

Mission Emphasis Month Bible Study –

Week One September 2024

Focus Text: Matthew 13:1-9

PURSUING INTEGRITY: SOWING DESPITE OUR REALITY

‘Pursuing Integrity’ is the third of our five sub-themes under our Decadal Theme (2020-2030), ‘Keeping Faith with the Word in an Ever-Changing World’. This theme is believed by many to be timely, in a world where there are ongoing new faith claims, growing acceptance of relativism, crisis of identity and integrity, questioning of the mystery, and seemingly lessening of the presence of compassion and modesty of character. Some of the emphases of this decadal theme may be seen as:

- We live in an ever-changing World
- Christians are to remain faithful to the Word
- The reality of the world should be guided by the Word

All of the sub-themes are intended to help us in giving greater focus to contemporary theological and ethical Issues, all of which have implications for ministry and mission in the ever changing world in which we live. Pursuing Integrity is essentially about that to which there should be loyalty for greater good. The truth is that every person in life will always be loyal to something, and those who are the children of God should be loyal to the Word of God. This loyalty should become our moral compass that guides our decision making as we consider the facts and attempt to apply sound reasoning. In pursuing integrity, we are talking about a daily and lifetime commitment to being guided by the Word in decision making concerning what we say and do as we live out our lives under the sun.

The absence of a moral compass, and thus moral convictions, is a by-product of postmodernism and globalization, among other things, and this absence is seen in the ways in which moral absolutes have

been supplanted more and more by moral relativism. This is evident in all spheres of life, including human relationships, and amoral living has become a common feature in life. We are seeing as common place a lack of common internalized values and virtues to guide ethical decision making and behaviour. Among the frightening consequences of this reality is the extent to which life is calculated and lived, guided by that which is popular, and driven by digitization and data. Let it be emphasized that the absence of a moral compass precedes the absence of moral convictions. **The church is thus challenged to pursue integrity in addressing growing contextual amoral realities in the light of the Word, with a particular emphasis on the moral content of human beliefs and behaviour.**

‘Integrity’ is commonly mentioned in the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, especially, Psalms and Proverbs, for example, Psalms 7:8; 25:21; 26:1 & 11; 41:12; 78:72; and Proverbs 19:1; 20:7. Among other Old Testament mentioned are Genesis 20:5 & 6; and 1 Kings 9:4. Let us also consider some of the references in the New Testament which are interpreted as referring to pursuing integrity: Mathew 6:1-18; Ephesians 5:1-5; Galatians 2:17-20 & 5:13-26; Romans 6:1-4. and James 1:5-8. Based on these references, is integrity in the Bible about righteousness in words and deeds? Is it also about the quality or state of being complete or undivided? Does it speak to wholeness, which is, being a complete person of character who is undivided in loyalties, affections, words, and deeds? Is it about saying and doing that which is right, based on our loyalty to God and God’s Word, ultimately fully revealed in and through Christ Jesus?

In pursuing integrity, there are some things that we ought to be committed to in life; some core values some may say. Among the things that those pursuing integrity must be committed to may be covered by the following: accountability, advocacy, authenticity, dignity and equity, plus honesty, reliability, generosity and exemplary. All of these point to integrity as righteousness, that is, basically doing the right thing as is ultimately fully revealed in and through Jesus the Christ. Within this revelation is the

understanding that we are called to aim to be and to create mature disciples through encouraging persons to come to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour, grow to become more and more like Jesus, and glow in the world for Jesus, by helping others to come to know, grow and glow also. Critical to the success of this is to sow integrity despite our reality. This sowing may be seen as making known God's expectation or God's will for humanity as is revealed in and through Jesus the Christ. As this is done, doing it with integrity is about doing it with loyalty to God and God's Word. Based on our text, this 'Pursuing Integrity: Sowing Despite Our Reality' implies several things, but for this Bible study series, we will focus on two. In week one we will focus on 'Responding Obediently Despite Our Reality', and in week two the focus will be, 'Reaching Extensively Despite Our Reality'.

The real purpose of this study is to encourage greater obedience and more extensive engagement in our effort to reach the world with the Word of God.

RESPONDING OBEDIENTLY DESPITE OUR REALITY

The idea of sowing and reaping is commonly used in scripture, including in the ministry of Jesus the Christ. Our text focuses on the sowing of seed. It comes to us in a literary genre known as a parable. The use of parable seems to be a popular teaching tool of Jesus. Here in chapter 13, it may be said that Jesus, as per Matthew's Gospel, started to use fully, this literary genre of parables. Before, he had been using a way of teaching which had the germ of parable, sometimes called embryo parables. These include the simile of salt and light (5:13-16), the illustration of the garments and the wine skins (9:16-17) and, many pictures to make his point, including that of children playing in the market place (11:16-17). Parable as a literary tool was evidently used to, possibly among other things, compel interest, help with clarity, make truth concrete, challenge self-discovery and self-searching, but even conceal truth from those bent on resisting and rejecting based on pride and prejudices. Whatever it was used to do, however, it is to be noted that each parable only has one point, that is, it aims to make one

solemn truth clear. It must not be treated like an allegory, a literary tool that comes with every possible detail having an inner meaning. The parable of our focus is revealed to be one of several spoken of in Matthew 13 and makes the point that there is hope for those who sow seed, those who seek to make God's will for humanity known to the world, thus encouraging obedience to God's expectation for us to sow despite our reality.

It is strongly believed that as Jesus was ministering from the boat, somebody nearby, possibly visible to all, was seen using the broadcasting method of seed sowing, and made use of the opportunity to make the point about hope for the sower. The hearers, in and around Palestine would have been very familiar with this reality of sowing and even what transpired after. While some translation use 'a sower', when examined, the Greek rendering should actually be 'the sower'. And it may be more accurate to translate it 'behold the sower' or even, 'Look at the sower sowing seeds there in that field'. The clear message is, due to various reasons, whatever they may be, not all the seeds will grow, and even some that grow will not come to maturity, but those that grow and come to maturity will bring about a harvest, and possibly, even such an abundant harvest, that the farmer or sower will be encouraged to continue sowing season after season. The point is thus concretised by using the familiar, right before their very eyes, that there is hope for those who sow seeds.

Bearing also in mind the explanation given in verses 18-23, one may say that the parable was intended for both those who were expected to be hearers of the Word, and the expected proclaimers or declarers of the Word. It was intended for hearers with shut minds, those who were shallow thinkers, some with shared focus on too many other things, and sure fruit-bearers. But, very importantly it was intended to encourage persons to keep sowing as despite the variety of hearers, the reality is that there will always be a harvest, and even a bountiful harvest. Again, the point is clear that there is hope for the sowers, so that sowers are encouraged to respond obediently to the expectation of the Lord to keep sowing the

seed of his Word, regardless of any seeming lack of response, or fruitless response.

Further, there is something that we say from the parable concerning the method of sowing or outreach.

That is, the parable has nothing to do with method of outreach to be employed or practiced. This is so, even though it refers to the broadcasting method of sowing seed, which may be compared with net fishing that may result in catching even unsuitable fish. In Palestine there seems to have been two methods of sowing seeds: the sower scattering or broadcasting while moving across the field; or, placing a sack with a hole in it, to allow the seeds to fall out unto the soil, as the donkey is guided in traversing the field. None of the methods suggest any concern for where the seeds fall. Despite this reality, the parable is, not in the least, suggesting that if the method of sowing seed employed was dibbling, drilling, hill dropping, row planting or point seeding, then the yield would have been better.

Growing up on my father's farms in Saint Mary, I witnessed digging holes and planting seeds like corn and legumes; making of seed beds for seeds such as tomatoes and various vegetables, and transplanting the best with better spacing, and; even broadcasting seeds such as sorrel. The yield was always more about the type and quality of the soil more than anything else. So it is likewise as it relates to sowing the seeds of the Word of God, the yield is usually, if not always, about the readiness of the hearers to receive it, than about the method of outreach.

So does it matter if the outreach method is mass effort like 'crusade', group outreach effort via an auxiliary of the church, or any personal one to one effort such as 'each one reach one'? Does it matter if it is a Sunday morning worship service, a tent revival effort in a densely populated area, an open air meeting at a selected location, a sports or bar evangelizing outreach, a gospel splash on the beach or by the river, a children outreach programme in a community, or whatever else? The method used should not matter. That which matters is that there is obedience in doing it. The reality of some is that maybe they have resources constraint that rules out crusade. Others do not feel confident that they

have the competence. There are those discouraged by what is deemed lack of success, for despite the personal evangelisation efforts, there is no fruit. Still there may be those who feel that the group effort is not being supported enough by group members, and not being supported at all some of those who are expected to. Regardless of what the reality may be, even if you are the only sower, just respond in obedience and sow.

Our parable encourages the appropriate response of obedience for those of us who are expected to be sowers of the seed of making the will of God known to humanity. This is the most appropriate response, despite the reality faced, even if it is a reality of resistance, rejection, deception, tribulation, and so on. We should always respond obediently and continue being a sower, or even becoming a sower by listening to Jesus, by lining up with Jesus and daily learn from Jesus, and live for Jesus. May God grant us the conviction that makes the words of the stanzas and refrain of the hymn authored by Mary Brown, resonate with us. The hymn is ‘I go where you want me to go, dear Lord...

Further Reflection

Please comment on the following:

1. Those who are not involved in sowing seeds in God’s harvest field lack integrity as they are living in disobedience to God
2. There is absolutely no excuse for not sowing in God’s harvest field as expected by God
3. Churches that do not have ‘crusades’ cannot claim to be sowing in God’s harvest field
4. A congregation that has not baptised anybody in five years is a failing one in terms of God’s expectation

Mission Emphasis Month Bible Study –

Week Two September 2024

Focus Text: Matthew 13:1-9

PURSUING INTEGRITY: SOWING DESPITE OUR REALITY

Please be reminded that in pursuing integrity, there are some things that we ought to be committed to in life; some core values some may say. Among the things that those pursuing integrity must be committed to may be covered by the following: accountability, advocacy, authenticity, dignity and equity, plus honesty, reliability, generosity and exemplary. All of these point to integrity as righteousness, that is, basically doing the right thing as is ultimately fully revealed in and through Jesus the Christ. Within this revelation is the understanding that we are called to aim to be and to create mature disciples through encouraging persons to come to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour, grow to become more and more like Jesus, and glow in the world for Jesus, by helping others to come to know, grow and glow also. Critical to the success of this, is to, with integrity sow despite our reality. This sowing may be seen as making known God's expectation or God's will for humanity as is revealed in and through Jesus the Christ. As this is done, doing it with integrity is about doing it with loyalty to God and God's Word. Based on our text, this 'Pursuing Integrity: Sowing Despite Our Reality' imply several things, but for this Bible study series, we are focusing on two. In week one we focused on 'Responding Obediently Despite Our Reality', and this week, week two, the focus will be, 'Reaching Extensively Despite Our Reality'.

REACHING EXTENSIVELY DESPITE OUR REALITY

It is interesting to note that this parable suggest a turning point in the ministry of Jesus, as per Matthew's Gospel, not only in terms of the full and more focused use of parables, but in terms of location of the ministry. At first there was a great focus on ministry in the synagogue, but now it was

ministry at the seashore. The synagogue had not yet fully shut out Jesus and the disciples but it was imminent. There, he likely had the full welcome of those who were not synagogue officials and religious leaders. But those, especially of Jewish orthodoxy were clearly in opposition to Jesus and his message. In addition to an eager, willing to listen audience, then, there were those watching and waiting to come up with charges against him in order to sink him. This is indicative of the different, including the indifferent responses, to the ministry of Jesus, and by extension the ministry of his followers; those who seek to make God's will for humanity known to the world. The reach of the sower then cannot be limited to a location or any particular set of persons. If one door is closing or even closed, the sower must make use of opportunities elsewhere or even create opportunities elsewhere. There are opportunities beyond the four walls of our buildings, including the seashore, the public sphere, and even personal and private spaces, including homes of individuals.

Let us consider some examples of the alertness of Jesus to available opportunities: at the synagogue (Luke 4:16-21); Nicodemus at some place while it was dark (John 3:1ff); the woman of Samaria at a public place just about midday (John 4:3ff); Zacchaeus in a Sycamore tree, even while he was surrounded by a large and very critical crowd (Luke 19:1ff); and, at the seashore in our text (Matthew 13:1-2). At the synagogue in Nazareth he ran the risk of being killed, but soon he was at another in Capernaum making use of another opportunity (4:28-31). At Jacob's well in Samaria, despite the risk of being criticised, he made use of the opportunity (John 4:9 & 27). And, with his decision to go to the house of Zacchaeus, despite public backlash, and much public disappointment, he did not allow the opportunity to go by (Luke 19:5-11). Jesus reached extensively despite the surrounding reality, by making use of available opportunity. And do we not see this pattern continuing with the Church?

Let us look at some example in the Book of Acts. During a Festival of Pentecost, in the midst of the negative reaction of some, Peter made use of the opportunity to proclaim Jesus (2:12ff). At the risk of

being charged with civil disobedience, Peter and John, plus others continued declaring the truth concerning Jesus (4:18-33; 5:17-37). In the midst of the reality of being falsely accused and eventually be killed, Stephen never relented in making known the truth of the Word of God (6:8ff & 7:57-60). And, Paul, at times with others, despite having to face hatred and rejection from his supposedly own, being wrongly accused, falsely imprisoned, threatened by the massive, and so on, never waned in his commitment to making Jesus known to the world around him (9:23-25, 16:19ff, 21:27ff). The apostles reached extensively despite the reality with which they were faced, by making use of available opportunities.

It is evident in the Gospels, including Matthew's Gospel, that despite making use of available opportunities, despite many proofs that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah), the many declarations that were interesting and enlightening, the disciples were possibly becoming perplexed and even discouraged by that which was to them the limited success. This is about limited success in terms of conviction to many of their very own, and others, concerning the truth about God, as declared in and through Jesus. Earlier, Jesus in his declaration upbraided especially some cities of his own hometown of Galilee, where he spent significant amount of time ministering without seemingly much success. See for example, the evident disappointment declared concerning the lack of responses of the people of these cities in Matthew 11:16ff. The parable of our text, in an attempt to give hope, may be interpreted to be saying that the issue of seeming lack of response definitely has nothing to do with the message of the truth about God, and likely not even the messenger. The problem is about the readiness of the hearers to receive the message. So the farmer is to keep sowing the seeds everywhere, without concern for where it is sown, as although most of the seed may not yield any harvest because the lack of readiness of the soil on which it falls, there is hope; there will be a harvest, even a bountiful one.

So we ought to sow extensively, exempting no place on the available field, expecting a harvest at all times. Some will fall along the wayside or the trodden path, and yield no result at all. Others will fall on rocky soil and among thorns, and will seem to be doing well, but this will only be for a while. But there will always be those that will fall on good soil, and will eventually bear fruit, even abundance of it. Engaging widely despite the reality of our field of endeavour is the way to go, as although most of those with whom we share the message of God, will yield no fruit, enough will always yield to make a difference. Even that which seems to be the least of the seed sown, may yield great benefit (note Matthew 13:31-32), so keep on sowing anywhere and everywhere. At times, there will be no decision for Jesus; or a decision for Jesus, but no real conviction; or even a conviction about Jesus, but also distraction; but, there will be enough conviction about Jesus that comes with full concentration on Jesus, making such persons more and more like Jesus, and persons who glow for Jesus, and bring hope to others. Again, may God grant us the conviction that makes the words of the stanzas and refrain, of the hymn authored by Mary Brown, resonate with us. The hymn is 'I will go where you want me to go, dear Lord...

Further Reflection

- 1. What do you understand 'Reaching extensively despite our reality' to be asking us to do?**
- 2. Why is it important to sow seeds extensively in God's harvest field,**
- 3. Comment on these scenarios on alertness to opportunities**
 - a) Some garbage collector usually passed by a particular area every week to collect garbage. The people in the area, including a prominent family who are faithful members of a church body, usually ignore them and behave toward them as if they were nobodies. In the process of time a young teenage boy in a Christian family felt compelled to be friendly and courteous to the garbage collectors. One of them eventually felt comfortable to share his story about his

troubled marriage with the young boy. He got his pastor to counsel with and minister to the family of the garbage collector. He eventually started to attend church, got saved shortly after and became an active member of the church.

b) There was a pastor who used to see a group of young men playing with a football at the church gate as a nuisance. He was annoyed by them, like many who were a part of his congregation, and would sometimes even pass them without greeting them. It dawned on him one day that he could sometimes stop to juggle the ball with them for a few minutes and interact with them. Eventually they became his friends and some started attending church and several were eventually baptised.

c) While in the air the on a flight in the same seat, a young teenage girl, nearest to the aisle, tugged on the shirt sleeve of the evangelist beside her who was concentrating on reading his book. The evangelist looked in her direction wondering what the matter was. The girl staring in his face asked, "Did you brush your teeth this morning?" The evangelist was very puzzled but answered yes. She then responded, "Good, for that is important"

The evangelist went back to his book but the young girl after a while tugged his shirt again. The evangelist again looked on the young girl who again stared in his face and asked another question, "Do you smoke?" The evangelist who was now a bit concerned patiently answered no. The girl responded, "Good, for that will kill you" The evangelist again went back to his book but before long the girl tugged on his shirt sleeve for the third time and asked, "Do you know Jesus" The

evangelist was happy to respond "yes I know him as my Lord and Saviour"

The young girl then successfully prompted the evangelist to ask the businessman the same three questions on her behalf. The answer to the first two was the same as the evangelist but the

answer to the third was “No, but I have been thinking about it recently.” The businessman was interested in being saved and the evangelist took the opportunity to lead him to Christ.