

## The Responsibility of Reaping

by Evangelist John R. Van Gelderen

Occasionally the prophet Jeremiah is cited as an example of one who was faithful but saw no fruit. The conclusion made from this is that as children of God we simply need to be faithful even if we do not see a harvest of souls. While it is commendable to emphasize faithfulness, to use it as a subtle guise to excuse fruitlessness is not biblically accurate. Jeremiah received from God a promise that his hearers would not respond positively to his message. Twice in chapter one, where Jeremiah received his call and mission, God admonishes him, saying, “Be not afraid of their faces” (Jeremiah 1:8, 17). This clearly implies a negative response among his hearers. Without going into great detail, the point is that Jeremiah and some other Old Testament prophets were at times given a promise of negative response to their message.

We, however, live in the New Testament age. This is the age of grace or Spirit-enablement. We, too, have been given a promise regarding our message from God. But our promise makes clear that some of our hearers will respond positively to the gospel message. One such promise is Matthew 9:37 where Jesus claims, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth labourers into His harvest.” Clearly we are to labor in the fields, but Jesus here is not just admonishing us to faithfulness in His work. He promises *the harvest truly is plenteous*. This soundly implies reaping. Beyond that, Jesus speaks of *labourers into His harvest*. He does not merely speak of labourers in His field but His *harvest!* It is not just laboring or going to preach the gospel that is involved in obedience. The promise indicates we should reap as well! While it is true that not every hearer responds rightly to the gospel, and sometimes we are only sowing the seed of God’s Word or perhaps “watering,” it is also true that, according to Christ’s words, we should be regularly reaping. Therefore, **not reaping reveals unbelief**. Some may wonder if this is a fair statement. So let’s look unto Jesus to see that He not only teaches us to sow in fulfilling the Great Commission, He also promises repeatedly that we will reap. We will consider three major concepts to aid our understanding.

### The Promises of Reaping

Our opening text says *The harvest truly is plenteous*. This is the promise of the harvest! Luke 10:2 records similar words on a different occasion, “The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He would send forth labourers into His harvest.” Again notice the promise of the harvest—*The harvest truly is great!* Also the burden again is for *labourers*, not just in His field, but His *harvest*. Certainly

there is a need for faithfulness in laboring. In fact, we are commanded to pray for *labourers*. But there is also a promise of reaping! Therefore, not reaping reveals unbelief. A third similar promise is given earlier in Christ's ministry recorded in John 4:35, "Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest." Notice, not will be, *they are!*

In Luke 5:4 Jesus says, "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets *for a draught*." Notice the promise of the catch—for a draught! This is defined two verses later as "a great multitude of fishes"! Jesus applies this physical illustration to spiritual responsibility. For in Luke 5:10 He says "from henceforth thou shalt catch men."

Matthew 12:21, referring to Christ, promises "And in His name shall the Gentiles trust." A similar promise is given under inspiration by the Apostle Paul in Acts 28: 28, "The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it." Notice the powerful promise—*they will hear it!* These two promises speak clearly of a harvest among the nations (Gentiles) during the age of grace.

The Lord Jesus boldly explains in Matthew 16:18, "I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". What a mighty promise! With such marvelous promises of reaping, why do so many children of God live such barren and fruitless lives? God's will is revealed in His promises, but man does not enter into God's will unless he accesses that will by faith. Therefore, we will now consider a second major concept.

## **The Practice of Faith**

When faith is practiced, the promises are accessed. The problem is not a lack of foundation for faith in this matter of reaping. The problem is unbelief in the promises we have been given.

### The Problem of Unbelief

Based on the clear promises, most of which are given directly by the Savior of the world, within the sphere of your life there are people ready to be reaped right now! I did not say it—but Jesus did! *The Lord of the harvest* is constantly preparing the harvest. However, God gives the body of Christ the responsibility of reaping. Is this not a sobering responsibility? Yet Christ gives us the promise of the harvest. Is this not an encouragement to faith? *The harvest truly is plenteous and great! The fields ... are white, not will be, they are* right now ready to be harvested!

Now here's what some today tend to say, "I know the fields are white in some other places, but not here. This is cold, formal New England." Or "This

is the burned out Bible Belt." Or "This is the unchurched West." Or "This is free-spirit California." Or "This country has suffocated under the domination of such and such a religion for centuries." Therefore, the conclusion is made, "Other areas may be ripe for reaping, but not this one." If we are honest about it, most of us have made statements like this along life's way. Yet in light of the promises, is this not blatant unbelief?

All of these scenarios have an element of truth in them. There are negative influences. This should not surprise us. "The god of this world" seeks to blind people "lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ . . . should shine unto them" (II Corinthians 4:4). However, do the negative influences negate the promises? Absolutely not! If you focus on the negative influences, you will continue in unbelief and experience defeat. But if you will switch focus to the promises, you can proceed in faith and experience victory. We may say, "The harvest is bad." But Jesus said, *The harvest truly is great*. The problem is not with the harvest, but rather with the labourers.

Sadly for many, they simply do not labour at all in the gospel. This is defiance and disobedience regardless of the pious guise of excuse given. Others may labour in the gospel, but they do it in the power of man. This is not disbelief which denies the Word of God; this is unbelief which does not depend on the Word of God. The labourers must labor in faith remembering that faith depends on the reality of the words of God, though yet unseen. The reality is *the fields are white*. Within the sphere of your life there are people ripe for the reaping. You may wonder why, if that really is the case, you do not "see" the white harvest. The reason is that "we walk by faith, not by sight" (II Corinthians 5:7). If you saw it all to begin with, it would be sight and not faith. Faith depends on the reality of what you cannot see because God says so! *The fields are white* not because you can always initially see it, but because Jesus promised it. As you open your mouth in God-dependence to declare the gospel, then you will find out where God is working.

*The Lord of the harvest* constantly prepares *His harvest*. In other words, the Spirit of God constantly prepares the *harvest*. But the harvest does not get harvested without the cooperation of labourers. For example, before a "prepared" Cornelius could get saved (Acts 10:1-8), a cooperating *labourer* named Peter who was Spirit-led, Spirit-dependent, and Spirit-empowered, had to preach the gospel and thus "harvest" Cornelius (Acts 10:9-48). God is preparing "Cornelius" all around us. Are we cooperating as *labourers* in God's *harvest*?

### **The Solution of Faith**

Jesus commands in John 15:4, "Abide in Me, and I in you." He then

promises in the next verse, "He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit." Abiding is the key to *much fruit*. Abiding is the life of faith. Abiding is God-dependence, for Jesus continues in the very next statement with "for without Me ye can do nothing." Therefore, you abide in Christ by depending on Christ. He then promises to abide in you by enabling you. For He *can do* everything. Christ is simply looking for those who will abide in Him (God-dependence) so that He, in turn, will abide in them (Spirit-enablement) so that they bear *much fruit*. The promise of *much fruit* is conditional. The condition is abiding in Christ. *Without Me* reveals man's self-dependence which leads to the barrenness of *ye can do nothing*. *With ... Me* reveals God-dependence, which leads to the bearing of much fruit. If we are not bearing *much fruit*, it is not that there is a lack of potential harvest. It is that there is a lack of abiding, which is a lack of faith. Not reaping reveals unbelief.

Faith is not simply saying, "I believe God can bless the gospel." By itself this is merely acknowledging God's ability. Faith is actually depending on God to bless the gospel as you open your mouth to declare it. The dependence is for the step of obedience. You do not have God-dependence for the step of obedience without taking the step. "Faith without works [the step] is dead" (James 2:26). Therefore, you do not have God-dependence for witnessing without witnessing. You can witness without depending on God's power. This is the futility of the flesh. But you do not have God-dependence for declaring the gospel without declaring the gospel. This is the practice of faith. Jesus says *let down your nets for a draught*. You do not receive the *draught* without first *let[ting] down your nets*. You do not *catch* souls without confronting people with the nets of the gospel. Faith lets down the nets of the gospel, knowing that Jesus promised a catch.

What a difference it makes when you get on the position of faith regarding the promise of the catch or harvest. Instead of knocking on a door and, when no one answers, thinking, "Am I ever glad no one was home!" you can knock on a door with anticipation, wondering, "Is this going to be my divine appointment?" If it is not, fine – you can move on to where God is working because you know there is a prepared harvest somewhere. By "divine appointment" we mean a God-led conversation where God's hand is manifested and God's truth is vindicated. Not everyone will be an actual salvation. Sometimes it will be a key step of conviction toward one's salvation.

When one depends on the reality of the promise of the harvest, more souls are harvested. I know of one assistant pastor who bore very little fruit. But when he grabbed a hold of the promise of the harvest he began to bear much fruit. For the last several years he has averaged seeing at least one soul saved per week. I know of a missionary who went from little fruit to

much fruit when he laid hold of the promise of the harvest. I know of a deacon in Asia who went from no fruit – though saved for years – to seeing 200 people saved in one year because he began to depend on Christ's promises. O that we would internalize the responsibility of reaping! The promises are there, and the power of the Spirit is available to those who will abide in Christ.

Abiding in Christ is depending on the reality of the words of God, for Christ is the Word. Who will lay hold of Christ's promises? The fields are white. *The harvest truly is plenteous. The harvest truly is great. Let down your nets for a draught.* If these realities are not manifested in the life of a child of God, the problem is unbelief. If Jesus meant what He said, then not reaping reveals unbelief. Someone may object, saying men like Adoniram Judson were faithful for years before ever seeing the first convert. However, a closer look into Judson's own admissions reveals wrong motives and having to be schooled to true faith.

Now this is not to say that there is never a test of faith. James 1:2-4 teaches there will be trials that test true faith. However, this is to say that enduring faith, which keeps believing against all human odds, triumphs. Hebrews 10:36 says, "For ye have need of patience [a compound word combining the concepts of 'endurance' with 'abiding/dependence'] that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise." True faith is not just faithfulness in duties; true faith is enduring dependence [*patience*] which will *receive the promise*. Hebrews 6:12 states, "That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience [enduring abiding] inherit the promises."

Faithfulness is misunderstood today by many, as if it merely means regularity of duties. However, unsaved people can attain to this if this is the standard. Faithfulness goes beyond being devout in duty to being full of faith so that these duties are fulfilled in the power of God. Faithfulness without faith is a misnomer. To say as some, "Well, we sure don't see many people saved, but we sure are faithful!" is misleading. True faith accesses the promises of reaping. There may be trials and tests but true faith triumphs, or God's Word is not true.

For most, the reason for a lack of reaping is a lack of faith regarding the promise of the harvest. Yet there are those who seem to be applying the basics regarding faith, but still appear quite fruitless. When this is the case, the need is to go beyond the basics in faith to faith for spiritual warfare. The god of this world seeks to keep people in darkness. There are places like Pergamos, the location of one of the seven churches of Revelation, that is described as "where Satan's seat is" (Revelation 2:13). Satan does have strongholds which he does not nonchalantly abandon. Does not Ephesians

6:12 explain "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood"? The real battle is in the spiritual realm. We do *wrestle* according to Ephesians 6:12 "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness, against spiritual [hosts of] wickedness in high places." Spiritual warfare is warred only on our knees. We must claim our position of victory with Christ over Satan by pleading the promises of Christ's victory. "The prince of this world is judged" (John 16:8), "cast out" (John 12:31-32), his head is bruised (Genesis 3:15), and he is disarmed (Colossians 3:15). Therefore, Satan's present power is by deceit (John 8:44). But I John 3:8 says, "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested that He might destroy the works of the devil." By bringing the promises of Christ's already won victory to the throne in believing prayer, God then is ready to "bind the strong man" and enable us to "spoil his house" (Matthew 12:28-29). O how we need intercessors on the position of faith for victory over the world and the flesh, who also know how to war against Satan! But notice through faith we can *spoil his house*. Again we see the responsibility of reaping. This leads us to one final major concept.

### **The Priority of Motives**

Revelation 4:11 states, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things and for Thy pleasure they are and were created." Why were *all things* created? *For* [God's] *pleasure*. We are to please the Lord. Is this your primary motive for all you do?

Because we were created to please God, we are to give Him *glory and honour and power*. I Corinthians 10:31 commands, "Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to *the glory of God*." Much emphasis today is being made on evangelism being to the glory of God. In proper perspective, this is good. For if, one's primary motive is "success" in evangelism, then why not use questionable or worldly methods as long as one is achieving a good end? This is, of course, the fallacious thinking of "the end justifies the means." So the motive of God's glory must precede the motive of "success." However, the danger is an imbalanced emphasis on evangelism to the glory of God that releases one from a legitimate burden for the salvation of lost souls.

I Timothy 1:15 claims "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save sinners*." In bringing glory to the Father, Christ's object was to save sinners. Therefore, if we do not desire to see sinners saved, we reveal the sad fact that we are not living the "not I, but Christ" life (Galatians 2:20). To say you have the motive of glorifying God when you lack the secondary motive of the salvation of the lost is contradictory. Jesus clarifies in John 15:8, "Herein is

my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." Notice He did not say, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye just be faithful even if you're not fruitful." Rather, Christ boldly claims that the Father is *glorified* when we *bear much fruit!* Again we see the responsibility of reaping.

## **Conclusion**

Having emphasized the responsibility of reaping let me clarify that not every location will see the same "numbers". Rural settings may vary from city settings. Strongholds of Satan will have to be dealt with through biblical spiritual warfare. This may take more time. Also some believers may have "five talent" giftings, while others may have "two talent" giftings. These and other factors may enter in. But to never reap in the age of the promise of the harvest is a problem.

In the matter of soul winning, perhaps some are sincere, but unbelieving. Others may be lazy. Sadly, some are resorting to contemporary style church methods to have the semblance of "success." Some are embracing strict Calvinism, which can be a conscience soother to a defeated worker. Fatalism in the name of the sovereignty of God can be a welcome relief to a "faithful" but fruitless worker. When will the church of Jesus Christ awaken to the promise of their Lord and the power of His sent Spirit? We all must own our responsibility of reaping.

Not reaping reveals unbelief. However, reaping occurs as we access the promises by faith. Faith exercised and the ensuing promises realized both please and glorify the Lord.

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