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"Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you." Hosea 10:12

The solemn responsibility of speaking in God's great name increases, and I believe there are those here who feel the responsibility of hearing the word increases. If there is a responsibility in the pulpit there must be a proportionate responsibility felt in the pew, and a minister is required to declare the whole Gospel of God, not a part of it. And we feel that the people before whom we stand from time to time is like a farmer, the farmer has to deal with different parts of the year, different crops, the ground needs different attention, and therefore it becomes us not only to speak words of comfort to those that mourn, words of instruction to guide those in the pathway in the wilderness, words of warning to the careless. So with respect to the text, in fact the whole book of Hosea is remarkable instruction on two things mainly, and that is the ingratitude and idolatry and unbelief of His people, and His goodness, His faithfulness, His love.

Really the book of Hosea speaks of Ephraim, representing His people in their backslidings. I should think that there is nobody here that would deny that the people of God can backslide. I could not deny it, it would deny my own sad experience. But there is a word in Jeremiah that you are well acquainted with: "Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still." (Jeremiah 31:20) And perhaps some of you in reading this book of Hosea, you can see your backslidings described. Many things are spoken against Ephraim. One was: "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone." (ch.4:17) He will be sick of his idols, let him go, let him alone. It is a very solemn thing for the Lord to let His people alone. He will not for good, but He lets them go a long way, and makes them sick in smiting them.

Another thing said concerning Ephraim: "Ephraim, he hath mixed himself among the people" – become worldly minded, mixed with the people. "Ephraim is a cake not turned" – burnt to a cinder on one side, raw the other. "Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not" – he is unconscious of his state. Backsliding is not all at once, my friends, it goes on without notice. "Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not: yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth it not." (ch.7:8,9) Decay has set in, he is unconscious of it. Well, are you clear from it? But look at this text, a kind word: "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you."

So the first thing evidently in this text is to break up the fallow ground, it is no use sowing seed unless the ground is prepared. But what is fallow ground? Fallow ground is neglected ground, uncultivated ground. And speaking of it as backsliders, for that is what I consider this Book sets forth, it is not barren ground, it is not sand, the ground is fertile, and indeed if you leave some of the best and richest ground alone it grows weeds faster than a barren ground. "Break up your fallow ground." It is very solemn that the Lord's people can get into such a condition. But there are two chapters that describe this: one is the 32nd Isaiah and the other is the 80th Psalm. If you read both these portions you will see the cause of barrenness. Unfruitfulness, unprofitableness in the 32nd Isaiah is a very solemn cause of this decay.

"Rise up, ye women that are at ease; hear my voice, ye careless daughters; give ear unto my speech. Many days and years shall ye be troubled, ye careless women: for the vintage shall fail, the gathering shall not come." (Isaiah 32:9,10) So you see the cause of the gradual decay was in the first place

they were at ease, carnal ease, and that brought on carelessness. "Ye women that are at ease; hear my voice, ye careless daughters; give ear unto my speech." That that condition can come upon one who has grace is surprising, but some of you know it sadly in your own experience.

Then you know in the 80th Psalm, how that the boar out of the wood had desolated the things and brought desolation and barrenness. But the mercy of it is that faith reigns. "Why hast thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it." (v.12,13) But here, in this text is a gracious instruction to those who have been awakened to their bad condition of soul, and what a mercy it is! The first test for a recovery, for a spiritual reviving, is a renewed sense of what you have lost, that our iniquities like the wind have carried us away. O this fallow ground! And yet there will be a keeping up of an external religion, there will still be an attendance upon the means of grace, the services, you will still continue your formal prayers. But it is an inward decay, uncultivated heart, and the Lord takes notice of it in His mercy, and in taking notice of it He sends this message: "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground," and I believe the first thing will be conviction of sin. You will be awakened and sickened with a sense of what a formality you have degraded to, stagnation of soul, and you will realise it as you gradually awaken to your condition, your stagnant prayers, there will be mildew. And what a mercy! I have thought sometimes it is amazing that in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple, he anticipates different cases that will come to that Temple and pray toward that holy place. But among the many cases there was this: "...if there is blasting, or mildew, or caterpillar..." (2 Chronicles 6:28) O, I have thought how the goodness of God can recognise such a case as that, and I have pleaded it. And this comes to the uncultivated, fallow ground, which is brought about by ease. The flesh is always looking after a little ease; we cannot be so particular, we want a little relaxation, that is the flesh, relaxation from God, going away from God to get a holiday, something to remove the influence of what the flesh calls an intolerable restraint. And so we begin to go, to slip, and the devil will rock us to sleep. There is no harm in just this or just that, and you will find that your prayers begin to get very misty, very mildewed, your heart very hard, reading the Scriptures is a bore, a burden, and as for spiritual conversation, why it seems as though you can speak about any topic and feel an interest in anything but those things that are vital.

Fallow ground. "Break up your fallow ground," and O this is a kind word. If we are led into it, you will see the mercy and love of God in this text. He does not deal so with empty professors, they do not feel their need of it, they have never been brought to realise their fallow ground, they can sing their sorrows away, read away their darkness if they have got any, a pleasant Sunday afternoon will do away with a lot of their misery. When the Lord deals with a poor sinner He deals with him for eternity, not for time. Religion then is not just a social affair.

"Break up your fallow ground." But the Lord breaks it up, blessed be His name, we cannot. Can you break a hard heart? It is the beginning of better things when you feel it. If you feel a hard heart, if you are sick of formality and mere custom, and long for something fresh, for the dew of heaven, to feel the influence of the Holy Spirit once more in your soul.

But the Lord will break it up, break it up by His judgements. When the Lord sends a north wind: "Awake O north wind," and freezes a poor sinner, when He begins to dig, by His Spirit, conviction of sin in the heart afresh, when He sends the alarm through the corridors of the soul, when He brings one to feel and see where they would be if they were left alone, brings them into darkness, a darkness that can be felt, then there is an awakening, there is an alarm, there is a searching of the heart. Have you ever been afraid when you have thus had discovered to you the condition of your soul, whether you will prove to be a cast-away at last? Because when you are in that condition you can not see signs, there is no communication with the Lord, no fellowship with His people, all your

religion is external and formal. And when that is the case the interests of the world become nearer to you. There are some lawful things that the Lord has given us to enjoy, but when we are far from Him the world is near to us, and then it is that we are carried away even by lawful things. And you know, my friends, that will spoil them. If we are not brought away from that inordinate affection to the things of this life, it will even spoil those pleasures, for what the Lord gives us to enjoy, they are sanctified by the Word of God and by prayer. And O what a relief it is to find this ground broken up! He uses chastenings and judgements, calamities, disappointments, and He sometimes uses the ministry, a faithful minister, to break up the fallow ground.

"Break up your fallow ground...sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy." Here is a gracious direction: "Sow to yourselves." Well, when a farmer sows he does sow to himself, he expects and hopes to have a harvest; so those who sow in righteousness, to sow to ourselves in righteousness is to sow to the Spirit. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." (Galatians 6:7,8) Faithful word, and it is clear and plain; our nature does sow to the flesh, the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye, the pride of life. Naturally we live to ourselves. A natural man's object is himself; he is his own end, a poor affair. You look at it, those of you who are enlightened, those of you who know yourselves by divine teaching. It is a great thing to know ourselves. If you are your own end, your own object, live for yourself, well, when you come to the end, the end of yourself, you will come to the end of your portion. But Paul says to the Romans: "None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself." (Romans 14:7) And that is true, for we have an influence while we live either for good or evil upon everybody with whom we come into contact and associate with. You cannot go through this world without an influence, you cannot be a member of a church without an influence, you cannot live in a home without an influence. O but what a mercy if the Lord Jesus is the Object of our faith and we live unto Him. I wish I could, I would if I could, but "When I would do good evil is present with me." (Romans 7:21) And we should be truly happy if we could do everything as unto Him, eat and drink as unto the Lord, go out and come in as unto the Lord, speak and keep silent as unto the Lord. If you could, you would find true blessedness and happiness in it.

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness." This sowing really is internal and external godliness. That is what it is: godliness. What a word that is! It seems impossible that it can ever belong to a sinner. But it can, and the first step in godliness is to be born again. And when one is born again, they will begin to sow, sow unto the Spirit, live unto the Spirit, they are looking for a different harvest. Very solemn was that parable where we read of the wheat and tares. I do not understand the first thing about farming, but I have understood that when wheat and tares first spring up out of the ground, it is difficult to tell which is which; and the disciples asked the Lord whether they should gather out the tares. A very solemn answer, "Nay; let them both grow together until the harvest, lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them." (Matthew 13:29,30) We need these things to be applied to us, and it is by the application of these solemn truths that our fallow ground is broken up. "It is high time to awake out of sleep." So that this is in righteousness.

The whole of godliness, first internal godliness, and consequently, resulting from that is external godliness, and all the fear of God, and the influence of the Spirit in action, is this sowing. Every spiritual thought, every spiritual prayer, and I might say every spiritual groan and sigh is a seed. When we come to look at what seeds there are in a seed basket, look how innumerable they are as they are scattered, and look at our innumerable thoughts, then look at the thoughts of our nature, of an ungodly man, innumerable thoughts, every thought and every action, every desire and every imagination, are seeds. What a mercy it is then to have a new heart out of which proceeds nothing but what is spiritual and living. "Sow to yourselves in righteousness," and this sowing will be brought forth under different conditions, as for instance, there will be a sowing in conviction of sin –

repentance – that is a blessed sowing, it is the Spirit's work in the heart. Repentance is the gift of God. The Lord Jesus is "exalted...to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." (Acts 5:31) O this sowing is mainly at the throne of grace; you sow unto yourself there, and what you sow there by the Spirit you will have a harvest, my friend. You will have a harvest, you will reap in mercy.

Well, we need to pause and just ask ourselves an honest question. I like asking questions. How are we sowing? If what I have said is true, every thought and imagination, every desire, every look, every movement is sowing. What have we sown? Our nature sows. What are we to do with the harvest? Look at the seeds we have sown with sin – what are we to do with them? My friends, if the seeds of our sinful life, of our body of sin and death, are brought forth to a harvest, how could we die? There is only one way by which that harvest can be prevented: "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins." (Isaiah 44:22) But the Lord regards His Holy Spirit's work in His people's hearts.

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness." So that sowing will be the exercise of faith under conviction of sin. O the depths of this sowing at times! Conviction is a mercy. Conviction of sin, when it is by the Spirit, will penetrate to the very core of the heart; it is nothing superficial. And repentance is of the same nature as conviction, if your conviction is of the Holy Spirit, your repentance will be as deep as your conviction, and this will be sowing. O how many of you in this particular point have been sowing to yourselves in righteousness, in conviction of your sins, at the throne of grace?

Then there will be a sowing in desires. "Lord, all my desire," said David, "is before Thee." (Psalm 38:9) And if you have a spiritual heart, that heart is full of spiritual seed and spiritual aspirations and desires. O how good it is at times to feel, and sometimes unaccountably, and suddenly there comes upon your spirit such an uprising of desire toward the Lord. You may be walking down the street, and unexpectedly such a sense of desire goes up to heaven. I believe I remember that once, in walking down a street in Tunbridge Wells, not thinking of those things at all, when suddenly there came into my heart the last three words of the 68th Psalm: "Blessed be God." I could see Him in everything, and it seemed to draw my very soul in desire unto Him. It is a sowing of seed.

But then this sowing goes on in the midst of the changing circumstances of life. O how some have sown in deep affliction! I believe we have had the favour of seeing this in our afflicted friends. O what sowings at the throne of grace, as the poor body weakens and fulfils that gracious word: "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day." (2 Corinthians 4:16) And it gives us the reason: "While we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things which are not seen. (v.18) And when faith sees things that are unseen, and the poor body is in decay, O the sowings there are in desire, vehement longings homeward, toward heaven! Then it is that faith is strengthened to declare: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee." (Psalm 73:25)

Ah my friends, if our fallow ground is broken up, and we are brought to sow to ourselves in righteousness, we shall reap in mercy, sweet mercy, and we shall reap in mercy here. Of course, the fulness of the reaping is in heaven, that is where the fulness of the harvest will be. These seeds which are sown, really will be brought forth in heaven, but we do reap mercy here. The mercy is this, the Lord's return. Ah it is no small mercy, when we have been to the ends of the earth, when your iniquities have carried you away from peace to conflict, from light to darkness, from life unto death, it is no small mercy when the Lord turns again, causes His face to shine, brings you near to Himself, restores unto you the joy of salvation. You reap in mercy, and you are thankful there is mercy. O my friends, we are brought to agree and thankfully acquiesce that salvation is all of grace, not merited at all, - it would spoil it. Perhaps some of you will understand if I make a peculiar

remark, but I feel that I should spoil everything if I could contribute anything toward the grace of God or toward His mercy. Everything that we could put to it would mar it, would detract from it. O how precious it does make the Lord Jesus!

"Sow to yourselves" in inward godliness. Sometimes you will sow to yourself as you lie on your bed at night, you may sow to yourself in mourning, sow to yourself in conviction, sow to yourself of a night, as you pour out your heart unto the Lord, and make known to Him your worst condition, and ask Him to come for His love's sake, and to purge out everything that is defiling, and take out everything that is offensive to Him. It is a sowing, and you will reap, you will reap in answer to prayer – and that is a mercy – reap in mercy, reap answers to your prayers. Then to come back again to those who have passed through tribulation, weakness, infirmities and afflictions: have you not known what it is to sow in prayer in the midst of tribulation? You take those in the 84th Psalm, those pilgrims. "They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God. Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well" – the valley of sorrow, the valley of tears – they make it a well. (Psalm 84:6,5) Now this is a point here: they sow, they dig a well in the midst of their sorrows, in the midst of their afflictions, in the midst of all their fears, they dig a well, faith digs a well by prayer. O those sowings in affliction! And have not some of you known what it is to have reaped mercy, answers to prayer as you pass through tribulation, adversities, trials, disappointments, calamities? O this godliness is profitable for the things of this life, that is profitable for the exercise of faith and for grace, profitable too, to the soul, the establishment of the soul, profitable for the life that now is and for that which is to come.

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your a fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord." It is the same word really as in the Romans: "It is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." (Romans 13:11) And this is a kind awakening, for the Lord to come to His people and say, 'Now you are old your salvation is nearer than when you first believed, therefore it is high time to awake out of sleep. You are dreaming, you are dreaming in this world, your ground is fallow, it is high time to awake, for "It is time to seek the Lord.'" It is kind of Him to allow backsliders to seek Him at all. You will feel this, especially if with Asaph you have feared: "Is His mercy clean gone for ever? Doth His promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath He in anger shut up His tender mercies?" (Psalm 77:8,9) O you will esteem it a favour for the Lord to allow you to seek Him again. His mercy endures for ever; that is why it is, and it is because of the covenant of grace, for He says of Ephraim later: "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within Me, My repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of Mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim." Why not? "For I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city." (Hosea 11:8,9) "For it is time to seek the Lord," to seek His favour, to seek His strength, to seek His forgiveness, and to seek Him, "till He come and rain righteousness upon you." A continuing in prayer and watching unto the same with thanksgiving.

Now you look at the last clause, in fact the whole text – the mercy that there is to a backsliding sinner: "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord till He come and rain righteousness upon you", and that may be in answer to that prayer in Isaiah, I believe I had a touch of that some long time ago, but you look at it, "It is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you." And when you are brought to that deep need and desire, you will pray this prayer: "Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together; I the Lord have created it." (Isaiah 45:8)

O then, look at the mercy of this text! May the Lord enable us to walk according to it, and fulfil this most gracious promise: "Drop down, ye heavens, from above." There is nothing on the earth that you want. Have you not known what it is to be wearied of earth, yourself and sin, and to look up, and for faith to believe there is in heaven an exalted and ascended Redeemer, that He came down to accomplish salvation, and He has gone to heaven, and all the merit of His Person, and all the authority of His finished work, and everything is in heaven that a poor sinner can need to take him there, and make him fit to be there, and so faith goes out: "Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness."

"It is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you."

Amen.