more than you sow. I think you reap two ways. You reap in quality more than you sow. And you reap in quantity more than you sow.

I brought with me this morning a seed. It's a big seed. I didn't want to bring a small one because I wanted you to be able to see it. This is a gladiola bulb. Isn't it ugly? Gladiola bulbs are the ugliest things you've ever seen. You look at this and you'd say, what good could ever come out of that? Actually there's going to be a set of beautiful red gladiolas that come out of this grungy looking thing that looks like it's a wizened marshmallow or something like that. The quality of the harvest is going to be much greater than the seed that is planted. This is going to yield a beautiful flower.

I think that Paul is saying that same thing when he speaks of the body being sown into the grave. He says when you sow you do not plant the body that will be but just a seed. Perhaps of wheat or gladiola or something else. So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown perishable is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor. It is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness. It is raised in power. It is sown in natural body. It is raised a spiritual body.

Every time I go to a cemetery or see a body in a casket I think of the bulb of a plant. This isn't the way it's really going to be in the great resurrection day. Because God has a law of seedtime and harvest that says the harvest is going to far outstretch the seed that was planted in the ground.

There is not only this multiplication in terms of quality. But there is a multiplication of quantity as well. Jesus said some seed will bring forth thirty folds and sixty folds and a hundred fold. It will bring a harvest.

When I make a commitment to invest in the work of the Lord and invest in missions for example I may at this moment be investing financially in a service such as this, making a financial commitment. But I don't expect that the harvest is going to be a financial harvest. I expect that harvest to be translated in giving missionaries tools and support to be able to share the good news with others and train up national leadership so that the harvest is people and not dollars. But God works in the exchange. What we sow is lost to us and dies in the ground.

It was Paul who said, "Remember this. Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. But whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

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There are these laws of the harvest. You reap what you sow. You reap where you do not sow. You sow where you do not reap. You reap more than you sow. And the fifth...

You always reap later than you sow.

This creates always the tension. For what is sown dies to us and disappears for a while. The grain, which is used for food or for feed, is lost for a time in the ground. It is dead to us. But the farmer sows because he believes in the harvest. As God said to Noah in Genesis 8 "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." Harvest seedtime. Those are God's eternal principles and like night and day those will not cease. We will reap after we have sown. But the minute we plant the seed is not the minute we will harvest it. There must be time that goes by to see the harvest. This teaches us therefore patience. And it also teaches us to let go of the seed even though we do not immediately see the harvest.

I think I may have shared this story last fall but it's a powerful illustration to me of this principle of reaping later than you sow. It comes out of Psalm 126:6 "He who goes out weeping carrying seed to sow will return with songs of joy carrying sheaves with him." It was missionary Del Tar who really made me understand this difference between sowing and reaping and this delay and understand it in a powerful way.

He had spent much of his growing up years first as a preacher's kid in Minnesota and south Dakota then as a young missionary he had spent his early career in west Africa. He shares that he was raised in farming communities as a preacher's kid and he played with the deacons' kids on John Deere tractors, International Harvesters, and others. He learned how to drill oats and plant corn and cultivate. But he said never once did he ever see one of the farmer deacons going out weeping as they went out to plant seed. And he could never figure out what Psalm 126:6 meant "He who goes out weeping will return again with shouts of rejoicing." He had been perplexed by that scripture all of his life until he went out into the vast area of Africa lying just below the Sahara. It stretches across the span of Africa four thousand miles. It's got a climate like Bible lands we see described in our scriptures.

There is a period of time of four months when there is moisture. May, June, July and August. These four months are the only months that can be used for the sowing of seed and the raising of crops and for the harvest time. There's tremendous starvation problems all across that part of Africa today.

When those rainy times are done the heat unbearable sun begins to crack and dry the ground and the winds begin to blow the dust and of course the dust gets into everything. Your bed, your floor, your mouth, the cracks of your face. The year's food which mainly consist of milo and sorghum must be grown in those four months of the wet season. The farmer goes out in small fields to raise their supply for the year. Their tools are the strength of their backs and their short handled hoes. October and November are beautiful months there. The granaries are full, the harvest has come, people are rejoicing and relaxing. They're able to eat two full meals a day. One about ten o'clock in the morning after the initial work in the morning has been done. Then after sunset when things have cooled down another meal. I've seen them out there taking the sorghum grain and breaking it down into flour and then forming it into a consistency that looks like white paste that has about the idea of yesterday's corn meal or cream of wheat. They'll put it in what looks like a banana leaf but it's a green leaf of some kind. That'll be the plate. They'll

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take their hands and roll the meal up into little balls and dip it in a sauce and pop it in their mouth. It's their main gruel, their main dish. The meal does something wonderful I guess to the insides. It glues all those desperate parts together for a time.

But December comes and the granaries start to recede. Many families start to omit the morning meal. By January, five months after the August harvest, scarcely one family in fifty is eating the morning meal any more. By February the evening meal has diminished and people feel the clutch of hunger again. The meal shrinks even more in March and children begin to succumb to sickness. You don't stay very well on a half meal a day.

Del Tar say that April is the month that always haunts his memory. A month that is the worst. The Africa dust is quiet. There are no jet planes flying overhead. No traffic noses to break the stillness. There is the dust filtering through the air and the sound, which can carry for long distances. You can hear the babies crying from the nearby village or from the next door hunt that are hungry. Their mother's milk has stopped and there is no food in any plenteous degree at all. People begin to go out into distant areas and try to get bark off the trees to reduce it to some kind of a gruel that can keep them together.

I remember my mother telling me of a great famine that occurred in China in the mid 30s when she was there. She said any where you could go for hundreds of miles all the bark was off all the trees because that was all that was left. People boiled it down and tried to get food out of it.

That's what these people are doing there in Africa. Then in April, Del Tar says inevitably it will happen. A young boy maybe six or seven years of age will come running to his father with sudden excitement saying, Daddy! Daddy! We've got grain!" The father will say, "You know we haven't had grain for weeks." The boy will say, "Out in the hut where we keep the goats. There's a leather sack hanging up on the wall and I reached my hand down into the sack and there's grain in that sack. Get mommy to take that grain and make us some flour and give us some food."

And the father stands motionless and has to explain to his son. "That's next year's seed grain. That's what stands between us and starvation we're waiting for the rains so that we can use it."

The rains finally arrive in May if they're on time and when they do the young boy watches his father take the sack from the wall and do the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family he goes to the field and Del Tar said I've seen it so many times. With tears streaming down his face the farmer goes out taking his precious seed and he throws it away. Why does he throw it away? Because they believe in the harvest and they know there will be no harvest tomorrow unless someone sows today. But they also know the harvest is later than the seedtime.

When I stand before you as pastor and ask you to make a commitment for missions I realize that everybody and their brother is asking the body of Christ today for commitments. I as a pastor do not try to stand before you and pull the emergency cord and say; We're going to sink unless this month you give us X amount of dollars. But I am saying because I deeply am committed to missions and because I know the integrity of the mission that's involved in what we've represented to you today that there is in the body of Christ today great sowing and great reaping going on. And simply because of the fact that there are a few flakes and self indulgent people in

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the body of Christ that are milking the body for all they can does not mean that the great and overwhelming part of the body of Christ is not out there doing an honest job for the king.

That is part of our responsibility to stand with them. And it's also part of our responsibility to know and to know what we are giving to make sure that it is being dealt with in integrity.

I believe in the harvest. I believe in the Great Commission. I believe you do too. In order to see the harvest worldwide and here at home we simply must sow seed. I ask you as a congregation to sow seed both sacrificially and generously in the work of the Lord. I ask you not only that in regard to money but in regard to doing what is right in God's eyes. That maybe this is a time in your life when you're doing a lot of sowing. Maybe you have younger children and you haven't yet seen the harvest of what you're doing. But keep on sowing. If we sow love and prayer and sacrifice and good example we'll reap that too in the day ahead.

Our Lord, we thank you for your word for us today. All of us here are debtors. Someone else sowed seed in our life, that gave us opportunity to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The church that we're a part of others have planted, sowed, watered. We have reaped the benefits of it. Lord, we want to do that in our own life for others. Especially in regard to missions where we have the chance to sow where we will not reap personally. But we know that there is a harvest. Because of that we'll invest seed in the soil. So, Lord, we pray that as every individual here considers their own responsibility in the kingdom that each one of us can restrict those funds that we have that should be used for seed for the expansion of your work. And not bite into those seed funds for other purposes. Except to use them for the harvest or men and women and boys and girls in this world today. Thank you for the joy of being committed to you and to your work. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.