

# Weeding the garden

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Psalm 32/ Matthew 13<sup>1-9</sup>/ James 3<sup>5-12</sup>

A little girl came home from Sunday school waving a paper for her mother to see. "Look Mommy," she exclaimed, "The teacher says I drew the most unusual Christmas picture she ever saw!" Her mother took one look and had to agree with the teacher. Hoping her daughter could explain her creation, the mother asked, "Why are all these people riding in the back of an airplane?" "Well, Mommy, that's the flight into Egypt." Accepting that, mother asked another question: "Who is this mean-looking man in the front?" Her daughter answered quickly and knowingly: "That's Pontius, the Pilot." Looking at the picture even more closely, the mother said, "I see you have Mary and Joseph and the baby. But who is this large man sitting behind Mary?" "Can't you tell?" the little girl asked, beginning to shake her head in disappointment. "That's Round John Virgin."

How, I wonder do you picture Christmas? Is it a time of giving only or do you think of it as a time of receiving? Is it really a time of peace or do you think of it as a time of stress? Is it largely about family or is it a chance to seek a wider social setting? One very different way to view Christmas is to see it, at one level at least, as a statement about sin. Let me explain why. There are two very important messages Christmas brings to us every year. The first is that God has not given up on us.

God does not give His most precious gift to a situation, a race, a world which He has given up on. The message of Christmas is always one of hope against hopelessness; a future, a dream, a better way. And we are given permission to think this way at Christmas because Christ is God's best and God has given the best... **for us!**

Perhaps the lowest a person can get in life is to realise truly how bad we can get and how twisted the human spirit can be and to know that this applies to us as well. And yet it is not a bad thing to be reminded of our potential for evil. It is not a bad thing to be reminded of how wrong we can be because this is so often the beginning of a search for help. It is at these times, however, that we wonder if there can ever really be hope for us or, indeed, for the world. Christmas is the answer to that

question. **If God was willing to give God's best for the world whose only reaction was to kill that best then there must be hope because God has not given up on us.**

The second major theme of Christmas is that we are helpless in the face of sin apart from God's help. Sin's genesis is not bad or immoral behaviour; it's not ignorance or lawlessness; it's not even indifference or a lack of love. Sin is, essentially, walking away from God and the only answer to it is to find some way to walk back to God. Jesus is that Way. We cannot walk that way ourselves. We cannot steal ourselves to even take a step. All is Christ or all is lost. Christmas is the great annual reminder of this very thing because at Christmas we see Jesus come to a people who of all people should know the heart of God, should know the way of God, should know the Son of God – but they don't and, indeed, they are the very ones who end up killing Him. And these people are not just themselves. Oh no! They stand for all of us. They stand for every human who has ever breathed. We are all alike, says Paul.

**<sup>9</sup>What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. <sup>10</sup>As it is written:**

**“There is no one righteous, not even one; <sup>11</sup>there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. <sup>12</sup>All have turned away, (Romans 3)**

Against this background Christ comes at Christmas time to help. Because of this we may breath again. The question now arises – so what are we meant to do with sin? Is there any response called for. Are we even to worry about it since Christ has come?

Into this speaks our parable today. The parable of the sower is not necessarily about sin as such but what is clear from it is that the faithful must deal with issues of the human heart if faith is to flourish and that the central issue for the heart according to the word of God – is sin. As Jesus says...

**<sup>18</sup>But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. <sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup>These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (Matt 15)**

Sin is a bit like financial debt. Before we let Christ into our lives we are dealing with a debt that won't allow us to run our business as human beings. Instead we languish with an amazing resource that we cannot run – owing our debtors so much we are literally bankrupt. When ask Christ into our lives we

are made solvent again – we can begin trading, as it were; we can begin running this gift of life we've been given – but the weeds are still there. We must still deal with land that is weedy – we must still be real about the circumstances we find ourselves in; we must still be patient as we nurse our lives back into full productivity – there is still a battle to be fought and so the apostle Paul will say...

**<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7)**

How then do we deal with the issue of sin? What do we actually do? Where so we start. I want to leave you with three biblical practices which seem to be standard requirements in regard to how we live our lives and Christians but before I get on to that let us not forget the basis on which these stand. Nothing, but nothing replaces the fundamental work of Christ in a person's life. Time and again we must return to this call to 'let Christ be Lord' of our lives. So often, unfortunately, our activity, good though it may be and, at times, even effective from a certain standpoint, is nothing but an avoidance of this basic precept. It is Christ who saves – our role is to let Him! Jesus says to each of us today...

**<sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev 3)**

How often have we tried everything and not gone to Christ? How often have we worked and worked until we can work no more and not been willing to receive Christ's verdict on where or how we are working. Our work, our very good work is no substitute for God's Word in our lives for when we hear and obey God we work with His help. When we work without God the results can be almost the opposite of what we want to achieve. Listen to a few of these interesting patient notes from hospitals – notes which are, of course, meant to be crucial to the patient's health. [Not getting at nurse s here...]

- The patient refused autopsy./ Patient has left white blood cells at another hospital.
- Note: Patient recovering from forehead cut. Patient became very angry when given an enema by mistake.
- Patient has chest pain if she lies on her left side for over a year. /
- On the second day, the knee was better, and on the third day it disappeared./

- The patient is tearful and crying constantly. She also appears to be depressed. /
- The patient has been depressed since she began seeing me in 1993. /
- She is numb from her toes down. /
- While in ER, she was examined, x-rated, and sent home. /
- The skin was moist and dry. /
- Occasional, constant, infrequent headaches. /
- Patient was alert and unresponsive. /
- Rectal examination revealed a normal size thyroid. /
- She stated that she had been constipated for most of her life, until she got a divorce. /
- I saw your patient today, who is still under our care for physical therapy. /
- The lab test indicated abnormal liver function. /
- Skin: Somewhat pale but present. /
- Patient has two teenage children, but no other abnormalities.

3 basic practices in regard to sin can be summed up in two words. These are confession and repentance. I say three practices because confession has a double edged nature.

Confession begins with the conviction that coming to Christ involves an admission of guilt or need or wrongdoing. Indeed, confession is the act of coming to Christ with these things. There is no coming to Christ apart from confession and as the Psalmist says,

**<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.**

**<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.**

***Selah***

**<sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**

And such confession begins with the Spirit's work of conviction – that I have done something wrong or harmful and I need to confess that. But there is more here because this is not a matter of confessing once and for all. Rather it is the deep understanding that the paddock is never weed free and that there will always be a need for us to confess before a Holy God. Think of this work as the constant work of weeding in a lovely established garden.

Repentance is that work which all fellowship with Christ results in. We cannot walk any distance with Jesus without having to make some choices about what we do. The Presence of Christ illuminates the dark places in our life and calls us to make a choice about what we do. Repentance means going on with Jesus. Not to repent means we choose to go our own way. In this sense repentance is not first and foremost about things we do wrong – rather it is about what separates us from Christ – about everything that sin has done in us and to us. When we repent we turn over the ground of our heart; we make it friable and able to receive the new seed of the Kingdom and in this way we are made ready for God.

So we can weed the garden and we can turn the garden over and make it ready for new seed. The final practice in regard to sin involves sowing seed. Although Jesus represents Himself as sowing the seed in our parable today it is clear that we are also called to sow His seed and we do this by another positive form of confession. Confession literally means to 'say the same thing as' – and in this case it refers to Christ. So we are to be people who literally 'confess Christ' in that we say the same thing as He does – we give over our mouths to God and we allow God's words to become predominant. This is why, I think, swearing and cursing have always had bad press in the Church since they represent the opposite of what is indicated here. They represent giving our mouths over to evil to represent evil in our lives and as our reading from James said this morning...

**<sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (James 3)**

We cannot underestimate how vital control of the tongue is. In many ways if mammon is the root of every kind of evil then the tongue is the gateway for every kind of evil. Our one option is to commit the tongue to something else and that something is the word that Christ gives us. With our tongues we can literally bring Christ into the world, into every life we meet, into every situation we encounter. And

please don't hear me simply talking about God words and biblical phrases. I'm referring to something much more holistic than this. With our tongues we can love as God loves; we can care as God cares, we can lift up as God lifts up.

When we confess Christ in this way we crowd out Satan – we give Satan no room to move and we limit sin. God says – 'What you sow you shall also reap.' Let us sow good seed wherever we can. AMEN.