



**February 6, 2023**

Hi Prayer Partners,

Welcome to 2023. Already February is upon us. Where did January go? Wanda and I prayed you would all enjoy the holiday break and find the slower pace a time to refresh and renew those family ties. We've also prayed for our friends in Auckland and the far North who have endured copious amounts of rain. It's encouraging to read the CCCNZ church families have been working hard to support and help the many who have been affected.

January gave me the quiet time to reflect on the past year and to wonder about the potential for us all in 2023. With this in mind, I take this opportunity to offer some guidance and encouragement for the year ahead:



I've heard it a good number of times already this year. More than normal. A phrase that is expectantly a reflective resolution. People have been saying, '**I hope 2023 is better than last year.**' Although the thoughts are aimed at life in general, these sentiments have been echoed in churches too.

In January I started reading through the Gospel of Matthew. I kept returning to Chapter 13 and rereading the parable of the weeds. It's fascinating. As I've pondered this remarkable teaching of Jesus, I don't recall ever hearing a sermon on these particular

verses. That's been to my loss, because this parable has helped me understand the disappointments and grief of the last two years.

In Matthew Ch. 13 Jesus taught...

*24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.*

*27 "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 28 "An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'*

*29 "No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"*

When the disciples asked for an explanation...

*37 He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.*

*40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.*



These words of Jesus are remarkable. Through a simple farming/gardening illustration, they insightfully help us understand the complexities of our world and our times.

In brief... Jesus came and sowed good seeds on this earth.  
The good seeds are those who believe in Christ.

God's enemy, Satan, plants weeds among the good seeds.  
The weeds remain until harvest day comes.

One day every weed will be destroyed.  
On that day, the good and true seeds (believers) are harvested to be in God's kingdom.

## *It becomes even more challenging when the world's weeds surface in the church.*

When Jesus spoke this illustration and explanation to his disciples, He was giving them (and us) the big picture on how the good seed and the weeds engage in the world. Clearly, the weeds have the opportunity to choke the good seed, but in His wisdom, the Lord chooses to trust the roots of the good seed. Jesus put it another way in John 17:14-15 when He said, *'they are in the world, but not of the world.'* Admittedly, it's hard living as good seed in a world full of weeds. It becomes even more challenging when the world's weeds surface in the church.

It's good to know that in a messy world, God's plans are not thwarted. Although Matthew 13 reveals the ultimate end for weeds and seeds, it also gives hope for the here and now. One day the good seed will reap the harvest of their actions but until that time, we live among many weeds.

As I look back over the past two years, I see the enemies' weeds on every continent. Our world has experienced political turmoil, civil unrest, wars, economic crisis, not to forget a global pandemic. We've witnessed shocking violence, raging oppositions and flashpoint revolts around the world. Increasing tensions were evident as individuals strongly opposed other opinions. People became combative as immoral values, radical agendas and unwanted decisions were forced on them.

Criticism was loud and cynics spread their theories far and wide online. Lies became headlines. Conformity was debated, truth was compromised, confusion reigned, and many experienced inner fears. Choking weeds have sprouted everywhere in the world.

The full emotional toll has yet to be revealed but it seems that a toxic cloud of fear and uncertainty continues to linger over the land. It appears the world has stumbled through one traumatic event only to be confronted with another. It's been an aggressive and dramatic 24 months as we've witnessed our country's shortcomings. It's easy to understand why society is hoping for a better 2023.

*Divisions were created as antagonism  
flowed through the veins of church life.*

The church has not been sheltered from the world's trials. Sadly, over the last two years weeds have taken root in churches. It has been heart-breaking to hear of arguing, disagreement, dissention, anger, malice and obstinance bristling among our church families. No matter what side people took over a variety of issues, there was often a spirit of disrespect and ugliness. Divisions were created as antagonism flowed through the veins of church life. This troublesome narrative should have had no place among us, yet people perpetuated their inflexible political and social opinions allowing negativity, agitation and bad civility to spread in the church.

It wasn't easy being a church leader when the New Zealand government ordered that the church should adhere to the lockdown mandate. Every church leader I know wrestled with and prayed about what to do. Before God they did their best to respond theologically and practically as they shepherded their flocks. Struggling with situational ethics, all of them tried to honour the Lord with their outcomes. Nevertheless, people they called brothers and sisters in Christ chastised the decisions, vented their frustrations, accused leaders of selling out, exaggerated their position and walked away from their church family. It hurt and the church body still aches. That is not what good seed does.

*Our work is to germinate unity, not indifference.*

The lack of forgiveness, patience, kindness, understanding and gentleness has been worrying. This is not who we are. Clearly, over the last couple of years weeds were sown in our land, but even worse, it was disheartening discovering weeds had found a home in the church. Our work is to germinate unity, not indifference. God's people are called to sow the kernels of *'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'* (Gal. 5:22-23). Our ministry is about seeds not weeds.

With 2023 now upon us, we have a fresh opportunity to push our roots deeper into Christ and deliberately choose to not feed the weeds. As people who have accepted the good seed into our hearts, let's commit to sowing what God sows.

- Our business is to sow God's truth into every human heart.
- Our seeds of blessings are what our hurting communities need.
- Seeds of repentance will smother the weeds of resentment.
- Let's bless and not berate.
- Let's bring mercy and not mayhem.

As God's seed on this land, we are compelled to have a laser focus on propagating good seeds while living in a world full of weeds.

This year, may we plant seeds that reconcile and prune the weeds that revile.

Let's leave the weeds to their ultimate destruction and attend to sowing Gospel seeds which can cultivate true hope to a troubled world.

The choice is ours.

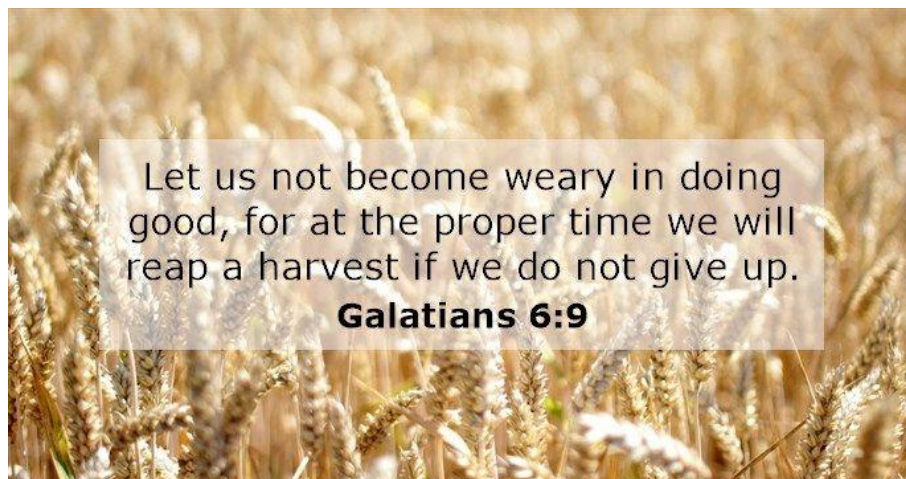
Will it be seeds or weeds?

**I hope that 2023 is a better year than last year.**

Read a related article on:

*What About the Families Who Didn't Return to Church After COVID?*

[https://churchleaders.com/children/443848-what-about-the-families-who-didnt-return-to-church-after-covid.html?utm\\_source=cl-today&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=button&utm\\_campaign=cl-today-&maropost\\_id=745857170&mpweb=256-9921818-745857170](https://churchleaders.com/children/443848-what-about-the-families-who-didnt-return-to-church-after-covid.html?utm_source=cl-today&utm_medium=email&utm_content=button&utm_campaign=cl-today-&maropost_id=745857170&mpweb=256-9921818-745857170)



Blessings

Graham Ashby