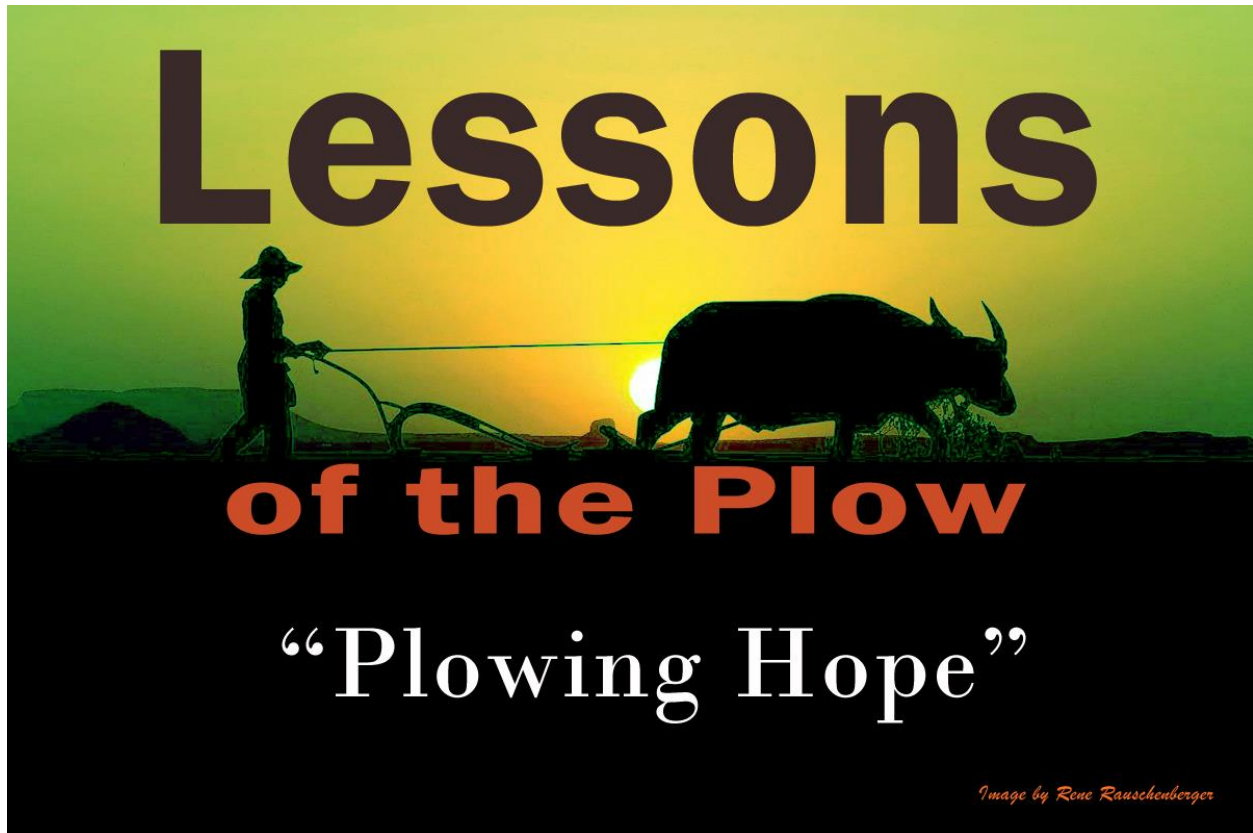


September 18

“Plowing Hope”

1 Corinthians 9:10

Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.



SPECIAL MUSIC: “You Keep Hope Alive” Church of the City

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROsdWfK_G0E

NOTHING TO WASTE

When we have little
There's nothing to waste
Everything's used
And it's all in its place

Paper and string,
Latches and springs,
Nails, screws, and hardware
Are just a few of those things

Clothes that are worn
By a sibling or two,
Shirts made from drapes
And pass-me-down shoes

Cloth can be washed
And holes can be stitched
Tools that are broken
Can often be fixed.

Eggs from the chickens
And milk from the cows
Vegetables planted
With a mule and a plow.

Sticks become swords

Dolls made of weeds

A swing from a tire

Strung to a tree

A cock for a clock

Opens our eyes for the day

Stars still a twinkling

As we make our way

Out to the barn

Where there's critters to feed

Cows to be milked

And gardens to weed

Each sun arising

Is a sweet gift from God

And each time the sun sets

A moment of awe

So thankful each moment

And all that we have

All the wonders around us

The good and the bad

Yes, we may not have much

But its more than we need

Nothing to waste

As we let the world be.

Farming is a faith-based investment. It is a commitment without knowing the rewards. Every time a farmer plows a field, he or she is trusting that the investment that they are making will pay off at harvest time. A wise farmer always sets aside some profit for those years when their investment might not pay off. But there are also years where the conditions are perfect, and yields are much higher than expected. Those windfall bonus crop years give even greater reason to celebrate while also creating an element of hope that keeps the farmers hand to the plow. But most years, farmers are pleased if they break even and manage to make enough money to see them through the winter and into the next planting season.

What makes a farmer get up on cold, frosty mornings, before sunrise, and start taking care of business? What makes a farmer work until his or her fingers are numb from the cold, taking care of livestock and maintaining their machinery? I don't care who you are, fighting with a stubborn tractor on a freezing morning is just miserable. What makes that farmer work sunrise to sunset mending fences in 100+ degree temperatures? What makes them look at an unplowed field in the freezing cold and tell themselves, "No use complaining. Time to get 'er done!"? What makes them do it when there is no guarantee that they will have a successful season or even be able to continue to put food on the table?

In 1991, it is estimated that 44% of the world's population worked in agriculture. By 2020, that percentage had dropped to 26%. There are a number of reasons for that. Banks today, are not as interested in investing in farming and

often find land not to be a credible source of collateral. For many years, farmers would borrow from banks to buy seed and equipment, using their land for collateral. A great deal of that funding has dried up. Farming is considered a high-risk investment by many. I can see why they think that. At the same time though, we all have to eat, and the population is growing, not decreasing. But we are constantly bombarded with information on how big commercial farming communities use pesticides and GMOs to increase crop production and maintain prices. When farmers struggle each year and fail to get ahead, they sell out to large corporations so that they can continue to farm, only now they have someone telling them what they are going to plant and what products they are going to use to get the best yield.

We have to ask ourselves, what makes the independent farmer resolve to face their oak tree and put their hand to the plow?

Hope. Plain and simple. Hope. “This year’s going to be a good year. I can just feel it. This is the year for the bumper crop. This is the year for a comeback. This is the year we get ahead. Let’s get to it!” Hope. Another year of hope. It takes a very special kind of person who can fix their eyes on that Oak Tree and say, “If that old Oak Tree that served my grandfather, my father, and now me, can continue to come back every spring, then I can, too.”

We can look at the struggles of the farmers we know and think, “God has forsaken the farmers of this world.” But that just isn’t so. That responsibility lays in our lap. It is we, independent of thought and mind, who have taken the farmer for granted and forsaken the path of those who remain committed to

farming. Our values have gotten topsy-turvy. And not just with farmers. Teachers are quitting in massive numbers. Ministers are abandoning their callings in record numbers. Artists of all kinds are having to turn their professions into hobbies as they seek a sustainable living. I had a friend who worked as an EMT in a large city who left his job after several years because he made a better living delivering Pizza. These people lost hope in what they were doing, lost trust that the human race would support them as they gave themselves to lives serving humanity. What will our world be like when we can no longer find people to work in these professions? The needs don't go away just because the people do.

“Why are you telling us things we already know, preacher? There's nothing we can do to fix it.” Here is a hard truth. Many of us have become like those farmers who have given in to a broken system. No, I don't fault the farmers. They did not fail us. We failed them. And until we realize that and set about correcting it, we will just watch the situation get worse. One of my greatest fears is that we will wake up one morning and find the farmer gone. Find the teacher gone. Find the minister gone. Find ourselves in a world devoid of new art and music created from the hearts and souls of people expressing the angst and joy of being human, a world where poets only exist in our past. And we will blame it on progress as driverless tractors plow and plant fields, machines teach our children, churches become hard to find, and art is generated and performed by computers and avatars. What used to be considered fantasy is now quickly becoming the next stage of our existence, a society where our morals and

character are determined by the latest viral post on Facebook, Pinterest, or TikTok.

Our greatest mistake of the last century is that we have chosen to invest in things; technology, commodities, manufacturing, communication, utilities, and other investments that we believe will provide the greatest ROI (return on investment) monetarily. Every time we turn around, somebody is trying to get us to buy stocks, crypto currency, gold, insurance, and bonds. I'm not saying that it is bad to invest some of the resources that God has given to us. But what I am saying is that we seem to have stopped investing in people. We may invest in the things that people produce but that is not investing people themselves.

It has come to this because we have allowed it to come to this. Instead of plowing hope for future generations, we have allowed the fields to go fallow, expecting the next generation to jump in and right the ship, but we haven't given them the tools, the character, or the education and common sense to do that. What makes us believe they have a better chance of changing things than we do? If we do not wake up, then we will find ourselves, our children, and our children's children living in a dystopian world of our own creation.

Sound's dark, doesn't it? Sounds like we've given up. But here is the thing about hope, it is never too late to start plowing hope. It's never too late to fix our eyes on that Old Oak and plow a field with a better promise for tomorrow. But, in order to do so, we have to fix our eyes on Jesus and let Him shine light into our dark places, showing us where and how to plow. We cannot let fear of

the dark prevent us from embracing the light. What we see in the light, is not lost, nor is it hidden.

I want to share with you several ways that we can plow hope into the world around us. These are only suggestions. I'm not asking anyone to get out their checkbooks. These are only opportunities. Opportunities that can make a difference. If you are seeking a great physical return on your investment, you won't find it here. If you are looking to make a difference, slow the predicament we find ourselves in, possibly even reverse the trend, then these things will go a long way towards helping alleviate the mess we have created. Here are three unique places where you can make an investment in humanity:

1. Kivo.com: Kivo provides micro loans to small businesses all over the world. With as little as \$25, you can invest in someone working a farm, creating a product, or providing a service. You will not receive interest on the loan, but there is a 96% chance that you will be repaid which will allow you to reinvest those funds in someone else. You can choose who you will invest it. You might be helping to buy seeds for a farmer, tools for a shop, materials for making clothes, or even allowing that small businessperson to bring on some help with their productivity. You can plow hope into someone who is struggling to provide for themselves, their families, and their towns or villages.

2. Heifer International: This investment will not bring you a monetary return of any kind. When you give to Heifer, it is considered a donation. Heifer International does not provide funds to people. It provides a path to a sustainable existence for many small towns and villages around the world.

Through Heifer, you can give animals in a package that includes animal husbandry training to people seeking to find a way to provide for themselves and their families. Whether it is a dozen chicks or an entire ark full of animals, each gift goes to change a person's way of life to make them more self-sustaining. Heifer even offers seeds for planting, lessons in farming, and a partnership for productivity. With a donation to Heifer, you can plow hope into people committed to taking the next step towards self-sufficiency and are willing to teach others to do the same thing.

Intuba.org: Intuba provides a different and progressive path to self-sufficiency. Their model is based on a multi-step process with a greater commitment from the receiver at each level. An Intuba Project begins with helping a community build raised garden beds, and then helps them lay drip irrigation systems. The drip irrigation system requires that the villagers fill the water containers manually. With each step in the process comes training for the village. If the village fulfills their commitment with the raised gardens and drip irrigation, then Intuba will do a geological survey and drill for an underground well. The recipients are taught how to maintain the well which can provide clean drinking water for the village as well as providing water for the irrigation system that they already have in place. If the villagers meet their commitment at this level by maintaining the well and the irrigation systems, Intuba will install a solar system that will pump the water. The system will also allow for some electricity for villages in remote areas.

Each of these three organizations are built on the principal that requires commitment on the part of the recipient. With Kiva, the loans have to be repaid in a timely manner. With Heifer International, the recipients cannot receive animals or seeds without getting training to properly care for those animals or crops. With Intuba, the recipient is required to meet obligations at each step of the process in order to continue receiving investment.

One of the biggest reasons for not giving to charities is that we do not know how the donation is spent. We fear that money that we worked so hard for will be handed over without any expectation on the part of the recipient, or that the organization will spend most of the money on administrative fees. Each of these organizations has a proven track record of showing a successful pattern of investing in people, not just giving them money. They provide materials, time, training, and encouragement. They are organizations that teach people how to take the next step towards meeting their goals of self-sufficiency.

There are many other organizations that provide this same type of aid. Here in the U.S., we are all familiar with The Salvation Army and Goodwill. There are organizations dedicated improving the health of people, like St. Jude's Children's Hospital and MD Anderson Cancer Center. There are other organizations that lift people out of bad situations like the Disabled American Veterans and Boys Town. Locally, we have things we can do like supporting El Buen Vecino or volunteering at the hospital or nursing home. We might buy a breakfast or lunch for law enforcement or military personnel when we see them in a restaurant. Not every story is a success story. Only Jesus has a perfect batting

record, and even then, there were those who chose not to follow him. When we examine the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5000, we really have no idea how many took the food and moved on. That wasn't the point. The point was meeting the need. It was about plowing hope. It's still about plowing hope.

Here are a few things that we need to keep in mind so that we can plow hope:

- 1. Just like the farmer, we have to get up and put our hand to the plow, no matter what it looks like outside, focus our eyes on Jesus and watch for opportunities. There are far more opportunities that we can count.**
- 2. We must plow with the hope that the seed we plant will take purchase and bring forth crops. To assume it will not produce makes us pause before we give. When we allow our pessimism to guide our giving, we miss out on the blessings.**
- 3. We have to accept the fact that our investment in people may fall on bad ground or in a weed patch. It happens. Not everyone is open to improving their lot, but that should never stop us from extending our hand.**
- 4. When people help with the plowing and planting, they should be allowed to share in the harvest. When we help others with their plowing and planting, we will also share in their harvest. When we give of our time and resources, we will be blessed with a portion of the crops, God's blessings will return to us.**

Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.

This week, I want us to rise up and look for opportunities to invest in people, here or elsewhere. We cannot outgive God and God will provide the resources we need to help others. We need only ask and seek His guidance.

God bless you all!

AMEN

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