

Ploughing a Rock

by C.H. Spurgeon

The sermon warns against the folly of trying to plow a rock, which represents the futility of seeking happiness and satisfaction in things that are not capable of providing it.

Duration: 38:53

Scripture: Proverbs 26:11, Matthew 7:6, Matthew 13:15, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:18, John 12:40, Romans 10:16

Topics: "Worldly Pursuits", "Gospel Satisfaction"

Description

The sermon transcript discusses the futility of seeking satisfaction and fulfillment in worldly pursuits such as pleasure, wealth, and success. The author presents various examples of individuals who achieved greatness in their respective fields but ultimately found themselves unfulfilled and dissatisfied. The sermon emphasizes the importance of the gospel and the need for individuals to accept it in order to find true satisfaction. The preacher expresses frustration with those who refuse to accept the gospel despite repeated explanations and attempts to reach them.

Transcript

The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit. Plowing a Rock. A sermon published on Thursday, March 1st, 1906, delivered by C. H. Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, on Lord's Day evening, September 12th, 1875.

Amos 6, verse 12. Shall horses run upon the rock? Will one plow there with oxen? These two questions are evidently Oriental proverbial expressions. Proverbs have always been used by the wisest of men.

Solomon not only spoke and wrote a great many, but he also made a considerable collection of those uttered by others. We find in the writings of such notable thinkers as Socrates and Pliny and Aristotle an abundance of short, pithy sentences, many of which can be used as proverbs. Proverbs have great force in them because they are condensed wisdom.

They are generally most convincing. It is hardly ever possible to answer or controvert them. They carry truth home as an arrow has often been known to carry death to the person aimed at, for they strike, they stick, they penetrate, and they wound.

Our Lord Jesus very frequently made use of proverbs, nor was he singular in so doing. The prophets of old constantly employed them, and here in our text we see Amos, who from his occupation as a herdsman

and gatherer of sycamore fruit was probably more familiar with their use than some others of the prophets were, puts together two proverbs which were commonly used to signify that men do not, as a rule, continue to labor in vain and spend their strength for naught. Wise men do not send their horses to run upon the rocks, and they do not send their oxen to plow where all their toil would be wasted.

Shall horses run upon the rock, will one plow there with oxen? The answer implied is certainly not, and it means that if a thing cannot be done, or is not worth doing if it can, it will be well for us not to attempt to do it. Our text may have two bearings, first upon men and secondly upon God. First with regard to men, they are not usually so foolish as to try to plow a rock, yet many are as foolish as that in moral and spiritual matters.

I want to give you three or four illustrations of this fact. The first is that many persons have tried to find the way of safety and pleasure in the way of sin. Many a man has sought to get rich by injustice.

Possibly he has succeeded to a certain extent, but as a general rule it is notorious that ill-gotten riches are generally ill-spent and bring a curse upon their possessors. Some have thought that if they indulged their passions, they would have great enjoyment. Although their fathers warned them that such a sin would be like self-destruction and would make their whole life sad, they have not believed it would be so.

They have tried to plow this hard rock of sin and to find lasting pleasure therein. There are hundreds and thousands of men who are pursuing the way which is not good, and they know it is not good, yet they foolishly continue in it because they conceive it to be the path of pleasure. Nor can you beat that false notion out of their heads, do what you may.

On the contrary, they turn round upon you and call you a Puritan because you object to their style of living. Possibly they revile you as a hypocrite because you point out the evils of the way in which they are walking. Yet if they would but think at all seriously, they must perceive that the way of sin cannot lead to happiness.

It is absolutely inconceivable that God, who made the whole universe, should have arranged that the terminus of sin should be heaven, or should have made the path of evil lead to joy and peace. The judge of all the earth cannot have put a premium upon wickedness. In the long run it must be proved that sin brings forth sorrow, and the path of right is the path of peace.

Yet many will not see that it must be so, and they continue, even to the bitter end of life, to plow that rock, breaking the plowshare, wearing out the ox, and themselves dying a death of miserable disappointment, which if they had not been errant fools they would never have had to endure, for they would never have attempted so hopeless a task as that of trying to find any real pleasure in the ways of sin. As well might you sow the sea with salt, and expect to reap from it a harvest of golden sheaves. As well might you scatter firebrands, and expect to gather from them the cooling streams that flow from the mountain spring, as live in sin, and expect to receive happiness as the result of doing so.

See, O sons of men, such an act of madness as the plowing of this rock must ever be. Others are attempting another equally absurd task. They are hoping to find real joy in pursuits which are laudable in themselves, but which are entirely of this world.

Did you ever read the book called *The Mirage of Life*? It is a book which is well worth everyone's reading. The author gives in sets of pictures the life of the man of pleasure, the life of the courtier, the life of the

philosopher, the life of the statesman, the life of the warrior, and so on, with a very fair selection of facts from the lives of such men, with the object of showing that although each one of them was eminent in his own line of things, and apparently successful in that line, yet they all failed to find the precious jewel of solid satisfaction. Most of them lived in a sort of perpetual weariness, and when at last they died and their eyes were opened, they found that their pretty dreams had all vanished, and that the reality, when they beheld it, was dreary indeed.

There have been men, perhaps some of you have known them, who have had more wealth than you and I would care to count, yet they have thought themselves poor, and so they really were, for they were incapable of enjoying the riches which they had amassed. There have been men who have been crowned with laurel, who have had all sorts of honors heaped upon them, yet when a friend has wished them a happy new year, they have said, then it had need be a very different year from any that we have ever yet experienced. The high places of the world, like the mountaintops, are glassy with icy dangers, and they are cold with discontent.

Many try to clamber up to them, and a few reach the summit, but others perish in the crevices. Yet those who reach the summit often envy those who are in the vale below, and those in the valley envy those on the heights. For beneath yon moon there is no contentment to be found in earthly things, either in the peasant's hut or the monarch's palace.

The man whose arm is not long enough to grasp that which lies in the land beyond the stars will have to live and die without attaining to perfect satisfaction. Man, it is not here below that God has placed that which you want. The bread for your souls must come from heaven.

That which can satisfy your immortal spirit must be divine, like the Creator who made you. God alone can satisfy the cravings of your soul. Cease then to toil and tug and fret and fume, and waste your time and strength in seeking happiness in these bubbles of earth.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you, insofar as you need them. But as far as seeking them first, plough that rock no longer, for it will yield you no return for all your toil. Men of another sort are satisfied that the things of this world are not sufficient to render a man perfectly happy, so they have religious thoughts of a certain form.

They believe that they are very good and excellent, and they mean to make themselves still better, and so to get perfect peace by feeling that they are what they ought to be and have done what they ought to have done. I remember when I ploughed that hard rock and entertained the hope of getting a very fine crop off it. But I woke one morning to discover that the rock would not yield even the moss or lichen of comfort to me.

There was nothing on its surface that could bring me any contentment. Self-righteousness is a great cheat. The man who gets most comfort out of it simply gets that comfort because he is ignorant.

If he knew himself and knew God's law and knew the demands of inflexible justice, he would fling upon the nearest dunghill that self-righteousness of his, which looks like fair white linen, but which really is in God's sight nothing but filthy rags. O sirs, you cannot find your way to heaven by your own works, for the only way to heaven by works is perfectly to keep the law of God, and you have broken that law already. You must present this matchless vase, flawless and entire, at the gates of glory if you would be saved by works, but you have already shattered it in a thousand pieces.

How can you hope to mend it? That is impossible. The hope of salvation by a perfect life is over, and you must each one feel that your life has been imperfect already. Some hope that they will get perfect peace by the way of ceremonies.

Many people tell us that we are living in a very enlightened age, but I am inclined to think that Carlyle was uncommonly near the mark when he said that the United Kingdom contains about thirty millions of people, mostly fools. For it does seem as if people nowadays were fools to a very large extent. For instance, a man says that if we will come and confess our sins to him, he can forgive us in the name of God, and that he can, by sprinkling a few drops of water upon a child and uttering certain words, transform an air of wrath into an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven, and that if we come to what he calls an altar, he will give us the very blood and body of Christ to eat and drink.

When I was young, I thought that anybody who talked like that ought to be served like the gypsies who were put in prison for taking six pences from silly servants and pretending to tell their fortunes. And in later years I have been sometimes surprised that the law has not been put in motion against these gentlemen, for certainly the imposture which they seek to foist upon us is a far more terrible one than that of the fortune-telling gypsies. The so-called priest has no power to forgive sins, or to change the nature of the child he sprinkles, or to offer the sacrifice of the mass.

There is nothing more in him than there is in anybody else, and let him talk as loudly as he may. His pretensions are utterly vain and worthless. If you trust to him, the result to you will be the same as it has been to tens of thousands before you.

For you will find that all the ceremonies which men have invented, yea, and all the rites that God himself has given, cannot bring healing to a soul diseased, or hush the tumult of an awakened conscience, or bring the soul into a state of conscience reconciliation with the Most High. O sirs, you may be sprinkled, and confirmed, and immersed, and go to the communion table, and do I know not what beside, yea, you may travel along seven thousand leagues of ceremonialism, but you will be just as uneasy at the end as you were at the beginning. That is not the way of peace, neither will God make it to be so.

It is ploughing a rock, and no harvest can possibly come of it. Some are trying the equally impossible task of being saved by Jesus Christ, when they shall have prepared themselves for him. In other words, they talk about being saved by Christ, but in their heart of hearts, they do not think that Christ can save them till they have reached a certain standard of excellence.

Now we know from the scriptures that Jesus Christ came into the world to save his people from their sins, and he will do it from first to last, or not at all. He will be the Alpha and the Omega, the A and the Z of salvation's alphabet, or else he will have nothing to do with it. Yet thousands of hearers of the gospel are constantly saying, we will believe in Jesus when we feel our sins more, when we feel more repentance, when we have done this and felt that and experienced the other.

Ah sirs, this plan of bringing Christ in at the vague end of the work, after you have accomplished the first part of it yourselves, is a most foolish mistake, and a fateful one too. It is like setting oxen to plough rock. Let me ask you, are you any better than you used to be? You have been trying for a long while to make yourselves ready for Christ.

Are you any more ready than you were at the first? Has it never struck you that hearts lines are true? If you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all. Thus I have shown you how the text can be applied

with regard to men. Now secondly, I want to show you how these proverbs can be applied with regard to God.

Shall horses run upon the rock? Will one plough there with oxen? God does not always continue to do that, which after a certain period turns out to be unprofitable. Dear friends, there are some of you, I pray God to grant that there may not be any of you of whom this will remain true, but it is at present true that there are some of you to whom the gospel has come in vain. Up till now, so far as you are concerned, the gospel plough has only gone across a rock.

The truth preached in your hearing has not gained an entrance into your heart. Oh, how many come and hear us preach merely that they may compare us with other preachers. They pass certain criticisms upon our mode and manner and matter.

We do not know and we do not care what they say, but the point that really concerns us is that we cannot get the gospel plough into them. We cannot make them feel and repent and believe. A great master of the art of preaching once said when his congregation complimented him on his having delivered a fine discourse, there is another sermon lost.

He did not want his hearers to praise his discourse. He wanted them to feel the power of the truth which he had preached to them, and so do we. But there are some hearers into whom we do not know how to get the truth.

We may put it first in one way and then in another way, sometimes pathetically, and at other times we may make use of a little humor. We may denounce or allure, but we are equally foiled in whatever way we attempt to reach them. We cannot get the plough in where we want it to go, and if ever the share does seem to make a little impression, it only produces a slight surface scratch.

Some of you have had a good many of those scratches. You have thought, when I get out of this place, I will go home and pray, but you have not done so. Or if you have prayed, your seriousness has soon vanished, and the impression made upon you in the service has expended itself in that prayer.

And what is worst of all, in some of you, God's dealing with you in the preaching of the gospel has developed the hardness of your hearts. It has made others realize how hard they are, and truth to tell, it has really hardened them. Ploughing does not harden rocks, but preaching does harden sinners if the gospel does not reach their hearts.

And of all hard-hearted men, the hardest are those who have been hardened in the fire of the gospel. If you want to find a heart that is as hard as steel, you must look for one that has passed to the furnace of divine love and has been made aware of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, but has rejected the truth that has been made known to it. This hardening of heart is not the fault of the plowshares which have been used, and with some of you, God has used a great many.

There is a man here who used to be plowed by God when he was a child, and the plowshares employed then were his mother's tears. He cannot forget them. Even now as I bring them to his memory, he feels as if he must weep as he did when he was a child.

Ah, my friend, that mother of yours is in heaven now, but if she could look down upon her son and tears could be shed in heaven, what cause would she have to weep over you? She prayed for you, and when you were nestling in her bosom and she took you to the house of God from your very early days, you can

remember her very look when she used to speak to you about Jesus when you were quite a little child, and perhaps you remember her dying request that you would follow her to heaven. But that plowshare, one of God's best, has never cut into your rocky heart yet, and you still remain as hard as ever you were. Since that time God has tried you with the plowshare of personal sickness.

You have not always been such a strong man as you are today. Time was when you lay very near the gates of death and you trembled at the prospect before you. Do you remember when the fever seized you, or when you thought the cholera had claimed you as its victim? You did tremble then, and you made many vows which all proved to be lies, and you made a profession of repentance, but it was a mere profession.

And though you appeared just for a little while to be touched, and those who were around you who had prayed for you hoped that at last the plowshare had entered into you, they found that you rose up from that bed of sickness worse than you were before. Since then God has used another sharp plowshare upon you, the conversion of some of those who are very near and dear to you. You were not at all pleased when your wife came home a converted woman, but you could not help feeling it.

And when your sister wrote and told you that she was rejoicing in Christ as her Saviour, you could not pour ridicule upon the letter, and as you read it, it brought tears to your eyes. You quickly wiped them away, and said that you were not such a fool as to trouble about so absurd a matter, and yet it was not easy for you to forget the emotion which the news had caused. Possibly your own dear child, whom you love very much, has made a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, yet you do not know anything experimentally about such a faith as that.

This is a very sharp plowshare, and none can think lightly of it but those who are unaware of its operation. To have your relatives and friends converted, and to be yourself left out of the happy circle of blessing, to make you think seriously about this matter, another plowshare has gone across your rocky heart from the fact that some of your old companions are dead. One was buried this week, was he not? You used to drink and smoke with him, but there will be no more pipes and beer on a Sunday night for you two.

You know right well that he died without the fear of God in his heart, and you also know that you are living in the same sad and perilous condition. It gave you quite a shock when someone said to you, Old Tom is dead. You have also seen several of your business friends die.

There was that clerk who was in the office with you a little while ago. He is gone, and you have been called to occupy his place. Death has come awfully near you again and again.

You have been like a soldier on the field of battle, who saw the ranks on every side of him moan down, and yet he still lived on. God's plow has been at work with you. He has been trying by these striking providential dealings to touch your hard heart, but it has not yielded yet.

Do you think that God means to keep on plowing you to no effect? If you do, you are wonderfully mistaken, for the oxen will not always plow upon this rock, and when it comes to this pass, that neither can love melt you nor tears subdue you, God will say Ephraim is joined to idols. Let him alone. And when God says that, your doom will be sealed.

May God grant that he may never have to say that concerning any whom I am now addressing. I have not shown you that you have been like a piece of granite rock, untouched by all the different plow shares which have been tried upon you. There is another thought that you must not forget, and that is you have

wearied the workers.

I pity the poor oxen that have to plow a rock. They plod on and on, and all their toil is wasted. The hardest form of labor is that which produces no result.

I remember being in a military prison where they punished the men by making them carry cannon balls from one end of the yard to another and bring them back again, a very senseless practice. The sergeant who accompanied me said, when we let the men carry the balls from this end of the yard to make them into a pyramid at the other end, there was some kind of amusement in the task. So the rule was made that the man must carry the ball from this end of the yard and bring it back again.

And in his toil seems to be so altogether fruitless that it becomes a double punishment to him. It is certainly a very great trial for a man to have to work for nothing and to feel that all he is doing will result in nothing. There are some of us who have had to do with you unconverted folk, and we have sometimes felt that we have been very hardly used.

We oxen that have to plow such hard rocks as you are. The first part of my text says, shall horses run upon the rock? I remember going over a smooth rocky place in the Alps, which is called Hell Place, because it is so very slippery. Well, horses could not be expected to run over rocks like those, and it is not surprising that they sometimes trip.

And if the preacher occasionally trips, it is little wonder when he has such rocks as those to go over. George Herbert says that the sins of here sometimes make the preacher trip, and so it is. There is often in the here that which makes the preacher speak amiss.

I remember pleading one night here with all my soul, and I said, If some of you who are listening to me never mean to accept Christ as your Savior, do not continue to sit in this place and hear the gospel, but go away and let somebody who will accept Him occupy your seat. I did not think that one of my heres would take me at my word, but there was one over whom I am never ceased to lament, and for whom I still pray, who says that he will never come here again, because he is one of those who will never receive Christ, and though he would still like to hear me preach, he will never occupy another person's place. It was a mistake on my part to say just what I did, but I do not think I should have tripped like that if the rock had not been so hard and smooth.

It is hard for a horse to have to run upon such a rock as that, and it is hard for the oxen to keep on plowing there. I have had over twenty years of this kind of plowing upon some of you, and I have made nothing of you yet. Thank God there are not many of your sort, but there is still a remnant left of the old Park Streeters who were almost persuaded then, and they are almost persuaded still, and I am almost persuaded that I shall never be able to do them any good.

It seems to me that there is nothing which I can say that will ever reach their hearts, or else surely it would have reached them before now. I am always glad when I hear that some other preacher attracts them and that they are listening to him with interest, for as long as they get saved, I shall not mind how it is done. Still, it is a hard line for us to have to preach for twenty years to some of you and to have all that labour for nothing.

If anybody would teach me how to preach better, I would gladly go to school again and learn how to get at some of your hearts. If they would teach me how to speak in such a vulgar style that I should lose my

reputation but be blessed to the saving of your souls, I would willingly fling my reputation to the wind. Or if I could learn the art of oratory, I would go and sit at the feet of Cicero or Demosthenes if I could but get at your superfine hearts that want such fine words before they will be touched.

But I fear that it is the oxen's fate to go on ploughing and ploughing and ploughing and to get weary with the labour and yet to see no result of it at all. One other thing that I want you to recollect, you who remain unconverted after all this effort, and that is, if the same labour which had been lost upon you had been used elsewhere, there, it might have been profitable. Christ said concerning Bethsaida and Chorazin a very wonderful thing which I do not fully understand but which I absolutely believe.

If the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. It is a very extraordinary thing that God should send the gospel to men who do not get any good out of it and not send it to people who would have got good out of it. There are people possibly even in London, certainly in other parts of the earth, who would have been converted if they had heard the gospel as much as you have done.

Yet you have heard it and have not been converted. That same digging about and dunging that would have made other trees bring forth much fruit has been used in vain upon you, for you have brought forth no fruit and you have stood there and occupied a plot of ground which a better tree might have occupied. You have cumbered the ground.

Do you think that God will always allow you to do that? Have you, you who live in the country and have a large orchard, have you a tree that has borne no fruit for many years? I am sure that if so, you mean to have it cut down before long, and God means to have some of you cut down, and that ere long it may be. I tremble even as I speak to you thus, for I may be a prophet foretelling the destruction of your soul. May God in His infinite mercy grant that you may repent ere His acts of judgment falls upon you.

Any man in his senses, when he finds that the rock will not break, gives up ploughing it. The ancient proverb says, Will one plough there with oxen? And God, though infinitely merciful, is equally wise. And if, after the use of means which are blessed elsewhere, any heart still remains hard, he may fairly say, I have done with it.

I give it up to its natural rockiness, and so let it continue forever. That is the end of the matter, and a terrible end it is, and I do not know anything more that I can say about it. I have preached the gospel thousands of times, and I have nothing to preach but the gospel.

But these people will not have that, so what more can I say to them? A man came to me the other day and asked me to pray for him. He was one to whom I had many times explained the gospel. And after I had again done so, he said to me, Will you pray for me, sir? I said, No, I will not.

He asked, Why not? And I replied, Do you want me to ask God to save you apart from the gospel? I have told you the gospel again and again. Will you accept it? If you will not, I shall not ask God to save you. How can I do so? I cannot expect him to save you if you will not have the gospel.

If you will have it, that will save you. If you will not have it, you will be lost, and it is of no use for me to pray for you. There I had to leave the matter so far as that man was concerned.

But let me say this much to God's people. You see that we cannot do anything with this rock. The oxen are quite tired out with their useless labor.

So let us pray to God to turn that rock into good soil. It needs a miracle to be wrought, and only God can work it. Let us unite our prayers and cry to God, O Lord, thou didst change our rocky hearts into good soil where the good seed could enter and germinate and grow.

Change these rocks we beseech thee. Here is the reason for our prayer meetings and for our private intercession. We can do nothing with these rocky hearts, so let us turn to God who can do everything.

Then may I add that if you will pray God to change these rocky hearts, I will go on preaching to them. The weary ox will go on plowing again, hard as it has found the work for these twenty years and more. If you will pray, I will preach.

If you pray God to make the rock friable and break it up, I will plow it again. And I should not wonder if the plow shall get into some of them at last, so that there may yet be a golden harvest to God's honor and glory. Let me put the plow in one minute more.

The greatest rock-breaking plow that I know of is the one that broke me up. If that will not do it, I do not know of any other that will. When Christ died upon the cross, among other wonderful things that happened, we read that the rocks rent and the graves were opened.

Ah, it was a dying Christ that rent the rocks. Sinner, listen once more to the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Thou hast offended and grieved thy God, and thy God is just, and must punish thee for thy wrongdoing.

But in order that he may not punish thee, he has taken upon himself thy nature, and come into this world to suffer in the sinner's stead, and born what was due to human sin in his own body on the tree. Out of pure love to those who were his enemies, out of love to those hearts that are so hard that they will not love him, out of love to those who have perhaps for fifty years rejected and despised him, for the sake of love alone he died upon that tree, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God. And now, if thou wilt trust him, thou shalt at once have the pardon of all thy sins.

If thou wilt trust him, thou shalt be to the great Father's bosom pressed, once for all a child confessed. Thou shalt be cleansed in a moment, and accepted and saved forever, if thou dost trust the incarnate, dying, risen, glorified Redeemer. God grant that this ploughshare of the cross may touch thee.

Law and tares I know full well do not affect some men, but almighty love will not that affect them? God grant that it may, and unto him shall be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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