

SOWING & REAPING

“Sowing and Reaping”: Dwight L. Moody’s 1899 Mormon Tabernacle Sermon Kyle Beshears

On a snowy Easter Sunday, April 2, 1899, Dwight Lyman Moody stood from his chair to approach the pulpit. Most heads in the congregation were bowed in prayer as the famous evangelist shuffled across the stage. There were thousands of them—upwards of 6,500—and they were quite unlike the people to whom he was accustomed to preaching.¹ Moody, the Protestant evangelist, was in Salt Lake City, standing in the famous Mormon Tabernacle, facing a sea of Latter-day Saints.

It wasn’t his first time. Twenty-eight years earlier, in June 1871, he preached at the exact same spot by invitation of Brigham Young. And other non-Mormons guests, like presidents and celebrities, would be invited to speak after him. But when the prayer concluded, and all eyes drew upward to Moody, he doubtless felt the significance: a Protestant preaching to Latter-day Saints in their primary assembly space.

What did Moody say, and how was it received? What follows is a reconstruction of Moody’s sermon based on three sources recorded in *The Salt Lake Herald*, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, and *The Deseret Evening News*. Non-italicized text are direct quotes from the articles while *italicized* text are a blend of both commentary and quotes to fill in gaps.



The Salt Lake Tribune, April 2, 1899

Sermon Reconstructed

“There are many important verses in the Bible, but I want to get the text today in the hearts of the people. I will read these two verses, although I shall only preach on the first; they are the seventh and eighth verses of the sixth chapter of Paul’s epistle to the Galatians” [Galatians 6:7–8]:

“Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting.”

“The speaker told of preaching from this text in the Tabernacle twenty-eight years before.”²

“I was here twenty-eight years ago [June 1871],³ and I believed that then, but I believe it a thousand times more now; it has been burning deeper and deeper into my heart with every year. There is nothing new about that truth; it is as old as man. God made Adam reap before he left Eden, and it has been so through all the ages.”

“‘Be not deceived.’ There isn’t a man or woman out of Christ in this house who is not laboring under a terrible delusion. Every child knows what it is to be deceived. You know what it is: you have been deceived by your friends and by the god of the world. There is the difference, for the God of that book [the Bible] never has and never will deceive. And do not try to deceive Him; there is no folly like trying to deceive the Almighty; He knows each of us personally, and our secret thoughts, and it is impossible to deceive Him. Some people don’t believe this and there is a class in this world laboring under this delusion. They think a thing isn’t so because they don’t believe it.”

“It is God’s eternal decree that we must reap as we sow. You may not think so, but that does not alter the fact. A lie is a lie, and the truth is the truth, whether you believe it or not. This law meets every man; you can’t get over it or under it or around it, for it is God’s law; didn’t God make David reap, even if he was a saint, and didn’t He make Eli reap, though he was a priest?”

Moody then outlined the sermon beneath four headers, although he said “he didn’t ordinarily believe in dividing a sermon into firstly, secondly, thirdly and so on, but on this occasion he would divide his talk into four heads and stick to them if he could.”⁴



The Salt Lake Tribune, April 2, 1899

Man Expects to Reap When He Sows

“The first head, I will only touch upon, for it is self-evident no farmer would plant if he did not expect to reap; no merchant would but if he did not expect to sell and reap a reward; you all expect to reap when you sow. Certainly no man who didn’t expect to reap would sow.”

[Man] Expects to Reap the Same Kind of Seed He Sows

“You expect to reap the same kind of seed that you sow. That is the law of the natural world, and it is the law of the spiritual world. If you are at home when a neighbor calls, but you tell your child to say that you are out, in six months that child will lie to you.”

Moody pressed the illustration by relaying how “mothers had complained about the falsehoods told by their children. He was not surprised at it for in most of such cases the lie had been sown by the parents.”⁵

“If you sow lies you will reap them every time. And you know that ‘birds of a feather flock together,’ so a liar will have liars about him. If you tell your servant to lie for you, you needn’t be surprised when that servant lies to you. There are society lies and political lies, and white lies and black ones, and I don’t know how many nowadays, but a lie is a lie no matter what it is called. If you teach your clerk to cheat your customers, he will surely cheat you and you needn’t be surprised—that’s where our defaulters come from. This [is] not astonishing when the merchants themselves set the example of deceit. What this nation needs is a revival of righteousness.”

“In this text is the strongest argument against selling whisky. Leave out the morality or temperance part of the question, if you will, and I tell you no man can afford to sell whisky. If you make my son a drunkard, someone will make your son a drunkard; if you sow whisky you will reap drunkards; it is inevitable. I challenge you to show me any man who has been dealing in whiskey for twenty years who has not had the curse come home to himself or some member of his family. If you are in the whisky business, get out; don’t sell out, but take an axe and knock in the heads of your barrels and let the damnable stuff run into the gutters. Do you say you must sell whisky or starve? Why, the word needs a martyr, and it would be a great thing to have on in Salt Lake City.”

“If you sow brothels, you will reap adultery. I knew a man who rented his property as a brothel at a great price; he had no daughters, but his four lovely sons went to destruction through that very building. I tell you that the man who rents his property for use as a barroom is as guilty as the man who sells the whisky. Plant brothels and you will raise adulterers. If you plant sin, you will reap it, it has been so through all the ages. Am I right? If I am, there is nothing more solemn than this in the Bible.”

“Jacob is sneered at often because of his rascality in getting Esau’s birthright, and religion is included in the sneer, because Jacob is held up as a saint. Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright, but he paid ten thousand times more for it than it was worth, and he was punished straight through life. Why, he worked seven years for Rachel [Gen 29:15–20] and then discovered that he had been married to the wrong woman [Gen 29:21–25]. Wasn’t that punishment? He sowed deceit and reaped it. Jacob sowed a lie and his best beloved son was sold into captivity but his brothers [Gen 37:12–28], who came back and told him [Jacob] that he [Joseph] had been killed by a wild beast [Gen 27:32–33]. His lie got back home at last. Every lie you’ve told, if God’s hasn’t put it away, is on your track, and sooner or later will overtake you.”

“I have heard men laugh at David’s downfall. I had rather put this hand in the fire than do that, for if ever a man was punished David was. He committed adultery, murder and rebellion, and reaped all three. The king on his throne and the peasant must all reap; rank makes no difference.”



The Salt Lake Tribune, April 2, 1899

[Man] Expects to Reap More Than He Sows

“Then a man reaps more than he sows. Jacob mourned twenty years for Joseph, cried through weary nights for his favorite, whom he thought dead. He told one lie, and ten sons, each with a lie on his lip lied to him; that lie had come him. If Jacob, the grandson, the third from Abraham had to reap way back in the early dawn, don’t you think we’ll have to reap in the blaze of Calvary?”

“It [takes] longer to reap than it does to sow. I have been forty years building up a Christian character, but I can blast it before the sun goes down tonight; it takes lone to build up, but a short time to tear down.

Moody then “told of a man occupying a reasonable position, who committed a crime while drunk, and pictured his return after four years in the penitentiary. He found his old friends cold, everybody against him, and the world bleak and cheerless.”⁶

“He sowed in a moment, but he was a long time reaping; he reaped in prison and through all his after life.”

Ignorance of the Kind of Seeds Makes No Difference

“Ignorance of the kind of seed makes no difference. If you saw a farmer sowing seed that he knew nothing about, you would say he was a lunatic. When he sows he knows that he is planting good seed; he is sowing for one season, we are sowing for time and eternity.”

“Let’s look at the seed and see that it is good. How do you treat the Bible? Do you think it’s old fashioned and unworthy of belief? Then you will have a black harvest.”

Moody pivoted toward reproofing wayward children, especially young men who “drive their parents into their graves by reckless dissipation and neglect.”⁷

How do you treat your father and mother? Do you say they are old fashioned; that when you were young they crammed too much religion down you? Do you make fun of them? I protest against it. God have mercy on the man who goes about saloons dishonoring his parents. How long have you been away from home? How long is it since you have written to your mother or your father? Tell me how you treat your parents and I will tell you what your harvest will be.”

Moody followed this point with a story about “a loving mother and a dutiful son which seemed to find personal application in the hearts of many of his hearers.”⁸ He “drew a picture of a mother’s love, its sweetness and dear simplicity and all-pervading tenderness; its unselfishness and purity. It was a lovely, a true and a sad picture, eloquently portrayed that sorrow that came to loving hearts when the boy went wrong.”⁹



The Salt Lake Herald, April 3, 1899

“We only hand our best murderers; the worst ones are never touched. The man who comes into my home at night and stabs me to the heart for money is a very prince of good fellows compared to the boy who puts his heel on his mother’s heart and takes five years to crush it to powder [or the] man who reels home drunk, night after night, to the loving hearts waiting there, and who curses the gray hairs of his parents if he is remonstrated with; who takes five years to murder them by inches—that man is the meanest man unhung. God help us to so good seed in our homes.”

Moody concluded by asking “all who wished henceforth to sow nothing but good deed to stand. Nearly every person in the big audience rose and remained standing during the final prayer and benediction.”¹⁰

Reception

Intense interest in Moody’s visit prompted reporters to take detailed notes of his services. The evangelist was invited by representatives of the YMCA and Salt Lake Ministers Association to preach at the First Congregational Church while traveling between California and Chicago. But after his first evening of preaching, when the Congregational church buckled at its seams, leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offered Moody the Tabernacle to preach on Easter Sunday.

Moody’s sermon was well-received by the largely Latter-day Saint audience. Many of the moralistic themes resonated with the ethical code of the Church. They affirmed Moody’s diagnosis of personal, familial, and societal ills, but many were left wanting more. A *Deseret Evening News* opinion piece “was full of truth,” they opined, “told with vividness and dramatic force.”¹¹ Still, something was missing; Moody’s proposed cure for society’s illness. “As a rule it is not fair to criticize a sermon for what is not in it,” they acknowledged, “but to a great many it

seemed strange that the celebrated speaker, before an audience of six or seven thousand people . . . did not explain the plan of salvation.” True, Moody “emphasized with terrible force the consequences of lying” and all manner of sins, “but of the remedy little or nothing was said.”

“What would be thought of a physician who should tell his patient that he is suffering from a dangerous fever and then leave no prescription,” they wondered? Moody had, in fact, articulated his gospel message before and after his Tabernacle sermon, but at a different venue and before a different audience. Not everyone appreciated Moody’s message. Apparently, at some point, he shared his conviction that baptism was a non-salvific ordinance, which is a theological departure from Latter-day Saint doctrine. At General Conference later that month, a church leader “took issue with Evangelist D. L. Moody, who asserts that ordinances such as baptism and laying on hands are unnecessary.”¹² “Anti-Christ says these ordinances are non-essential,” he warned.¹³

¹ “Rev. Moody’s Sermon,” *Salt Lake Herald* 28, no. 16, April 3, 1899. The maximum seating capacity of the Tabernacle was approximately 8,000. The facility was among the largest in the United States at the time. “The ‘Temple Block,’ Salt Lake City,” *Scientific American* 66, no. 6 (February 6, 1892), 83.

² “Moody in Tabernacle,” *Salt Lake Tribune* 58, no. 169, April 3, 1899. It is possible Moody spoke on more than one topic in 1871; one newspaper reported Moody preaching on “salvation for all.” “Services At The Tabernacle,” *Deseret Evening News* 4, no. 167, June 5, 1871.

³ Moody preached at the Tabernacle on Sunday, June 4, 1871, by invitation of Brigham Young. “Services.”

⁴ “Moody in Tabernacle.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Tabernacle Sermon,” *Deseret Evening News* 49, no. 112, April 3, 1899.

⁷ “Moody in Tabernacle.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Rev. Moody’s Sermon.”

¹⁰ “Moody in Tabernacle.”

¹¹ “Moody at the Tabernacle”

¹² *The Salt Lake Herald* 28, no. 21, April 8, 1899.

¹³ *The Salt Lake Tribune* 58, no. 174, April 8, 1899.