

HOMILETICA ET HOMILIAE

—THE HERITAGE OF REFORMED PREACHING—

MJT 18 (2007) 199-207

SOWING AND REAPING: A PROVERB OF THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL¹

— *A Sermon on Hosea 8:1-14* —

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HOSEA 8 SOUNDS a siren. Do you hear it? The trumpet is put to the lips, blasting a panicked alarm: “Get ready! Danger is near!” An eagle hovers above, ready to swoop down upon its prey. Does the church still have an ear to hear the siren of warning?

In asking the question, we’re not talking only about once-faithful churches that have long ago forsaken the Lord and gone their own way. We’re talking about churches we know, that we pray for; churches we are part of. It is a question for us: Do we hear the siren? Or do we judge ourselves beyond the need of warning—beyond the reach of Hosea 8?

Notice that this chapter has a proverb, a law about sowing and reaping. Every farm boy understands how this works: from a handful of seeds comes a much larger harvest. If you sow a big bag of seed-corn, from it you can expect to harvest an entire field! Successful sowing is the precursor to great abundance. If you sow soybeans, more soybeans are expected. It’s a simple law. The proverb is obvious: *You reap what you sow.*

But what happens when you sow not seed but the *wind*? What will be the harvest? And in what *abundance*?

Israel—the *selected people* of the peoples of the earth, the God-blessed *covenant* people—is given a word from God’s prophet. It is a word for us, too—a word of a wailing siren, of a sounding trumpet. It tells us to

¹ This sermon was first preached at Lynwood United Reformed Church, 11 December 2005.

fear the Lord and flee from our sins, for the Lord hates our sins. Flight from sin is flight toward God, who is rich in mercy, who freely pardons, who loves us covenantally (faithfully and certainly), who is our patient Sovereign. That is also why this word tells us about sowing and reaping: *You shall reap what you sow—a proverb that applies to the law and the gospel.* Consider three aspects of this proverb:

- (1) The Proverb's necessity—point and sin's counterpoint (vv. 1-6)
- (2) The Proverb's verdict—sold as a slave to sin (vv. 7-9)
- (3) The Proverb's illustration—the ironies of sin (vv. 10-14)

I. The Proverb's Necessity—Point and Sin's Counterpoint

We see the necessity of this proverb from a certain kind of contest taking place here, a point/counterpoint contest. No sooner does Hosea announce the threat of the devouring predator overhead, he turns to explain why God would allow his own people to be consumed: "because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law." It seems to be a contradiction in terms—a *faithless, law-breaking* people of God. Indeed, it is. What a scandal! This should scandalize us and break our hearts, just as we are scandalized when any professing Christian, any believer, any pastor and church leader falls into gross sin. It is a contradiction. Things don't add up here—*God's people* break covenant. *God's people* rebel against his law. With unbelievers and pagans, this is expected. We aren't surprised when the playboy at work boasts of his conquests—but not our Christian brother. Not the church elder!

Likewise we should be shocked and embarrassed that Israel decided to trust her political savvy instead of trusting in her God. Reading through the book of Hosea we discover that she had decided to make alliances with foreign nations, with Assyria (12:1) and Egypt (7:11), while her faithless kings ignored the Lord (7:7). She looked around and did the computation; her calculations were quickly made: To get along in this world you need to be like this world. This amounted to a kind of spiritual whoredom, with Hosea's marriage to Gomer serving as a living parable of Israel's infidelity to God.

Meanwhile, Israel basked in economic sunshine. She counted herself favored by God. "My, my, we're blessed—and blessing is from the Lord, don't forget." Yet, while she boasted of her high standard of living, the priesthood wallowed in corruption, neither teaching the law nor enforcing it (see e.g., 4:4-10), so that God laments, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (4:6). Theologically askew and politically ill, Israel, the northern kingdom, ever felt the pinch with Judah, and feared the powerful threats of Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south.

Nonetheless, to her way of thinking, she "practiced" her faith, no question about that. But she was obsessed with false religion, and preferred it. She went through the motions, sure; in fact, she perfected "lip-religion"; she practically invented it. But her heart longed for and loved another. Her devotion was to Baal—how she enjoyed the lust-satisfying-

worship of this fertility religion. And so we learn that she gladly bowed herself to the golden calf (see 9:10-11:11).

In chapter 7 of his prophecy, Hosea describes Israel's spiritual whoredom in the way of her alliance with foreign powers: "Ephraim [another name for Israel] mixes with the nations; Ephraim is a flat cake not turned over" (v. 8) In other words, she mixed like flour into the batter of nations, and remained only half-baked at that—burned on one side, undone on the other, a reject! "Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless—now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria" (v. 11). Therefore God announces doom, "Woe to them, because they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, because they have rebelled against me! I long to redeem them but they speak lies against me. They do not cry out to me from their hearts but wail upon their beds. They gather together for grain and new wine but turn away from me" (7:13, 14). They cry to God *while sinning*; they do not cry to God in *turning from* their sin.

Remember, these are *covenant* people. But what does that mean? Who are God's people, anyway? One way to think about this (the boys and girls can use their crayons and draw it) is by making three circles, one circle inside the other, like a target with a bull's eye, so that the widest circle refers to the people of God's creation (in that sense everyone belongs to God; everyone is under his providential care). Then inside of that circle there is the people of God's covenant, the circumcised, and the now the baptized. But inside of God's covenant there is yet another circle—the circle of God's covenant keeping people. As for the covenant breakers, if they do not repent, if they persist in rejecting the covenant of grace, if they scorn and trample God's favor, they will meet the threatened sanction of God's justice. This means that whereas covenant and salvation ought to be coextensive, even as signs of the covenant testify to life, nonetheless, because of unbelief, they can trace out distinct boundaries, for some who are in the covenant walk in faithlessness and are on the broad road leading to destruction. All the while the covenant makes its claim upon them and calls them to repentance—as God does here through his prophet, as God still does to his church.

So much for covenant breakers. Covenant keepers, on the other hand, *do not rebel against the law*; they might transgress, but they also repent and seek to live by it, for the law itself declares that life before God is possible only by blood, only by sacrifice, only by forgiveness. The law proclaims the requirements of life with God, the law leads us away from ourselves, for it shows how hopeless we are in ourselves. We're failed sinners who will always fail unless God provides the remedy.

That should have given Israel pause. It should give us pause. Would we claim the covenant without Christ, the new covenant in *his blood*? Would we live before God without his sacrifice? Can we? Will we spurn his law, reject his Word? Would we announce the glories of the covenant while we remain estranged from Christ? Notice God's accusation, *the point* of his argument. Then notice Israel's sinful *counterpoint* in the words of verse 2: "Israel cries out to me, 'O our God, we acknowledge you!'" Do you see what is going on here? Israel pleads the covenant, falsely: God, we are Israel, we know you! We aren't illegitimate children.

We aren't Ishmaels. We aren't Esaus. We aren't phonies. We are faithful covenant folk.

Ah, but this is a tired song—in fact, we hear it again from the Jews of Jesus' day in responding to the Savior. "We are descendants of Abraham..." (John 8:33), "We have Abraham as our father..." (Luke 3:8), "We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow..." (John 9:28, 29). What a tired song! Birth and breeding don't add up to blessing. Not then! Not now! Not without rebirth and faith.

Actions speak louder than words. Israel rejects what is good—and surprise, surprise, an enemy nips at her heels. She sets up kings without divine consent, and chooses princes whom God doesn't want, and all the while she thinks she is fooling God (as we see in verses 3 & 4). But this won't do. The church today snubs her doctrinal heritage, chases theological fads, rewrites her confessions, or worse, ignores them altogether—that is, she rejects what is good, allows her children to grow up ignorant of the Bible and the faith—and surprise, surprise, how easily we are devoured. A bird of prey hovers above—a scary speck up in the sky that grows larger, comes nearer. The alarm sounds—prophet, preacher, and theologian warn. Will we listen? If we sow wind, what we reap will blow our lives apart. If we use our economic success in order to pursue idols, we do so, according to Hosea 8, to our own destruction. That is why this proverb is necessary.

And so we see here the point and sin's counter point. Israel argues with God.

Will we?

She defends herself; she even affirms her allegiance to him; she claims to love the old covenant story, the old, old story of Yahweh and his love. But God's call to repentance goes unheeded.

Lest you think that God simply announces punishment without calling to repentance, you should pay attention to verse 5, for there the call is explicit: "Throw out your calf-idol, O Samaria! My anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of purity?" (It is possible to translate this verse as God's rejection of their calf worship—as if God could have possibly been pleased with a people that thought they could worship him by means of the calf-image! The gall! The audacity! The rank theological stupidity of it all!) Indeed, Jeroboam's sin lives; his golden calves in Bethel and Dan, long ago declared to be Israel's "gods," still poison and sicken. These are mere gods after your own image (verse 6). Again, the contest. God's point: Israel is faithless! Israel's sinful counterpoint: we're faithful! So God says, "Sow your calf-worship, Israel, and know that reaping is on the way—the harvest will show you the purity of your profession."

We see, then, that the proverb of sowing and reaping finds its necessity, its context, in the face of hard hearts, stubborn rebellion, a shattered covenant membership. That proverb is a law of divine righteousness; it is even a law of nature written on our hearts. Rebellion and lawlessness pay out wages. Slavery and death are the paycheck.

II. The Proverb's Verdict—Sold as a Slave to Sin

In fact, that's the verdict of the proverb, for the proverb of sowing and reaping also announces a verdict of greater consequences. And so sin brings its harvest: the consequences of enslavement, of being sold as a slave to sin, addicted to it. In the words of verse 8: "Israel is swallowed up...."

Sometimes it seems that the only way we learn is the hard way. No doubt, some of us can testify to that. God tried the gentle approach. He nudged us; we refused to pay attention. He warned us—we were scraped and bruised a bit—but we still didn't take heed. Then he allowed us to taste the fruits of our wayward path. Our sins came back to harm us, hurt us, betray us. They hurt others. And *finally* (by his grace) we take notice. A father allows his temper to spoil his family's good cheer and embitter his children. The day arrives when he sees the crop he has grown. *Finally* he recognizes his sin as *sin*. He learns the hard way.

Israel is like that. In fact, the book of Hosea is a startling portrait of a rebellious people. As we noted earlier, God called his prophet to marry a woman of a shady reputation, of no reputation, a prostitute, in order to depict for Israel, through Gomer's adultery against Hosea, Israel's own adultery against her Lord. God plays hardball with his prophet and with his people. These matters aren't trifles. What a lost cause Israel has become—so bent, so warped, so full of herself! She is brazen like a woman who sells herself, giving sexual favors for money. We are told in verse 8 that "Israel is swallowed up; now she is among the nations like a worthless thing." Can you think of a worse indictment?—like *a worthless thing* (or as other translations have it: *a useless vessel*). What do we do with worthless things? We don't even put them on the garage sale, do we? Instead, we take such items to the dump. In this context, a useless vessel might well have been a piece of pottery broken apart, or with a big crack running down it so that it leaked. It therefore has become worthless, useless. Not even the junkman would want it. Throw it out! That is the indictment against Israel.

Jesus once said about saltless salt that it is good for nothing; it is cast out and trampled under foot. A saltless church, a covenant people cracked in half, so that all faith and obedience trickles out of her, all devotion and love for God and neighbor drips out and leaves her empty, makes her a useless vessel, too—sold as a slave to sin! There is no harsher verdict that can be spoken about us in the Bible, except perhaps Jesus words, "I never knew you; depart from me, you doers of iniquity" (Matt. 7:23).

This verdict however did not emerge from nowhere. It isn't out of the blue. Israel had cultivated it; she had carefully planted it, watered it, given it sunshine, weeded it, nurtured it. She walked in her sin; she pursued her idolatry lustfully. Her spiritual adultery wasn't a mere slip, a mishap. Like Hosea's wife, she bore children of adultery. Her unfaithfulness was calculated. Hosea makes the point explicitly in verse 7, "They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind." And extending his farming metaphor he declares that "The stalk has no head; it will produce no flour.

Were it to yield grain, foreigners would swallow it up.” It is all empty, dried up, and dead.

What is it to sow the wind? As such, it’s a sham. Instead of seed finding the soil, no real seed is sown—just the gesture of sowing, only wind. Yet, given the law of sowing and reaping, to sow wind is a dangerous thing to do, for the law of sowing and reaping tells us to expect a much larger harvest than what was first put into the ground. In other words, the law says to us: the consequences far outweigh the action; the outcomes are much bigger than the activities. To sow wind is to harvest a cyclone; a little wind produces tornadic currents of destruction, a steady, gentle breeze of blissful sinning becomes a hurricane of devastation. Sowing the wind of spiritual compromise gives us the whirlwind of foreign nations, unbelievers, God-haters who swallows us whole.

Of late, we have seen it too often on the evening news—human lives mauled by the mighty winds of nature: hurricanes, with human names attached to them, leave people homeless, jobless, hopeless. Tornados tear people from their homes; and they tear their homes to shreds, along with hopes and dreams. Lives lost—fathers, mothers, brothers taken. Orphans weeping! Some things are better left unsown, unplanted! Some harvests are unwelcome. Yet, like Israel, we mindlessly sow this seed anyway—we sow the wind of anger and bitterness, and then wonder why people avoid us; or we are surprised that there is so little joy in our lives. We sow the wind of a faultfinding spirit—we nick and pick and peck at everything and everybody—and wonder why the church’s fellowship is deflated and flat. You can’t get anywhere on the flat tires of such fellowship. You sow the wind of apathy, idleness—let someone else do it—and then lament that the young people have no appetite for God or the church. If you sow the wind of pride and self-righteousness, don’t be surprised to see the gospel emptied of Christ and the cross. Denominational pride, theological pride, being-on-the-right-side (or I’m right, you’re wrong) pride, or even worse, *covenant* pride, these bring a harvest without blessing, only sorrow. The church as *God’s covenant people* must take heed and consider what she is sowing.

We know, of course, that we are called to sow the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Israel was to be a light to the nations. She was to love God first and most. She was to practice charity and mercy; she was to protect the orphan and the widow. God’s people were to sow righteousness, justice, love, mercy, kindness, and grace. She was to sow hearts of sacrifice and service, humility and surrender, and of confession, “God have mercy on me, the sinner!”

Likewise, the church is to sow the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. We are to announce him; we are to sow the gospel that there is only One who is the way, the truth, and the life. For though Moses shows us the way, and declares the truth, and points to the life, he does not embody it. The law shows us our sins and reveals God’s way—holy, righteous, and good; but it is impotent to make us holy, righteous, and good; it is powerless to transform us and heal us. It convicts but does not convert. That is why the *word of promise* found in the law is the sowing of hope. The church sows the good message of the promise fulfilled, of

Christ come, of the advent arrived. We sow the good message of salvation in the child given, who rules the nations with an iron scepter. We sow this good message of the wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, and prince of peace (Isa. 9:6), for there is no other name under heaven by which people shall be saved (Acts 4:12). We are to sow the warning about a broad road that leads to destruction and the blessing of a narrow road that leads to life (Matt. 7:13, 14); we're to sow the good news, announcing that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8); we're to sow that glorious message that there is hope for "children of wrath," for God is rich in mercy (Eph. 2:1-6); and we're to sow Hosea's prophecy about alienated and unwanted such as ourselves (Gentiles according to the flesh), that the promise is also for those who are afar off whom the Lord our God shall call—the very same are loved and adopted. Indeed, those who were called "not my people" are called "my people," and those called "not my loved one," are called "my loved one" (Rom. 9:25, 26; Hos. 2:23).

Dear friends, wont we sow these things? Isn't this our calling and our privilege? Would we sow something else in our homes, in our church? Why do we flirt with the wind? Why do we toy with worldliness and compromise? Why do we treat theology like a plaything? We sow the wind when we preach the covenant *without Christ*, when we call God's people to serve him from their own resources, and transform a trusting Christ-focused-dependency-upon-God into living by one's resolve. We sow the wind when we transform the cross of Christ into a half measure, a part salvation—with the remainder up to us, as if the cross is merely a form of preventive grace—it fixes you up so that now you can do the rest yourself. What a heavy burden! What an oppressive yoke! What a half-gospel! Let us pray: "O Lord, make me faithful, but most all give me always and increasingly the One who was faithful in my stead and on my behalf. Gracious Lord, give me the Surety, give me Christ and all of his righteousness." Without sowing such prayers, we sow the wind of self-righteousness and proclaim ourselves.

Hosea reminds us afresh that we reap what we sow; sow the wind and the whirlwind is upon you. Israel is swallowed up by the nations she covered before. Like a wild donkey, wandering and alone, she cozies up next to the Assyrians. In fact, she is so lost, such a slave to sin, she, in the words of verse 9, "has hired lovers" or "sold herself to lovers." No longer is she merely likened to a harlot who sells sexual favors, now she is so despised and unwanted, she pays them to pay attention to her. She is so unsought after, so frantic for love, she is worse than a prostitute. The whirlwind she harvests leaves her enslaved. She sowed emptiness; she reaps divine justice.

III. The Proverb's Illustration—The Ironies of Sin

In fact, the proverb of sowing and reaping is further depicted for us here in Hosea 8 when the prophet shows us the ironies of sin—ironies that aptly illustrate the proverb. Here we can be brief.

Notice the sad irony—each verse setting forth a cheerless, mocking outcome, unexpected. Sinful wind is sown; harmful, scorning, destroying whirlwind is harvested.

Thus we read in verse 10 how they allied themselves with foreigners for security and peace. *The irony*: soon those foreigners will devour them, for Assyria is the eagle hover above. Doesn't the world devour us when we make peace with it and live for it? In verse 11 we read how they built altars for *sin offerings*. Sounds pious enough. Looks godly and sincere. *The irony*: these altars have become places of idolatry and so altars for *sinning*. Certainly some contemporary worship, even some of our worship, fares no better. From verse 12 we learn that God gives the law; God shows himself, reveals his will; blesses and announces his ways. *The irony*: Israel is now more stupid than when she lived in Egypt. They treat the law of God as a foreign, strange thing. In verse 13 it is evident that Israel still practices the prescribed religious rites. She offers sacrifices as Moses demands; she eats the meat. *The irony*: it is precisely their lip-religion (their going through the motions while their hearts are far from God) that the Lord despises most. The false worship they offer God brings heavier punishment upon themselves. She was once delivered from Egypt. The time will come when she will return to Egypt as refugee. Homeless, lost. Dear friends, let our worship be anything but perfunctory and false. Finally, in verse 14 we see that Israel thinks that her wealth, her bank-accounts and palaces, her fortresses are her security. She views these things as her help and strength—certainly not God, certainly not her Maker! *The irony*: never was Israel weaker.

Is the church stronger today because she is richer today? Are the Reformed and Evangelical churches of North America today more secure because we are more affluent? Maybe we better look again at what we are sowing—in worship, in the catechism class, at school, in the home. We can't serve both God and Mammon. Money won't save the church, for our strength is not in dollars and cents.

John the Baptist once urged the crowds, and especially the Scribes and Pharisees, to flee the wrath to come. He called them a brood of vipers (Luke 3:7; Matt. 3:7; 12:34; 23:33), and in doing so he was calling them to repentance. He sowed the seed of the Word of God in preparing the way of the Lord. As the last prophet of the Old Testament he sowed the seed of preparation, the way for Christ. And he reaped what he sowed. He prepared the way, Christ traveled on that path.

Our Lord was also a sower. He sowed the seed of salvation; he even planted himself into the ground of death and decay—he entered all the way in our curse—but he reaped his exaltation and our salvation. He sowed his life, giving it to the grave and curse, but reaps the harvest of his church, and the name above every name. He also, ironically, sows a wind of sorts—but not the wind of Israel's unbelief; rather he sows the Wind of God, the breath of God who is the Holy Spirit of God, God's divine breath who fills his church and indwells our hearts. He sows his Spirit, and reaps our faith and repentance, our worship, our cry for mercy, our prayer for his return.

You see, the proverb of sowing and reaping applies to the law of God and the gospel of God. If we spurn the law, if we wont repent, the whirlwind of judgment awaits. But if we sow faith in Christ, if we sow the seed of the gospel in our hearts, what we reap will not disappoint. The gospel seed is what every sinner needs. And we discover that sowing and reaping does not only show us the ironies of sin, it also shows us the ironies of grace. For aren't you and I "an irony," with our foibles and sins, our backslidings and failings, our pride and conceits? And yet God forgives us, straightens us, picks us up, calls us back, enlists us for service, even uses us. In myself I can't do anything, yet I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13). His preachers are brittle clay pots, but ironic grace uses them—hard pressed, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:7-9). The irony of the gospel is that God loves us while we are unlovable; Christ dies for us while we are yet sinners; the Spirit indwells us, though we are still corrupted with sin's taint. This is the wonderful irony that brings us home.

Sowing and reaping is a proverb of God's law and God's gospel. With his gospel there is no contest, no point/ counterpoint, there is only God's 'Yes,' which is also God's verdict; and it is illustrated each day, even now, when we call upon the Lord to be merciful to struggling sinners like ourselves. Sow the seeds of repentance, dear friends, sow the seeds of faith, sow obedience. Sow the Word of the Spirit of God, and reap the sevenfold Spirit of his blessing.

Amen