

Break Up Your Fallow Ground

by David Guzik

Breaking up the fallow ground requires hard work and effort to cultivate and make fruitful the ground that has been left dormant or unused.

Duration: 49:47

Scripture: Hosea 10:12, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Spiritual Renewal", "Personal Discipleship"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of breaking up the fallow ground in order to seek the Lord. He compares the people of this continent to the savages in the movie *Gladiator*, highlighting the transformation that can occur when the gospel is received. The speaker encourages the audience to sow righteousness and reap mercy, reminding them that it is time to seek the Lord. He also addresses the tendency to procrastinate and emphasizes the need for personal discipleship and training up other leaders. The sermon concludes with a reminder that God will send the rain and fulfill His promises.

Transcript

We want to hear something from your spirit and so speak to us Lord We're here with our Bibles open with our hearts ready before you speak to us tonight We ask it in Jesus name. Amen two weeks ago my wife Inga Lil and I we went up for a quick trip to Sweden to participate in a Scandinavian Calvary Chapel conference that they've been having for many years now There's only one official Calvary Chapel in church in Sweden or excuse me in Scandinavia It's in in the city of Malmö in the southern part of Sweden But there's a lot of people starting Bible studies their Bible studies right now from Calvary Chapel people going on in Finland Denmark Sweden and Stockholm In Norway all over every Scandinavian country and it's very exciting to see what the Lord's doing there This year they had Pierre come and teach and Pierre taught a great study on the day that Inga Lil and I were there but they also had Peter will from Calvary Chapel hand over teach and Peter shared from a passage of scripture from the book of Hosea And I want to share on the same passage of scripture tonight because what Peter just started the ball rolling in my mind You know how that happens and your mind just starts turning over a passage again and again and my heart's just full of it And so that's what I want to share tonight Hosea chapter 10 verse 12 And this is a familiar passage to most of you I think that for many of you this isn't going to be any new passage to scripture that you didn't know was in the Bible But I trust that God will have something fresh for you tonight from Hosea chapter 10 verse 12 Where the Prophet said to the people of Israel the people of Judah so for yourselves righteousness reap in mercy Break up your fallow ground For it is time to seek the Lord Till he

comes and rains righteousness on you Well, of course the really striking phrase in that one verse is this idea of breaking up the fallow ground And that's really what I want to focus on in tonight's teaching.

I really don't know I haven't taught this message before so I don't know how long it's going to go I trust we may even get out of here a little bit early here tonight It's really just one focus sentence here the idea of breaking up the fallow ground And so what I thought I would do is first I would just sort of give some general thoughts on the context of the passage because we should understand something of the context and then really Focus in on this idea of what it means to break up the fallow ground And then lastly, I just wanted to consider what I consider to be the most absolutely Essential but at the same time frightening word in the verse That's what we'll look at to close with so first of all just some general thoughts on the passage in its context Hosea of course is using these familiar images from the world of agriculture We all know that ancient Israel that the primary economic Structure in their society was agricultural I mean they were farmers and so very often the prophets will speak to them through the imagery of Farm work and so this is what we have.

We have the idea of sowing and reaping the idea of plowing It's all very familiar things and this isn't the first place nor the last place in the book of Hosea where he uses this kind Of imagery in this verse. He uses the idea of two things connected to a harvest sowing for your Self-righteousness and then reaping in mercy now first we understand what the message to Israel was and to us very clearly from this It's just a very plain you reap what you sow kind of statement if you want to reap mercy If you want a harvest of mercy and grace from God, then what do you have to do? You should sow righteousness? It's very simple, isn't it? It's exactly the opposite to what Israel had been doing Israel was sowing seeds of sin They were sowing seeds of unrighteousness and what were they going to reap the book of Hosea's fuller? They were about to reap judgment from God Now if they would have rather had mercy from God rather than judgment They should start sowing seeds of righteousness Immediately and if they would now sow those seeds of righteousness then at the next harvest they would reap mercy from God Instead of the judgment that was promised to come and this is all very applicable to us But I think it also speaks to us just right here in this very first sentence of this verse Sow for your self-righteousness and reap in mercy. We understand that these are really two Marks of the ministry that we endeavor to do as Calvary Chapel ministries and not that we're the only ones who have these marks on Her ministry, but we really want to have them.

We want to be marked by both righteousness and mercy You know, we we endeavor to practice righteousness and to preach it Something sorely lacking in the church today You know you get this feeling both in Europe and America, but in particular in Europe that Christians good men and women sense that the culture is slipping away that they're losing it that the church is almost lost that it's dead that they need to do something and you know very well that for many of these People what they think they have to do is soften any message against sin The pastors and preachers are terrified to speak out against basic things of righteousness and sin in today's pulpits I Trust it is not so among us. It should not be but we need to stay dedicated to that a Few weeks ago I was filling in for Pastor Nick and I was teaching through the book of Ruth and I was talking about Ruth and you know There's really actually a pretty interesting passage in Ruth where Ruth makes this midnight visit to Boaz And I had to I had to make it very clear that this was a special thing in a special Situation and we don't approve of our youth group practicing this kind of conduct And I had to make it very clear, you know Ruth and Boaz did not have sex before marriage And to say that it's simple at one of the services three young men got up and walked out when I was talking about that very thing and They they made just enough of a little demonstration when they did it to evidence. Hey, we're not going to listen to this Yeah I don't paint myself as some kind of hero for saying that I trust each

one of you Would have taught the truth in that same way But we cannot hold back for a moment from teaching these basic things of righteousness and I say this even if you wanted to do it purely from a Pragmatic point of view purely if you're concerned about being successful Then you should do it because let me tell you something the churches that are compromising on that message, you know, they're empty You know that that that young people who hear that message that's soft on sin.

They rightfully feel Insulted by it. They can read the Bible for themselves They know what biblical morality is And when we don't preach righteousness to them, they know something's wrong So listen, this should be a mark of our ministry Righteousness, but don't forget the next part. It's not only righteousness.

What's the other part mercy? You know listen the way some people would practice ministry. You would think it says so for yourself righteousness reap in legalism It doesn't say that does it? No, we so in righteousness, but we reap in mercy. We want to preach and we want to work to practice Mercy and grace and just as much as righteousness is lacking in the church.

So is true biblical mercy and grace Where we put our arm around the struggling sinner and we'll say man will stand with you in the struggle against sin We open our arms to those who want to come to Jesus and we're not legalistic. We have big open arms for people We display the mercy and the grace of God we preach grace We talk about it and not just as a theological doctrine, but as the atmosphere that we live in You know, I really believe That the atmosphere of grace. It's kind of like having good weather Before our family moved to Germany We lived in Southern California and I noticed a big difference between Southern California and and especially the Zieger land in Germany where we live Which is one of the more rainy parts of Germany People talk about the weather a lot more in Germany than they ever did in Southern, California You know who talks about the weather in Southern, California? Well another beautiful day, you know, it's warm.

It's great There's not much to talk about You just live in it and you enjoy it and honestly you don't even think that much about the weather now You move to the Zieger land Suddenly you're thinking about the weather a lot and you know what it's the left It's the same way that same principle applies to an atmosphere of grace When you live in the midst of a grace atmosphere of a grace church that kind of thing You don't think a whole lot about it. It's just the air you breathe. It's your environment.

It's the good weather that you just enjoy But you know the people who don't have it they long for it They long for it like like a Zieger Lander longs for my Orca That's that's what they want man. They they want the Sun they want the warmth. They want the good environment of grace around Well, listen, we should have it shouldn't we? Shouldn't we have that kind of atmosphere?

Shouldn't people be able to feel the grace the good weather right when they walk into our congregation That that's hopefully how it is They long for it and and really Jesus has it for him and he should have it for him at our congregations well other than that the basic context here in this passage is just simply an Exhortation to break up your fallow ground and it's a picture used a few times in the Old Testament There's a command in the book of Exodus that says that you shouldn't reap what comes up from the fallow ground But leave it for the poor Proverbs there's a proverb in Proverbs chapter 13 that talks about there being much food in the fallow ground of the poor and actually Jeremiah chapter 4 Uses this idea of the fallow ground very much in the same kind of context that Hosea does and he says break up the fallow Ground and it's not a difficult picture understand even if you've never been a farmer You can understand what fallow ground is fallow ground is uncultivated ground Especially ground that had been plowed or had

been used before But now it's been laid dormant for a year or so And so now it had been plowed it had been fruitful But now it's unused and so if you're going to plow it if you're going to use it again You've got to get the plow out there and go through it And it's more difficult than the ground that has been previously used or well worked It's just more difficult ground to work on it's not hard to understand the context But let's just start applying some of these thoughts on what it means to break up the fallow ground well first of all Fallow ground implies something it implies that there was a prior fruitfulness earlier this summer Our family went and we visited in Galil's parents who live in Sweden And it's a wonderful time for us to visit them and to see family and friends of such and on one afternoon My father-in-law and my son Jonathan and I we went out for a walk in the hills out above their home And as we were walking through this sort of forested section you could see a field That at one time had been cleared now This was in a bunch of woods and so you know that at some time probably many years ago Some farmer went through a lot of trouble to cut down all the trees to pull out all the stumps to clear the rocks To level it out to build a stone wall around it and to plant a crop there And you could tell somebody went to a lot of work to make that piece of ground fruitful But now it was dormant Now the farmer wasn't doing anything with it and just from the looks of the wall and the surroundings it looked like it had been a Long time since anything had been done with that piece of ground, but I'll tell you something It wasn't as if the ground was just bare.

There was plenty growing in the fallow ground Fallow ground is not bare. It just grows weeds and So it's fruitful of a kind but not of any kind that's useful for the kingdom of God it grows weeds and this hard unfruitful Weed-filled ground. It's a good picture of Europe's spiritual condition today But we need to remind ourselves It wasn't always that way if you want to use Hosea's picture.

This was once a cultivated and fruitful land You think about it and one of the classes I teach at the Bible College up in Zeegan as I teach church history and I love church history and talking about it and reading about it and a Year or so ago. I read a book about the the Anabaptist is a book called the believers church and they followed the progress of these sort of extra Catholic groups not part of the Catholic Church and one of the ones that they talked about Here in Europe was the Valdenzis. Have you ever heard of them? Peter Waldo or sometimes called Valdez.

He served the Lord late in the 12th century and you know how it happened for him he simply got right with God and he hired two priests to translate the New Testament into the common language and Then once he had the New Testament in the common language He started studying it for himself and teaching it to whoever would listen He preached to the common people in their common language. And of course, you know, he was attacked They called him a heretic they called him a separatist they called him a Rebel and they persecuted him. They persecuted his followers.

He didn't care He just preached and won people to Jesus and started flourishing Christian communities all over Europe especially in France and in Germany and in this central part of the European continent and as I said Of course, they were called heretics. Of course, they were persecuted, but they loved God's Word It was common for Valdenzian preachers to have memorized the entire New Testament Doesn't that embarrass us It was not uncommon for Valdenzian lay people to have memorized one or more of the four Gospels They loved God's Word and their movement Flourished in the 12th century and in centuries afterwards. This was once a fruitful land I'll give you another example, you know in the early days of the Reformation some of the most exciting and biblical work that happened Happened not by the followers of Calvin not by the followers of Luther But by the Anabaptists who of course were called heretics and they were persecuted They get an idea of how strong these movements were in one part of Germany There's one part of southern Germany in the days of the Anabaptist movement they hired 400 special police

Tauber Jaeger Baptist hunters 400 special police just to arrest and kill Anabaptists and If you think that's not enough that wasn't enough a short time later.

They hired a thousand Baptist hunters now if you have to hire a Thousand Baptist hunters that means you have a lot of people coming to Christ and getting turned on in their relationship with Jesus You get the point This was once a fruitful land Now, what was it like before those great works? Listen, you know what it was like If you'd seen that movie Gladiator and in the opening scenes, they're fighting against the Germanic peoples They're like savages right, you know, they're clothed with skins and they're you know Yelling and they're not like the civilized Romans Listen we need to remember that at one time the people of this continent compared to the civilization of Rome they were savages and Yet something changed The gospel came to them and the fallow ground was broken and a beautiful harvest of the Lord came forth Now my whole point of is this say it happened before it can happen again Look, it's easy to look at Europe today and to say this is post Christian Europe and I don't disagree with saying that Couldn't we also say that it's pre-christian Europe? That just as much as there was fallow ground before and the Lord broke it up and there was a great move of the Holy Spirit it can happen again And so that's what is implied here this term Fallow ground implies for you and I that there was once a cultivated harvest and it can happen again But something has to be done what has to be done. Look at the text. It says right there in verse 12 Break up your fallow ground Now first you have to see that that implies hard work Because the grounds hard You can just see that parched ground in front of you right it's full of weeds It's full of rocks and it's hard and you try to put the plow down on it and it doesn't sink right into the soil but you have to press with all of your might and the animal has to be strong and you have to work with toil and Sweat and splinters and scratches and you've got to work hard to plow that fallow ground It's hard work Now might I say here that it says we're commanded to break up the fallow ground not to find a better place to plow Isn't that our tendency? It's mine You know a fallow ground get away from there.

Go find an easier place to do your plowing Our tendency is to look for the easiest place to plow, but that's not what God said He said you break up the fallow ground But it's easy for us to say it's easy listen, I didn't come here to scratch the ground I came here to get a harvest Plowing the hard ground. That's not my work. I want to pick the fruit.

I want to harvest the grain We can almost think that our job is like to walk through a fruit market and just pick up the fruit off the shelves and Put it in our bag and it's all that easy But no God sent us out not just to harvest the fruit but to plow the ground And might I say we should rejoice in having been given such gloriously hard work to do. I Remember hearing an old I didn't hear it. I read it a sermon by Spurgeon and I'm not that old and And in this old sermon by Spurgeon that I read and I wish I could find I've been looking for it's because I want to Read this story again, but I remember it very vividly.

He's speaking and he's talking about this old Scotsman who was at a missions conference in Scotland, you know back in his day and how all through this missions conference You know They were trying to encourage young people to go out on the difficult and the dangerous mission field of India at the time and that's what the whole purpose of the conference to inspire young people to answer the call and to go and nobody was stepping forth and Then on the last day of the conference this craggy old Scotsman Struggled up to the platform and he said in his old voice He said I'll go to India now This man had been a missionary and he had done his service and he had retired and he had come back to Scotland just to enjoy His last days and to die, but he got up on the platform and he said I'll go to India We need to let the heathen know that there's one Scotsman who will die for their salvation And as you can imagine such a shame Such a conviction of the Holy Spirit came upon the whole group That there were dozens of young men women

who said I'll go no dear sir. You've done your service. Don't you go? I'll go.

I know the ground is difficult I know it's a dangerous job, but I will go to India and answer the call that should be our attitude We know it's hard We know it's this is fallow ground that the Lord has given us to plow But we rejoice that he's counted us worthy to go out and to do the job Now when you think about this whole thing about the hard to fallow ground, it's almost interesting how we approach it We almost find pride in saying that our ground is the hardest You notice that right? We'd like to have a little contest amongst ourselves, you know Well, no, you know you man where I am. Wow. That's the hard hard ground and Obviously whenever we think that somebody's really having blessing or success in their ministry.

We always you know their grounds easy Of course, they're having it blessed because well, you know what maybe their ground wasn't any easier Maybe they broke up the fallow ground It's very very common for us to think that some people have easy ground and we have hard ground and we begin to excuse all Sorts of things because it but you know what? I believe I believe that basically there's a common hardness for it all for us all and you know what if the ground seems Cultivated if the ground is fruitful don't think that it started out that way Somebody else plowed it Somebody else broke up the fallow ground and you may be enjoying the fruit of it But God bless you if he's given you the honor to let your plow scrape that fallow ground Other people will fall after you enjoy the fruit of your labor And I have to say that I believe that the work in front of us is still yet harder If Jesus doesn't come soon, which I pray he does come quickly Lord Jesus But if Jesus does not come soon in some years We will do more and more work in the really hard ground in the Muslim world Places like Saudi Arabia and Iran where we're going out and Working the fallow ground where there's secret churches and where people die all the time for their faith in North Korea And other places like that. Oh We'll get to the really hard ground hard ground. I was thinking of it.

I just know it's going to happen if Jesus doesn't come soon We will be having mission conference here in some years to come and we will be remembering the easy years of Europe We will We'll think oh, wasn't it great? Wasn't it easy in Twickenham? Wasn't it easy in Rome, you know, oh how wonderful, you know That was just great back then because we'll be working the really hard ground of these other places So this is this is our glorious call This implies hard work when you say fallow ground and I'll say it implies something else not only hard ground hard work It also implies resistance Because fallow ground is hard It probably doesn't want to be broken up It's hard and compact and the blade of the plow Hurts the ground as it plows through it If that fallow ground could talk it would probably cry out as it's being plowed Yet that ground is useless as ground as long as it's fallow What Dave said when he taught? Morning a couple mornings ago when he said, you know He was a little bit surprised to find out that York was not receiving them with just open arms Oh, thank you for bringing us the Word of God How wonderful it is that you're here in our community But that's how it is when you're dealing with fallow ground. It's as if the ground Pushes away the plow if it could but our job is to not let it Push away the plow one bit No, listen, I think we experience this common hardness of ground and I think we experience this difficult work of doing it and the resistance that we have to face And this means a few things. It means that the ministry of teaching is sometimes going to be resisted You understand what it means to have a ministry of teaching don't you? When you have a ministry of teaching you're teaching people things that they wouldn't normally get on their own That's why they need a teacher And you understand what it means to be a leader in the body of Christ, right? You only have to lead people to do things that they wouldn't normally do on their own You have to lead everybody to have lunch They'll do it themselves.

Oh But to make sacrifices to advance the kingdom and then sometimes we wonder well, why is my leadership resisted? Of course it's resisted That's just the nature of leadership. You're trying to get people

to do things for the glory of God Things that they would not normally do it's all part of working the fallow ground Listen, I know what I want in my flesh. It may be what you want in your flesh.

I want a wonderful Powerful ministry that touches many people and I want it as cheap and easy as I can get it It doesn't happen that way does it? So no, we have to understand that the ministry that God has given us to do it's hard work and there will be resistance How do you do it? How practically do you break up the fallow ground? You know, I think Hosea tells us look at the text again So for yourselves righteousness reap in mercy and then he says in the next part of the verse break up your fallow ground For it is time to seek the Lord. That's how you break up the fallow ground You seek the Lord. I Think this is wonderful.

Do you know understand that that means that it's something that we can all do Everyone here can seek the Lord. You don't need to have a PhD in fallow ground analysis Seek the Lord That's how you break up the fallow ground if you draw near to the Lord He'll draw near to you and he'll give you guidance along the way how to do it You know, I think a great example of this is the example of a pastor Nick long and Zegan You know when he came here many years ago starting the first Calvary Chapel here in Europe When he came here, they didn't start a Bible study or a church service for many many months And it really wasn't because they had a grand plan to do so They just felt that the Lord was telling them to pray And as I've heard Nick relay the story both to others and to me personally He says how it must have tormented poor pastor Wayne all along and I don't blame way I mean you send a guy out there to start a church and what's he did? He's just praying But you know as in retrospect you look back they were seeking the Lord and This is what the Lord was telling them to do and it wasn't wasted time It was what God wanted them to do now. I know what some people would do with that then they'd say, okay great Then we need to go out and start a church just like Nick did you know? We'll pray for X number of months before we do anything.

No. No, then you've missed the point completely What Nick did was he sought the Lord and that's what you need to do And if the Lord directs you to pray for a certain amount of time before you start a Bible study before you start a thing Then you do it. But if you seek the Lord and he tells you to start with the right way, then you do that But the key is in seeking the Lord not in following any kind of mechanical way of doing things But that's what we need to do.

We need to seek the Lord for the vision of ministry that we have We need to seek the Lord in our teaching ministry and we need to preach the Word of God Isn't that what we do when we teach from the Bible We're up there with it. Let's seek the Lord I don't want you to seek my opinion my wisdom my beautiful three-point plan for your successful life Let's seek the Lord together and that's what you do when you teach the scriptures faithfully. Oh How we need it You know There's a whole church growth industry That has very very little to do with seeking the Lord.

Oh It's got great programs fantastic speakers Great seminars that they put on for a lot of people and I suppose they raise a lot of money at those seminars at the entrance fees and all But honestly, it has very little to do with seeking the Lord. I Remember looking over one of these conferences from the church growth industry You know and the conference was going to be in Germany and I looked over the thing Very carefully the prospector the brochure that they had for it And you know, I didn't find one single mention of the Bible in the whole prospect. I found one mention of God and Not a single mention of Jesus in the entire thing Listen seek the Lord But I don't think that teaching the word is the only way that you seek the Lord When you want to break up the fallow ground, I think there's another important way That's often neglected by us in the ministry and I would say this that we also seek the Lord together with other

people as we minister to them in personal discipleship, I think there's a misconception a Misconception that you come and if you want to build a church what you really need to be is you need to be a Giant in the pulpit.

That's how you're going to build your church make yourself a Spurgeon in the pulpit and then they'll all come and listen to you. I Don't think you break up the fallow ground primarily by being a Spurgeon in the pulpit. I Think there's a misconception that you're giving great care to your people simply directly and then giving great care to personal discipleship Men women if you're not doing that in your ministry if you're not personally discipling people Pouring into them what God has poured into you.

I think you're limiting your effectiveness I think that's what you need to be doing Well, believe me, I'm not down on the pulpit ministry and it should be as strong as it can be But I see pastors sometimes who are very dedicated and they want to preach and teach the very best they can, and they put a lot of effort into it, and God bless them for doing it, but they wonder, why aren't I affecting more people? And there's just something about the fallow ground that needs more. It's almost like the plow that we use. It has two blades, doesn't it? It needs a mighty sharp pulpit, but then it needs a sharp ministry of personal discipleship.

Where you're training up other leaders, other people, imparting to them what the Lord has given to you. I think that's just another way that you seek the Lord, not only in the pulpit, but individually with other people. I think the text tells us more about this idea of breaking up the fallow ground.

It tells us when to do it. Do you see the statement in there about when to do it? It says, break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord. When is it time? It's time now.

This is the time to do it. Now, what works against doing it now is our natural tendency to procrastinate with anything that's difficult. The things that come easy, the things that are fun.

You don't have to teach your children to not procrastinate when it comes to playing video games or something like that. They're very quick to do those things. But to do the work, to do the chores around the house, man, they're ready to procrastinate on it at any moment.

Well, we need to say this is serious work to break up the fallow ground. We need to take a look at it in front of us and say now is the time to do it. I need to get started on it now.

I'm not going to think that the ground is just going to break up in front of me miraculously. God says to me, break up the fallow ground. So I need to get started on it now.

And then he tells you how long to do it for. How long do you break up the fallow ground? Verse 12, for it is time to seek the Lord till he comes and rains righteousness on you. You do it until God brings the answer from heaven, until the rain's coming down.

There's going to be a thousand things that tell you to quit. A thousand things that tell you, OK, leave the plow. The work's too hard.

The field's too big. You're not making any difference. You're sweating and straining and you forget about a harvest.

You don't even see the seeds doing anything. You don't even see a little shoot growing up. You're just plowing.

You didn't get into this to plow. You want to pick a harvest. A thousand things will tell you to quit.

But no, no. The ground has to be plowed and it has to be broken up and it needs to be plowed deep. And then it needs to be cross plowed.

We are almost always ready and wanting to stop the work short. That's the way it is for me. This is one of the big, just sort of basic flaws or problems in my life.

I'm always ready, or at least I think I am. I'm all, oh Lord, I'm ready for that. Of course I am, Lord.

Sure. Then I find out I'm a long way from ready for it. You know, when I was a boy and I did chores with my father, I was amazed at the patience that he had in getting things ready.

I remember doing a little project, you know, just like painting a fence or painting something. And how my father would spend all this time preparing the thing that was supposed to be painted. He got the paint, just put it on.

No, no, no, no. Scrape and polish and clean and all this stuff. And the thing I remember most vividly is my dad stirring the paint.

He would stir it forever. He'd sit there with the can and just it seemed like for two hours. I know it wasn't.

It was probably five minutes. But to me, it's like, you know, just wiggle it around a little bit and paint. No, no, no.

My father knew what he was doing. He would sit and he would stir and stir and stir until it was really ready. As just a boy, I didn't know when ready was, but my father did.

I think about it now when I do painting things. I'm my father. I'm sitting there stirring and stirring and stirring the paint far past logic or anything else would tell you.

But there's just something to say. No, I'm I'm going to do it until it's right. You know, this is why also I think and I wonder if somebody isn't in this situation right now.

Maybe you've said it publicly or you've just said it inside your own heart. You've said, you know what? I'm going to continue on in this work until this and this date. And if something doesn't happen by then, I'm giving up.

You know, if I don't see a harvest by this point, then I'm done. You know, I think that's a very dangerous thing. I think our text here tells you when to quit.

You quit when the Lord sends the answer from heaven. You know, it's sort of like in a war. If you announce we're pulling out the troops on this day, then what is the enemy thing? Well, fine.

We'll just wait until that date and then the troops will be gone and then we win. I wonder if Satan hasn't gotten that message from some of us. That's what you've said.

If there's no harvest by this date, I'm pulling out. This is great. I'll do whatever I can to block up the harvest until that day.

And then you'll pull out. And we'll just see if somebody else will come around to pick up the plow from where you left it. No, no, no.

We do it until God sends the answer from heaven. But our text also tells us what God must do. And what must God do? He must bring the rain.

Because we can't do it. God alone can bring that rain from heaven. Now, today, I find it curious that we usually get it backwards.

For some reason, we want God to do all the plowing. God, you make it all easy. You, you plow all the field.

I'll come and throw a few seeds and then we want God to do all the plowing. And then we'll use our artificial irrigation to bring the crop up. That's not how it worked for Hosea.

So, no, you break up the fallow ground. The ground is hard work. It resists you.

But you get down there and do it. And then you scatter the seed. You wait for the rain from heaven.

That's the only thing that's going to make your ministry real. It's the only thing that's going to make it really fruitful before God. Ancient Israel didn't have the luxury to set up their own artificial irrigation like we can do it today.

No, they had to wait for the rain or nothing could happen. They knew that the rain could only come from heaven. And isn't that what we want? We don't want a ministry that can be figured out by human hard work.

We don't want a ministry that can be figured out by human schemes and plans and the church growth industry. We need to emphasize it's got to be the rain that comes and does that. It's easy to think too highly of our work of breaking up the fallow ground.

It's like you go by one of these great cornfields that they have here and the corn's tall and it looks great. And then you see the guy with the plow and he says, I did that. What do you mean you did? You just had the plow.

You had a part in it. What about the guy who sowed the seeds and the guy who weeded it and the rain that came down from heaven? What about all of that? Well, you can think too highly of just your work of breaking up the fallow ground. All the plowing in the world doesn't matter without the rain.

You can plow, you can sow, but without the rain from heaven, nothing grows. But this brings up a thought. It's a terrible thought, isn't it? You and I have harbored this thought secretly.

Maybe not so secretly. We say, what if the rain doesn't come? You know, we would think, Lord, I'll plow really hard. I don't care how hard the ground is.

I'll do it. And I'll sow the seed and I'll wait for the rain. But Lord, if that rain never comes, I'll be so crushed by this.

I don't know if I can go on. Isn't that the secret fear we have in ministry? What if you don't send your answer from heaven? Let me answer your question with another question. Why would God set you to plow unless he intended to send the rain? Why would he move upon your heart to do your part unless he was committed to do his part? No, the rain will come.

And I would say that your very act of breaking up the fallow ground is evidence of God's intention to send the rain. That's what you've been waiting for, isn't it? Now, I'll be honest with you. You may have to wait a good deal longer.

Maybe you think that your job of breaking up the fallow ground is just about done and you're ready to put the plow into the barn. And now you're just firing up the combine to bring in the harvest. You know, there may be a lot more plowing to do.

But I will assure you, God will send the rain. We can be confident of that. He called you to go out and plow the ground.

He would have never called you to do that unless he would also promise to send the rain. Now, I have to consider what I think to be perhaps the most important and I would even say the most frightening word in this text. Maybe you've read it over three or four times just in the time we've been here.

You see, I don't see a frightening word in here. If you haven't seen the frightening word, you haven't read it closely enough. Look at it again.

Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap in mercy. Break up your fallow ground, for it's time to seek the Lord till he comes and rains righteousness on you. You see, the most frightening word in there answers the question, whose fallow ground are you supposed to break up? Yours.

This is the most difficult point of the text, because you know what I want to do? I want to break up your fallow ground. I don't want to break up mine. I don't want to even admit that I have any.

It's just like when it comes to the confession of sin. I'd much rather confess your sins than mine. It's a lot more entertaining to me.

But God doesn't tell me to confess your sins, does he? God doesn't tell me to break up your fallow ground. He tells me to break up my fallow ground. And it's very easy to do a superficial inventory of my life and to say, hey, no hard ground here.

No weeds. Lord, when are you going to get them right with you so that this work can get forward? Don't we often think that way? We look at our congregation. We look at our community and we say, oh, Lord, break up their fallow ground.

I think it has to begin with you. You have to let that plow sink very deeply into your own heart first. You need to break up your fallow ground.

As a matter of fact, let's say that God has put you in a hard place, a hard community. And I know some of you are in those hard places. I know we all are really.

If it's an easy place, it's because it was hard for somebody before us. Now, let's say you're in one of those very difficult places. I would go so far as to say that you need that fallow ground that you're working with.

God wants to use the hard ground of the place you're ministering now to be that sharp blade of the plow that cuts through the fallow ground in your heart. Let's say that you win the contest here at the conference. Hardest ground to work with.

You know, we give you the award, you know, most fallow ground. All right, Mr. and Mrs. Award winner. Why did God send you there? Why did God send you to that place with the most fallow ground? Was it because God needed the most spiritual person around to send to that most fallow ground place? And he searched the world until he found you and sent you.

The giggles say no. No. Why did God send you there? It's very simple.

There's something at that place that you need for your walk with God. Oh, no, Lord. No, no, no, no, no.

No, Lord. They need me. Right.

They giant of spirituality. Right. No, no, no, no.

They do need you in a sense. I don't doubt that. But God also sent you there because he loves you and you need that difficult place.

There is some hard ground to break in you that that place is going to do. There's some death to self that you're going to die there and you need it. In fact.

You ask for it. No, no, I never asked for this. And you may protest this.

No, Lord, I never, never did. There was a time in your life, right? There was a time in your walk with God when you said, Lord, I surrender everything. Lord, whatever it takes, do your work in me.

Didn't you say that? Didn't you pray that at one time? And then God says, all right. I know where I have to send you to break up your fallow ground. Now, you thought that this whole business of fallow ground was just about the place where you were serving.

And about the work that you had to do to plow. And it is. But you see why this is the most frightening word in the text.

Break up your fallow ground. God is now answering the prayer that you made before. And that's why it's difficult.

That's why it feels like a plow is running through your heart. Because he's breaking up the fallow ground. And so you rejoice in it.

You say, thank the Lord for it. And you say, Lord. Continue that work until you come.

So for yourselves, righteousness. Reap in mercy. Break up your fallow ground.

For it is time to seek the Lord till he comes and rains righteousness on you. Let's pray. Rain your righteousness upon us, Lord.

But Lord, we don't want that rain from heaven to be wasted. We think of rain falling upon the fallow ground. And Lord, it doesn't do anything except grow weeds.

So Lord, for each one of us. Take away the veil. Shine the light of your Holy Spirit upon our blind spots.

The things that we were so sure of, Lord. And show us the fallow ground that you want to. That we want you to break up in our life, Lord.

Father, even as that plow cuts through our heart. We thank you for it. You're answering our prayer.

And we trust, we know, Lord, that you're doing it in the most loving way possible. Father, we pray for these places that you put us to minister. Many of them are hard, Lord.

It's hard ground. But we rededicate ourselves, Lord, to the work of breaking up the fallow ground there. Give us courage, Lord, to do it.

And Lord, as we give ourselves to that work. Help our hearts to be more soft. More plowed through.

More fruitful. In our own relationship with you. That's our prayer tonight, Lord.

In Jesus name. Amen.

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