

8.46

Luke 9:62—Thomas Hardy and a Gospel Song

In Luke 9:62, Jesus comments on the half-hearted commitment of a would-be follower by saying, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The saying employs an agricultural image: in order to plow straight furrows, one must look ahead at a fixed point; if one looks back to see if the furrow is straight, the plow will almost certainly move to the side.

Because of this saying, “Keep your hand to the plow” became a popular expression for “Focus on the future.” In a broader sense, keeping one’s hand to the plow implies persistence and a refusal to give up.

Tess of the D’Urbervilles

In Thomas Hardy’s 1891 novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, a preacher named Alec takes a break from his mission to court Tess. He tells her, “I believe that if the bachelor-apostle, whose deputy I thought I was, had been tempted by such a pretty face, he would have let go the plough for her sake as I do.”

The “bachelor-apostle” would be Paul, and Alec apparently thinks that it was Paul (not Jesus) who said one who has put hand to the

plow should not look back. In any case, he realizes that this is what he is doing but thinks Tess's charms should admit an exception.

Gospel Plow

The imagery from Luke 9:62 also figures heavily in an American gospel song. Variouslly called "Gospel Plow" or "Hold On," it is often associated with Bob Dylan, who recorded it on his 1962 self-titled debut album. The composer is unknown, however, and though first published in 1940, it had been sung for years prior to that.

Mary wore three links of chain

Every link was Jesus name

Keep your hand on that plow, hold on

Oh Lord, Oh Lord, keep your hand on that plow, hold on.