

# Breaking Up Fallow Ground

by A.W. Tozer

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of self-examination and growth in the church, and warns against the dangers of becoming critical and choosy, losing first love, and having constricted sympathies.*

**Duration:** 40:37

**Scripture:** Isaiah 55:10

**Topics:** "Fallow Ground"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses a proposal to cut down on overeating and gluttony. The idea is to have a small meal and focus more on the business of the Lord. However, there is a debate among the congregation about whether this is the right approach. The preacher emphasizes the need for a tender heart and a deep commitment to God, rather than being focused on worldly things. He encourages the congregation to spare themselves but not to spare others, and to continue plowing deep in their faith until Christ comes and reigns righteousness upon them.

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## Transcript

Thank you, O God, for thy work there in French Quebec, where the, everything is stacked against the people, against the true people of God. Bless our young brother, we pray. May thine oil be upon his head in such measure that everybody there, even though they hate him for his partisanism, may love him for the fragrance of his life, and slowly turn and see that the fragrance of a holy life comes from the same doctrines that they hate, and thus give up their opposition and turn to thee.

With mercy we pray thee, attend the ministry of this young man, and all those who labor there. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Now, I pray that I may have skill to help without harming. I want to speak frankly about our weaknesses and our needs. And I know how much injury is done by a sour, critical spirit, and I'd rather die now than to turn sour.

But I also know that the shortest way to the cemetery for any church is to assume that everything's all right and just let itself alone. So I want this morning to appraise the situation a little here, and tell you what we can do and what I hope we will do. Now, I follow Paul and our Lord Jesus Christ in this, for they both first appraised and showed what was on the credit side, and then what was on the debit side, and then told what to do about it.

I think that that's a perfect pattern for any preacher. What's wrong with us? What's right with us? What we can do to correct what's wrong? That seems to be, I'd say, the most logical and sensible and reasonable procedure possible, and I'll follow it along with Christ and Paul. Now, there is in this church a relative soundness of doctrine.

I haven't run into anybody yet that is off his rocker when it comes to his theology. I believe that we are theologically sound. The emphases seem to be falling in the right place, and that's what especially matters, you know, where the emphasis falls.

We may believe a thing and not emphasize it, and if we believe it but don't emphasize it, it is like money in the bank that is not used and not drawing interest, or like corn out in the barn that hasn't been planted, or like any useful thing that is lying rusting. So it isn't what we say we believe so much as what we emphasize. And I believe that the emphases are falling in the right place in this church.

I am quite sure that in the Sunday school and in young people's and in all the teaching that we're Orthodox all right, so you can check that off and say, well, we're Orthodox at least. But don't pat yourself on the back yet, because there's a lot wrong with orthodoxy unless we do something about it. And I believe we've preserved a high degree of social unity in the church.

I mean by that that the contrary-minded people don't seem to feel at home, and I suppose they go somewhere else or stay somewhere else. There's unity. I don't think that there is perfect unity.

That is, I suppose that there would might be one who would criticize another, and so on, a little. But I think even that's at a minimum. So I could say that there's unity among us, and I think that our unscriptural and extra-scriptural projects are probably kept at a fair minimum.

No, not as completely so as I'd like to see. And I believe that in some measure we are enjoying the presence of God. This is to me is the test of a church, whether it's people when they need to enjoy the presence of the Lord.

If they do not, then there's lots to be done yet. When the presence of the Lord is felt, worship is delightful and healing to the soul. And you come in and go out quite changed from what you were when you came in.

You sense the presence of God in the midst, and you'll love prayer and good singing and the fellowship and meditation. You'll love it because the presence of God is there. Now, I've been in churches where it was more marked than it is here, but I have been in some where there was far less of it than there is here.

So I would say for the average church, we are in a fairer condition, but certainly not where we ought to be yet. And I believe that our vital relationships are spiritual, that we're held together by some social ties, but we're held together primarily by spiritual ties. And therefore I think this is good.

I appreciate the interest of the church in missions that will probably bring in \$55,000 or \$60,000, this year to missions. That's good. And there are some missionaries on the field from this church, and there are some in Christian schools.

So that's good, and I would like Paul and like our Lord Jesus Christ say, I praise you and I hold you up as example. I think that's good. But now on the debit side, and here again I follow the man Paul and our Lord Jesus Christ in honestly pointing out deficiencies and recommending remedy.

If you don't know what your deficiencies are, you certainly won't know what the remedy is, and you won't know there's any reason for a remedy. But I want to point out to you a danger, and that is the danger that comes to a church, the disadvantage that comes to a church, which has reached a certain ecclesiastical maturity. The young churches that are just starting out are almost always the most spiritual churches because they have to trust God more than the other churches do.

And when the church is new and they only have a few people around, one man has to serve as secretary and Sunday school superintendent and chairman of the board, not because he wants to or insists on it, but because the men are so few. Or even sometimes, as Dr. Simpson once said in the early days of the Alliance, he said he had some elect ladies on his board because there weren't enough men to go around. Well, there's something wonderful about a new little church that's starting out.

Everybody seems to love everybody else, and their very hindrances are blessed to them. They don't have big numbers, but like the fellow who announced at a conference that his Sunday school had doubled, 100 percent increase. He said, What's the size of it? He said, Twelve.

He said, We had six when we started. And the young, the small new church, just two new people come in and they're happy about it, so they tend to be optimistic. And they're little and struggling, and they have to pray for everything.

And that's an advantage to the church. And then time and success come along, and then the churches tend to become critical and choosy and used to things. The little church, the little struggling beginning church that would take a boy out of NAC that was shaved with a wet cloth and that was scarcely a man yet, and they were glad to get him, you know, glad to get him.

And they just, Oh, bless God, bless the young brother, we thank thee you've sent him among us. And then when they get established and the people are there and the money's coming in and they get a reputation, then the tendency is to become critical and choosy. Then to get a man, they parade just as if they were buying a horse.

They parade a whole number of men across the platform and examine them in on feel their muscles and see if they think that they would be worthy to preach in such a giant of a church as this. Well, that's the big church's idea about things. And so out goes the freshness and the wonder and the enthusiasm that was there when they were little and struggling and everything, everybody that came in was welcome.

Well, it's an evidence of a cooling of the first love, and Jesus talked about the cooling of the first love. And I tell you that I'd rather hear, I'd rather hear that I had an incurable disease than to know that my love had cooled off, at least to know that it had cooled off beyond repair. The Lord Jesus said, Thou hast left thy first love.

That means your first degree of love or your love first in time, whichever it is. The scholars don't know and I don't think I care because both would be true. You've left your first degree of love.

Some translations say bluntly, you don't love me as much as you used to. Well, I suppose that this is more tragic than to hear that you had lung cancer, because all a lung cancer can do is kill the body. But when the heart has been injured and the soul chilled and cooled off, then sometimes that's irreparable and there's nothing that can be done, though certainly there is much that can be done if we only knew it and dared to believe it.

Now, how can the love of God ever cease to be what it is? How can God ever become less to us? How can it be that we love Christ less than we do, or less than we did? If this is true, then I say that there needs to be a stirring and a humbling and a repenting and a seeking after God. And then another thing that big churches get the habit they get into, or established churches by the word big, they may be anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand. But the second is constricted sympathy.

There's great danger. We get so many things to pray about in our own fellowship that it uses up our time and we don't get much chance to pray for anything else. Who was it that called attention? Miss Bailey, who spoke to us downstairs here some weeks ago, called attention that when Job prayed for his friends, God blessed him and doubled everything he had.

Well, constricted sympathies, I pray that we may be delivered from that. Now, it's necessary to protect and promote and pray for and labor and conserve and defend our own people and our own fellowship. But that is only in order that we might grow in grace and spread and expand and go to the far-out regions.

We want to have a successful and profitable church here, only that we might have a larger outreach and a larger outlook to the ends of the world. And the constricted sympathies are very dangerous. Sometimes it's good when you get on your knees not to pray for yourself at all and not to pray for your local church at all, but to pray for others out there, to name people and pray for them by name.

And thus your sympathies don't get constricted. There isn't anything in the wide world that I know of quite so horrible as an old person who thinks only of him or herself, living for him or herself all the time. And so there's danger that we should become self-centered and our sympathies should be constricted.

My constant prayer to God is, year in and year out, God give me a heart as big as thine, as big as naked big, and give me thy sympathies and thy understanding, so that I will love the ones that God loves for the same reason that he loves them. And sometimes those reasons are not known of men, and sometimes there are no reasons except that God loves them, and because he does, we do. We've got to war on narrowness, we've got to war on it, we've got to continue to war on it until it's destroyed, until our hearts are as big as the world.

You go with some people and they live around the world. I think it was Simpson who wrote a little hymn of some sort, We'll Pray the World Around. They say that when the old man would get up into his middle seventies and his mind had rather slipped on him and he was forgetful and he'd meet people on the campus and didn't know who they were, would shake their hand and greet them warmly, God bless you and go on, he didn't know who they were.

And the day he died, in the morning he sat out on his little screened-in porch there on the hillside of Nyack and prayed for his missionaries. There weren't so many then, and he could pray for them by name, and he did, and prayed around the world for his missionaries and then went in and died. He couldn't remember a friend that he'd known for 40 years on the campus, but he knew every missionary by name around the world.

I had another friend, Dr. L. H. Zeamer of Toledo, Ohio, pastor of that great missionary church until the time of his death. That great man of God didn't know his own wife, but she came into the room and he said, Take her away, take her away. Didn't have his own wife around, and didn't know people.

But he'd get on his knees and mention every missionary from his church by their name and pray for all the details of their lives. God had made his heart bigger than his brain, and had made his sympathies bigger than his intellect, so that after the intellect had caved in a little and the poor mind wasn't working so well, the sympathies still worked, and the big heart of the man still prayed for missionaries in all parts of the world. I think that we ought to watch our sympathies.

They tend to be constricted, and we feed on ourselves and pray for ourselves and give to ourselves, and the result of it is after a while that our ground becomes fallow and we need to have it breaking up. And the third thing I notice, and notice that's a disadvantage of the larger church, is that we don't have much care for lost men. We care more for each other, and we get to praying about all the little things that are wrong with us.

There are so many things we pray about that we well might not need to pray about at all. They'll take care of themselves. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and these other things will be added unto you.

You know, there was a man named John one time, and he prayed for a friend of his. I don't know the friend's name, or if I ever did I've forgotten it. But he prayed for a friend of his, and he prayed for his health.

He prayed for his physical health. But you know, being the man of God that he was, he made that prayer to be one of the most all-embracing and comprehensive prayers possible. He said, I pray that your health may be as your soul prospers.

As your soul prospers, let your health be. And I think sometimes instead of praying in detail, I'm sure the Lord hears a medical report on a great many people, and if God smiles, he must smile sometimes at the way we tell him about people. Those medical reports, those charts we give the Lord, they are not very intelligent because we're not doctors.

But the Lord knows we mean it. But I think that we could escape a lot of that if we prayed, O God, bless them physically as much as they're blessed spiritually, and then bless them spiritually so that their physical health would come up to their spirituality. But we're likely to be turned in too much on ourselves and not care too much for lost men.

A person will get in an automobile and ride off to church and never think that somebody might come along if he would only invite him to come. Somebody may have been waiting in your office or in the shop where you work or in the store where you work. Somebody may have been waiting for months to have you invite them to church, but you felt you didn't want to intrude, so you didn't do it.

That's what you say, but actually it's because you're not too much concerned, I would say. Well, then there's a lack of generosity, a fruitful generosity. What I fear is that we shall become what they call the bourgeois, the comfortable upper middle class with all we want and all we need, and just become the church of the bourgeois, the church of the upper middle class.

Now, I think that we ought to learn to love the simplest people and that we ought to love the poor. Jesus our Lord gathered around him the poor, and I suppose they weren't always dressed as well as they might be dressed. One of the hardest things and toughest things for me to get over that I ever had said about the church in Chicago was a woman came to me one time and she said, Mr. Tozer, I think I'm going to go to another church.

And I said, why? She's a very godly woman and a very prayerful and hardworking woman. Well, she said, there's not anything wrong with the preaching or the fellowship, but she said, here's the trouble. She said, I have noticed that people who aren't dressed well don't feel comfortable coming here.

She said, there are lots of poor kids in the neighborhood that simply can't, their mother can't dress them. And if they go to Sunday school, they'll have to come pretty in a pretty shoddy condition. And she said, I am afraid that they wouldn't be welcome here.

And I don't, when I go through the neighborhood, I don't feel free to invite the people that have in good clothes. And I went to God about that, and I went to people, and I said, if this is true, this is true, it's a terrible charge against us that we should ever make any difference between those who have the gold ring and those who don't. I believe that the true Church of Jesus Christ doesn't know anything about where we live or how we live or how we travel or how we dress, but that we're Christian brethren, or our potential Christian brethren.

That's all that ought to matter. So I pray that there'll never be a moment in this Church when the poor won't be welcomed, the poorest of the poor that can't dress well is their welcome too. So I pray that we may not have, or that we may not ignore the poor or care for the least of his sheep.

I am at the present time creating an anthology of devotional verse which is going to be published as a book. And I have been looking over some of the grand old bits of verse by some of the masters, and I remember Doddridge. I don't know what the name of this hymn is, that is, I don't recall how it starts out.

But I remember he prays to the Lord this. He says, Is there a foe before whose face I fear thy cause to plead? He's asking himself the question before God. Is there a foe before whose face I fear thy cause to plead? And when he gets that settled, he says, Hast thou a lamb in all thy flock I would disdain to feed? Is there a man big enough to frighten me, or a sheep poor and ragged enough to scare me off? I pray now may be the answer to both those questions.

I pray there may be no one before whose face I fear to plead the cause of Christ. And I pray that there never be a time in my life that God will ever allow me to live to see the time when I shall be an ivory tower preacher, walking about with a waxy smile, being toted to and admired, but forgetting that I was once a ragged farm kid who couldn't speak decent English, that only by the grace of God and the infinite mercy of my Heavenly Father am I a Christian at all or known anywhere outside of the little farm area of Pennsylvania where I was born. There is the avoidance of sacrifice.

When our churches are little, the women scrub them and the men paint the doors. If they put on a new room, the fellows meet in the evening and build it. Unions don't chase them out as they did in Chicago.

And everybody goes to work, and one fellow takes on enough work to kill him. Then we get big and we distribute it around. Pretty soon we sort of adopt an easy way of life.

What a wonderful thing it is to have an easy, smooth way of life here on earth, and then to die and go to heaven at last and wear a great big crown. Well, I'm afraid it isn't as smooth as that, nor quite so neat. The human mind is surprisingly ingenious at devising ways to let the flesh take its ease in religion, surprisingly so.

Did I tell you about the time I was at a meeting of preachers in Ohio? I think maybe I might have mentioned it once briefly, but I'll tell you about it now. I was at a gathering of preachers. They met every

month, and they spent the morning in prayer, they said, and then they ate, and then in the afternoons they had a business meeting.

I don't know what business there was, but they did whatever business there was for this ministerial association. And they met in little country towns here and there, in Iraq and Ohio, throughout from Ohio. And the women of the Church, being a good many of them farm women, they knew how to fry chicken that would just melt in your mouth, so that a preacher could, on the average, eat a half a chicken after he'd spent the morning in prayer, and then look around for something for a chaser.

And that's the way they lived in that neighborhood. All these preachers would meet once a month, and boy, the chicken, you know, and the luscious candied sweet potatoes, and the great big friendly loaves of bread, and pies that everybody could have a quarter of one. And those fellows would pray in the morning, and then they'd try to have a business meeting in the afternoon, but they were frightfully drowsy.

So I was there one time as a preacher. I wasn't there as a part of the fellowship because I was from another district, but I was there as a preacher. I was supposed to preach to them and inspire them.

I guess one fellow or two began to feel a little bit conscious stricken about their overeating, gluttony. So he proposed one afternoon after we'd been over and eaten everything that wasn't mailed down in the lovely farmhouse, he proposed that we cut that big meal down to just a bite. He said, let's just have a tiny lunch, a cup of coffee, a glass of milk, and have it over and go back to the business of the Lord.

Well, they were debating it back and forth, and it began to look as though maybe this godly proposition was going to go through and the chickens were going to get off the griddle. But instead of that, one young fellow got up and he was as innocent, you know, as a lamb. He said, Mr. Chairman, I understand how this is and I see what you mean, but there's not a side to this.

He said, these dear ladies love this. They take it as a ministry to be able to make these big meals for us preachers. And he said, Mr. Chairman, if we take away that ministry from them, we're not doing right.

All in favor say aye, and they voted for the chicken. Well, you see, those boys had figured out, they didn't learn that at night, but they'd figured out a comfortable way, a comfortable way to live. Have a little salary, drive a little car, have a little parsnip, and preach a few times, a couple of times a week, and visit somebody if they're real bad off, and then spend one day a month praying and gorging and fellowshiping and telling jokes while they ate.

That was a comfortable way to live, but there wasn't any of God in it, and there wasn't any self-sacrifice in it, and there wasn't any blood in it, and there wasn't any grief in it. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We're too often men of means acquainted with gluttony.

So avoiding sacrifice. War comes, we don't do it. In our business we don't do it, but in the work of God we do it habitually.

In our everyday living reflects the world too much. Our tastes are strongly influenced by the world. Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Know ye not? If any man loved the world, the love of the Father isn't in him.

We can be orthodox in our doctrine, we can keep our emphasis on Christ as being all in all, and still break down in our attitudes toward the world. You know, brethren and sisters, I find that outside the alliance,

among the denominations, people are bothered about this. Incidentally, after all I have said, I was at two banquets last week.

I had to. I never liked them, but I was there and preached to them. I find out that some of the pastors are worried about the worldliness in their churches.

I think we ought to watch it and pray irreverently about it, preach about it, and do something about it. Lastly, our lack of spiritual desire. There is danger of lukewarmness in these last days.

Some aren't any further along than you were a year ago. Now, some are. Some are.

I've met some of you that have definitely taken a forward step in the last year, but there are some of you not any further along than you were the last year. You became convinced of your need a long while ago, but up to now you've never dared take yourself in hand and do anything about it, because the desire is not strong enough. I've said before, and I repeat it now, that I believe that the intensity of our spiritual desire will break down any hindrances, will defeat every fall.

The intensity of our spiritual desire will create a vacuum into which the Holy Ghost will rush. The intensity of our spiritual desire will make self-sacrifice to be nothing at all. The intensity of our spiritual desire will be so big and so great and so wonderful that it will drive us toward God like a bullet driven out of the muzzle of a cannon, a shell.

But it's the lack of desire. The lack of desire is the ill of all ill, said the poet. Now, what about it? Break up your foul ground, says the Holy Ghost.

What's foul ground? It's ground, I don't know what it is in Canada, but I know what it is in the States, and I think I know what it was here in this book of Isaiah. It is a ground that was fruitful and is a good ground still, but it hasn't been plowed nor used for several years, and it's been rain-hardened and sun-baked, and so it's just lying there. Nothing grows on it but a few weeds, a few briars.

Yet it's not that it's not good ground. It is good ground, but it's not producing because there's no seed being put in it, and there's no seed being put in it because it's not plowed. It takes a lot of plowing to put a field in shape.

David, with that sly sense of humor he had, but also very serious, he said, they've plowed long furrows up my back. He felt that he was down lying on his stomach, and his enemies had a plow plowing up and down on his back. It couldn't have been a very pleasant experience to have your back plowed.

David felt it. The enemies did it to David, but the Holy Ghost said here that we're to do it to ourselves. Break up your fallow ground, for it's time to seek the Lord.

You seek him till he come and rain righteousness upon you. I'll tell you why I'd like to see some progress in this church. I'd like to see some individual spiritual progress among us.

I want to see it. I pray that we may see it, and we'll see it only when we break up our fallow ground. But somebody says, what we need is to get more.

What we need is to get rid of some things. What we need is to have the plow go up and down our hearts until the hard ground has been softened. The Holy Ghost brings the harrow on and softens up the ground, and then the seed of the Lord, when it falls, produces.

There's a vast difference that comes to the life when we get, as they say nowadays, tenderized. I don't like the word, but it's all right for the occasion. When our hearts become tender, what am I going to do? Well, one thing, spare not myself.

Spare everybody else, but spare not myself. Cut away the tangle and plow deep, and keep on until he come and rain righteousness upon us. Here it's this beautiful day.

Tomorrow it'll be May, and pretty soon it'll be summer, and then the churches accept the secondary position. They're not going to do much until the frost. I don't know whether I can stand it or not, people.

I don't know. I don't know whether I can continue to pour out my soul to God in prayer and to you in my sermons if we're going to be defeatist in our attitude and take the attitude that, well, season's over now. Godliness is never out of season.

Prayer is never out of season. Self-sacrifice and hard work and tears and sweat are never out of season in the kingdom of God. The devil doesn't run his work according to season.

He runs his work constantly every minute of the hour and day and night. Year in and year out he cares not for seasons and new moons and holy days. He continues to destroy men and women everywhere.

The Church of Christ, contented and satisfied with herself, I rode in a car out from one of the churches where I was last week. A couple of men, one of them and I sure here this morning, one of them told me about his business, taking him out after night. He said, sometimes it keeps me out until after midnight, and I'm downtown after midnight.

He said, it's common to see 16 and 17-year-old girls on the street thumbing rides. Common in the city of Toronto, 16 or 17-year-olds, young kids that should have been kissed goodnight and put to bed long ago, thumbing their way. And the rapacious wolves that ride in their old cars up and down the streets are bad to take them in.

And we're comfortable and satisfied, our little flock is in, and everybody's happy. I pray God that I may never be. I pray God that I may see our Becky there on that street, and your daughter, in my mind's eye and in my vision and imagination, that I may not think, ah, she's a tramp, she's no good.

She is good. She was a little curly-haired girl not long ago, a pretty little curly-haired girl that fell asleep on her daddy's lap. Now she's out in blue jeans thumbing a ride in Toronto's downtown, two o'clock in the morning.

I pray that all this may grieve us and break us and hurt us and make us anxious and fill us with prayer and burden until our hearts are plowed up, until this business, this Christianity, becomes to us all in all everything, until there's nothing but that, until our job is nothing, and our home is nothing. God is all, and Christ is all, and the home and the job are simply gifts he allows us to have for a while. And we'll be grateful for them, we'll be thankful for them.

I thank him for everything he's given me, that he could take it all away, and I still have God. That's at the heart of Christianity. You don't have to have things to be a holy Christian.

He'll give you things, he says he knows what you need before you ask it, and he'll give them to you if you're grateful for them. But if he takes them away, you still have him, and having him you're richer than all

the millionaires of the world. So let's break up our fallow ground and continue to break it up.

Now, I'm not going to break up your fallow ground, and I don't want you to break up mine. Break up your own, and I'll break mine. Your old MacArthur, Taddy MacArthur, that witty old brother, he's gone now to heaven.

He always had something in it that nearly killed you because of the sharp humor of it, but he also had something in it that drove you to your knees because of the intense spirituality of it. Not many men can combine it, but he managed to combine them. He said that when the news came to Ezra that the people of Israel were sinning, intermarrying with the heathen and doing all sorts of things they shouldn't do, working on the Sabbath day and not attending the temple, he said when he heard about it he went down on his knees before God in sackcloth and ashes, and he plucked his beard and pulled his hair.

MacArthur said, I want you to notice that Ezra plucked his own beard and pulled his own hair. He didn't pull the hair of the congregation. I don't want to pluck your beard and pull your hair, and I wouldn't be comfortable if you tried it on me.

But shall we work on ourselves before God these days, and see if we're where we should be, and see if we're his servants capable of carrying on his work? And if it's necessary to lie in sackcloth and ashes and pluck our hair, let's do it. Oh, what this Church could be in this center, what this Church could be compared to what we are. But thank God for everything we are, with what we could be.

And I, for my part, while I'm around here, I'm not going to spare you either in prayer nor in preaching. I pray that we may have a new baptism of power and light and fire, and a new evidence of his presence. This Church may take a step forward, definitely forward, in these coming days.

Amen.

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