

How would Charles Spurgeon sound if he preached today?



BE Still.

A rich but neglected part of our western Christian heritage is the wisdom and genuine experiential knowledge of God of so many Christian authors and speakers of the past—but it's progressively fading from the grasp of modern Christians simply because of the natural modification and simplification of the English language.

The sermons and books of Charles Spurgeon are still manageable for most people, but the differences between the idiom of his day and ours do take the edge off many of his quite pointed statements and questions.

I've taken the liberty to 'update' one of his Farm Sermons, but unlike the enjoyable revisions by Robert Backhouse, which modernise archaic words and rephrase things here and there, I thought I would try a paraphrase, a total rewrite, with modern figures of speech and illustrations. I've had fun with it, as you'll see, but I found the words of this godly, tender-hearted, Spirit-filled and witty man gained a new edge for me in a modern Australian idiom.

Spurgeon's preaching brought him fame right from the start. One of his distinctions was his effective use of word picture after word picture to hammer home a spiritual truth in his congregations' imaginations. His talent took him to the big smoke (literally), where he was ridiculed for a time because he was from the country. In many of his earlier sermons, the word pictures came from his intimate knowledge of farming life in a century when you might still use an ox or a horse to plow a field...

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION

Ploughing *the* Rock

from Farm Sermons by C. H. Spurgeon

“Shall horses run upon the rock? Will one plow there with oxen?
—Amos 6:12.

These expressions were most likely familiar proverbs in the East. A proverb is usually a sword with two edges, or many edges—maybe it is ALL edge, so you can wave it any which way and it will make a strong point. Like those intricately carved Chinese balls where there is one ball within another, so many Bible texts have a meaning within a meaning, a teaching within a teaching, and each meaning is still worthy of the Holy Spirit.

The first meaning that comes to my mind is this one: **Amos was having a go at**



“Visit us with Thy salvation—for there are folds and folds of the robe of righteousness that we would fain have Thee unfold to us.”

“I WILL LOVE HIM AND MANIFEST MYSELF TO HIM” JOHN 14:21

ungodly people and the way they chase happiness where it can't possibly be found. They were trying to become rich, famous and powerful by treading all over other people. He says "You have turned justice into poison!" They bought and sold justice, and Moses' law was used to commit fraud. "Yet," says the prophet, "you have made no real gain; you haven't found happiness behaving this way, and any profit you made is short-term. You might as well let your oxen plow the sand!"

If you try to be content with this life, if you attempt to create your own personal utopia out of your business, family or whatever, without looking to God, you are wasting your time. If you turn to sinful pleasures and think you'll do "just fine thank you", while the whole time you are really spitting in the face of God's law, you have totally lost the plot. You might as well look for banana trees at the south pole, or go fossicking for diamonds at the tip! **You will only find what your soul craves for in God.** "Why do you spend your money on anything but food, and work hard for trinkets that leave you empty?"

Son, you are letting your ambitions kill you, striving for wealth and prestige—what a B-grade goal for an immortal soul! Dad, you are worrying yourself straight to intensive care; your brains and brawn weren't built to last the distance you have to cover in your lust to be rich—as if a man is remembered for what he *gained* rather than what he *gave*. Guess what? You're plowing a rock! The end of that road isn't happiness or contentment; only when you finally reach that dead-end will you realise how badly you were duped. Even the strongest fallen human nature, stretched to its limit, has buckleys of saving itself. Why plow a rock? This is a trap for dunces. Give it up now!

A second meaning of the proverb is also possible: **God won't always send his ministers to tell men to repent of their sin.** When they deliberately harden their hearts, God doesn't put the Gospel on 'loop-replay'. "My Spirit won't always struggle with mankind." Sure, there is "a time to plow", but when it's clear that you are making your heart into a lump of cold granite, 'Wisdom' nudges 'Mercy' and suggests quietly that she should give up on you. "Can horses run upon crags? Would you bother plowing there with oxen?" Nup. Even kindness isn't stupid. The work eventually stops and the granite goes into eternity unplowed.

Preachers work to break up human hearts (relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, of course) so they can receive God's Word, the seed. Truth is a sharp plow—it makes people realise they have sinned and must repent and

receive Christ in their hearts and not just their heads. And seeing as we're cutting their hearts with the diamond-tipped plow of God's holy law, there should be at least some emotion as a result! A farmer who was too kind to dig up his land would never see a harvest, would he? A lot of Christians fail in witnessing because they are worried they'll hurt people's feelings. They steer well clear of mentioning the lake of fire or anything else that might get people a bit worked up or at the very least upset their nerves. Their farm doesn't even have a shovel, let alone a plow, and they wouldn't know the silo from the windmill! They're fishing without hooks, or hunting without ammo, with a mistaken kind of love that really is the ultimate cruelty to the souls of the lost. It's like cancelling a lifesaving operation because the needle-prick for the general might make the patient



wince! What kind of 'tenderness' lets our friends and relatives sink into hell for fear of causing some temporary mental distress? It would be easy if I only had to preach smooth or popular things—comforting for you and me both—but watch out to the man who actually degrades himself with that kind of crawling. Is that the spirit of Christ? Did He minimise the danger? Did he give any room for doubts about the excruciating, burning suffering just around the corner for defiant sinners? Did He sing a flattering lullaby to give those in danger a false sense of security? No way. HIS love was HONEST. His concern for sinners made Him anxious, and He warned them of the wrath that is already on its way—Repent or be destroyed!

If you have any desire to serve Christ, follow your Master's example: dig deep with a razor-sharp plow and don't let even the toughest clods put you off! Be your own coach and keep at it. If you have the love for people you say you do, you'll be honest with them. Hard hearts need to be broken and Christ was sent to bind the broken-hearted. Unbroken hearts refuse Him.

There are characteristics that appear in some people and not in others, even though they all come to Christ. But the one thing that

must not be missing is some degree of internal plowing, otherwise real salvation is impossible. There has to be a fear of God, an acknowledgement of personal guilt and a sincere cry for mercy. I can't stress it enough—a soul has to be thoroughly broken up before we can expect the seed to bear any spiritual fruit.

"**Sometimes preachers are wasting their time**" is another message I get from the maxim. It doesn't take the average farmer long to figure out whether or not his plow is going in, and the same goes for the average minister. He plows in one place where preaching gives him results and joy. Then he uses the same words in another place and it's hard work and mostly hopeless, and the plow seems to keep jumping out of the furrow. Every now and then a bit of the plowshare even gets broken off. He says "Boy, this is tough going!" and realises his Master has picked some tough ground for him to farm.

All Christian workers know this happens occasionally—in Sunday school, or a Bible study, or any other place where you've tried to teach and preach Jesus. Now and then you've probably said to yourself, "This is a rock I'm trying to plow! My ox is going to have a coronary!"

Every church has people like this. **They're like sheet metal** even though they sit right between two plots that are quite arable. Their whole family has felt the power of the Gospel, but they don't feel a thing. They sit there, apparently

showing respect, and allow the message of salvation just enough freedom to pass through one ear and out the other, but no more than that. They give the Gospel the suspect compliment of coming to listen to it and then refusing to hear it. These are hard, stony people.

Others are hard in a different way, but no better off in the end. The impression God's Word makes on them isn't very deep and it's only temporary. They "receive it with joy" and then forget about it. They listen carefully, but when it comes to actually putting it into practice there is some kind of communication breakdown. They hear "repent!" but they never repent. They hear "believe!" but they never quite believe. They are 'Gospel connoisseurs' without ever having tasted it for themselves. They insist on a feast every Sunday but are too gutless to touch it with a fork. They stand up for the exact same things on Sunday that they personally reject during the week. Oh, the Gospel does move them, even makes them cry, but their hearts are kept safe in the fridge out back, unmeltable, unplowable. They go home and "forget what kind of people they really are". Rocky-hearted through and through, and not only are all our attempts to

plow them utter failures, but a few of them have been under the plow for years and actually become harder instead of softer. We wouldn't mind if they yielded in the end, even after a broken blade or two, but some of them have known the Gospel since childhood and never given way to its power. Some of them are even white-haired, wrinkly and booked into nursing homes, and have been witnessed to over and over and over, but it's now clear it was a wasted effort. They're harder to the Gospel than they were before. The sun which could have melted the wax has hardened the clay—the same Gospel which has made others tender and sorry for their selfish crimes against God has had the opposite effect. They care less about the things of God now than they did as teens. What a sad way to be.

Why are some people so rocky? Some are just born solid! They have a bigger percentage of granite in their constitutions than others, and seem to be more closely related to Mr. Obstinate in Pilgrim's Progress than Mr. Pliable. Now, I'm not pointing the finger at these people; I also know what it's like to preach to an excited crowd and see absolutely nil results for God. Some of these monolithic, solid-willed people, when they are finally moved—well, it's like an earthquake! When they DO feel, they feel intensely, and the impression carved in the granite stays there forever. It's exciting to pray for a stony heart. God's jackhammer is a powerful one, and when the rock finally gives way it's plain to everyone that it was God's doing, and of course He gets the glory.

Much worse than these are people whose unbelief has made them hard. The unbelief isn't all from the heart. Some is from the head—they just don't WANT to believe because they know what the consequences of faith will be to their lives. So, they go ferreting madly for reasons not to. Now these difficulties do exist, and God put them there. If everything was as plain as the nose on your face there would be no room for the faith God desires to see in you. These people have gradually come to doubt (or at least think they doubt) essential Christian facts, which keeps the Gospel out like some kind of artificial force-field.

Even more people are just plain old 'worldly', even if they seem like people you'd want in your social circle. So-called sophistication hardens a person from the inside out. Making money is their passion and that makes them compulsive inward Scrooges. He or she thinks social security is an excuse for their lack of generosity. They've no time in their schedules to think of the next world. Money is tight, so they hold it tighter, and when their precious investments only bring them mediocre returns, that's their excuse for being an even bigger moneygrubber. They can't afford one minute to pray because they have

to see how their shares are doing. They can't read their Bibles because there are spreadsheets and pie-charts and performance projections to absorb. You can ring the doorbell but the heart is never at home—it's at the bank, where it lives and moves and has its being. Their god is an ever-changing number with two decimal places, and their life's work is—just their work. They think they're the centre of the known universe. Why bother preaching to them? You might as well plow the deck of an aircraft carrier!

Sometimes, the hardness is caused by the exact opposite—they are **totally fickle**. These people just flit through life like butterflies or bugs, zipping all over the place but really doing zip. They never just sit and think—and they don't want to think. Half a thought makes them exhausted, so they look for distractions in case their feeble little bug brains fizzle out. They see the future as their TV guide, and everything that happens has to be entertaining or they switch channels.

*You will only
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Everyone in their life is just an actor, and "all the world's a stage!" Try preaching to a drama queen, someone who is about as shallow as their reflection in a mirror. Underneath their worthless, constantly reinvented image, their 'shifting-sand' persona, lies a huge lump of numb, rock-hard stupidity.

So, do you think it's unreasonable for God's workers to keep at it in every case? These people have been preached to, explained to, illustrated to, warned, discussed with, debated with and even politely advised! Should we go on forever? They've had their turn—what does common sense say? Is a minister under some sort of contract to keep at them until he loses his voice and his mind? Ask a farmer—what would he say? How tired would he get of plowing a plot-full-of-rocks with nothing to show for it? Discouraged is putting it mildly. "Why have you sent me," says the preacher, "to people who have ears but just won't listen and won't have a bar of what God has to say to them?" Work always seems harder when you know it must be done but you feel like you are getting nowhere fast—even though you are doing your level best. No one wants a job which they know is basically futile. If your work looks ridiculous, your friends treat you like you are busting a gut trying to nail jelly to a wall.

Do you think God will continue to let his workers be trivialised like this? Will the Great Harvester keep asking His workers to waste their dedicated lives for nothing? Should His preachers keep rolling precious pearls before the swine like *jaffas*? Well, if God asks them to do it, they'll do it, no matter how painful it is—but note this well—**God watches over them constantly**. I ask you, would you expect someone with such a zealous heart to be used up trying to save the souls of people who will never respond? Will the oxen work there forever?

On top of all this, there is the Master Himself to think about. **Are you seriously going to provoke God?** Many of you have had eternal life brought before you on a platter—the simplicity of a saving faith in Christ—and you've said "no thanks". It's no small wonder to me that God hasn't said, "You've done your duty to them. Don't present my Son to them again; I won't let Him be insulted." If you offer money to a beggar and he doesn't want it, fair enough. You don't hassle him! You let him be. But God in His loving mercy is actually *begging* sinners to come to Him and receive His Son. He is humiliating Himself and standing like a spruiker in the street, shouting, "Everyone who's thirsty, come and get your free water! Even if you haven't got a cent, come and get your wine and milk for nothing!" In another verse He phrases Himself this way: "I've stretched out my arms to a criminal, defiant generation all day long!" Christians, doesn't the fact that God's mercy has been refused for so long right before your very eyes mix a bit of righteous anger with your pity? Even though you love the lost and desperately want to see them saved, don't you feel in your heart that God will put an end to such insulting behaviour? Non-Christian, if you think you couldn't care less about the plowman, take time to think about who His Master is.

There are so many other people who need the Gospel, people who would receive it if they had it, that wearing yourself out on those who despise it really doesn't seem a wise choice. What did our Lord say? He said that Tyre and Sidon would have repented if they had seen the powerful things that had been done in front of the Jews in Bethsaida and Chorazin—that even Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented if they had seen what He did in Capernaum! Sometimes the Word should be taken from those who reject it and given to the ones who want it, leaving the others to die in their own stubbornness. Look at the countries where people crowd around the missionary and climb over each other to hear the Gospel! Perhaps he left the ones who heard the Gospel every day and treated it like a doormat, and went looking for some good soil to plow. "Shall horses run upon the rock? Will one plow there with oxen?" Do I have to

keep working where there are no results? What a serious question. Would anyone in their right mind work towards a goal if they knew it was hopeless? When God has sent his pastors to speak to people out of tenderness and they spit in His face, is it any wonder that He says, "They are consumed with their idols. Let them be"? There is a limit to any man's patience—our human fuses are very short. **God has a fuse, too.** Sure, it's a long one, but it has an end, and if you push it, you can reach that end. "That's enough! My Spirit will not struggle with them any more!" And if the Lord says this to us, do we really have the gall to complain? Isn't this wisdom, pure and simple? Anyone who thinks at all would say, "Yep. You can't go on plowing a rock forever."

There has to be a change, then, and it doesn't take long. The ox will have another job to do in a matter of minutes. This can be done in three ways:

First, **the fruitless hearer can be removed so he won't hear the message any more.** He has felt some reaction to the preaching but rejected it and stayed stubborn. Maybe he moves to another church where the preaching is watered down, or soft like marshmallow, so it never pricks his conscience, and numbs him into the kind of sleep where you wake up in hell. Maybe some of you listening to me right now are either planning to leave, or church-hopping till you find some pastor who will indulge your irritation with the truth.

Another way to change things is to **take away the plowman.** He's done his best, he's tired, and God lets him go home. The tough

soil wouldn't break up, but it wasn't his fault. He kept at a discouraging job as long as God wanted him to and busted his plow in the process, so let him go to glory to hear the Lord he loves say "Well done!" I think this happens quite often.

Or something else might happen: The Lord might say "That rotten bit of rock is never going to give my man or woman trouble ever again. I'm going to rip it out!" Well, that means **the Gospel-rejecter dies in their sins** (and I pray daily that none of you does), and is then totally out of the picture as far as any hope for mercy goes. He turns back to the Saviour he rejected to find He is now seated as his judge. My prayers won't follow you into eternity. Don't destroy your soul by continued stubbornness against God's love.

Is there any other way to be saved without the breaking of the rock. No. No breaking, no sowing. Without repentance from sin, there is no forgiveness. But, some very respectable people ask, isn't there a way to be saved that bypasses this free grace of God? Christ said, "He that believes and is baptized will be saved, but he that doesn't believe will be damned." Do you hear any hints in that verse that there is some middle way, or some kind of back door to heaven? No. Don't kid yourself. God didn't build one. It's a fantasy.

If there is only half a hope left that some of these hardened hearts will hear, most preachers are quite willing to keep preaching, "Hear, you deaf people, and see, you blind people, and live, you corpses!" He'll keep at it because God commanded him to, but make no mistake, it's hard work.

I'm glad there is one other turn that events

might take! There is a God up there in heaven—so let's ask Him to send down His power. Jesus is by His side—let's call on Him to play His part as well. The Holy Spirit can do anything—let's call on His help, too. My brothers who plow, my Christian sisters who pray, cry to God! Horses and oxes always die in the end, but **there is One above them who can bring about miracles we could never anticipate.** Remember when He spoke to the rock and turned the stone into a stream of cool, fresh water? Let's ask Him to do the same thing among us right now.

If there is anyone here whose hard heart is getting him down, who feels that piece of heavy stone weighing him down, well—I'm glad you feel it! That's proof that the rock is being changed. Instead of hitting the rock, as Moses did in anger, I'll just speak to you. Would you like a heart as soft as putty in God's hands? Would you like a heart that dissolves into repentant streams? Listen to God's voice! Let your longing for Christ break you, and break you again! Does the Word of God feel like a sharp blade cutting a trench in your heart? Let it plow you, so you can receive the seed, and we can all see the beautiful spiritual fruit in your life.

To finish off today, I'll toss one more handful of good seed onto the soil. If you want eternal life, trust Jesus Christ and you'll be saved immediately. "Look to me and be saved," says Christ, "for I am God, and there is no one but Me." Whoever believes in Him has everlasting life.

Lord, break up the rock, and let the seed drop into the broken soil, and get a harvest for Yourself from the crumbled granite today, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

CHRIST FORMED IN YOU

"My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). The apostle Paul was determined to labor until Christ was formed in the Galatians. What did Paul mean by the expression, "until Christ be formed in you"?

One of the central themes of the apostolic writings is that of allowing Christ to live within us to guide us in our everyday lives. Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Paul had crucified the lusts of his flesh in order that Christ might live within him and take control of his life (Gal. 5:24). He had denied self in order that he might take up his cross and follow Jesus (Matt. 16:24). Can we say that we have allowed Christ to reign within us? Is Christ on the throne of our hearts? Are we Christ-controlled? Our whole purpose as Christians is to form Christ within us to the extent that he is Lord and Master of our lives! This is no doubt why Paul used the expression, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" in his epistle to the Colossians (Col. 1:27). This is to be our focus: to develop and form Christ within us.

The general epistles give equal emphasis to this concept. John wrote, "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked" (1 John 2:6). "For even hereunto were ye called: because

Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Scripture demonstrates clearly that one must seek to imitate Jesus if he would be pleasing to Jesus. It is simply impossible to be a faithful Christian without seeking to act as Christ would act. Nothing would revolutionise the church more than for its members to determine to form Christ within their hearts. To walk in the footsteps of Jesus is a challenging and yet rewarding walk.

What will happen if we allow Christ to be formed within us? Our hearts will be pure (Phil. 4:8). As a result, our lives will also be pure. Our language will be free from corrupt and foolish blemishes (Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6). Our eyes will avoid lust (Matt. 5:27,28). Our relationships with others will improve (Matt. 5:23,24; 18:15-17; Gal. 5:15ff). Our capacity to demonstrate compassion and forgiveness will increase (Eph. 4:32-5:2). Our passion for souls will burn more fervently (Luke 19:10; Matt. 9:36f). Our thirst for opportunities to worship and serve will be enhanced (Luke 4:16; Acts 10:38). We will become better husbands and wives, sons and daughters and employers and employees (Col. 3:18-24). The list of improvements is endless.

Let us allow Christ to be formed within our hearts so that the beauty of Jesus may be reflected by each one of our lives to the world (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15,16). May we ever strive to have Christ formed within us!

—B. J. CLARKE