

“THE PRINCIPLE OF SOWING AND REAPING”

Tonight we come to the penultimate section of Galatians, the last bit of teaching before Paul sums up his letter in the concluding section. And like the passages that have directly preceded it, this passage is focused upon the imperatives of the Christian life. Paul is telling us what the Christian life should look like. He is showing us how we ought to conduct ourselves if we claim to belong to Jesus Christ. And the specific imperative in this passage is that believers are to live spiritually-minded lives by supporting the church’s ministry and by using their time, abilities, and resources to do good to others, especially to other believers.

In verse 6, Paul talks about the importance of providing financial support for those who serve in the church’s ministry. Perhaps Paul decided to raise this point here because of what he said in verse 5: “each will have to bear his own load.” It may be that he wanted to make sure that the Galatians did not take this teaching about bearing one’s own load to mean that preachers should earn their own living rather than expect to be supported by those to whom they minister. It is true that Paul himself chose to do tent-making work to provide for his financial needs rather than take money from the churches that he served. But he also made it very clear that this was something that was voluntary on his part. He pointed out that he was entitled to receive support from the church. He simply chose to forego it in his particular situation. And he also explicitly taught that preachers are entitled to make their living by the gospel. We see this in 1 Corinthians 9 where he writes,

“If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?...the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” [1 Corinthians 9:11, 14]

And we see the same thing in 1 Timothy 5:17-18, where Paul writes,

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’”

Paul is very clear about this. The Christian ministry is work, and those who labor in it are entitled to be paid for their work. By providing adequate compensation for their minister, a congregation sets him free from financial concerns so that he can focus on preparing to preach and teach the Word to them. As our Book of Church Order says in the wording that is used for a minister’s terms of call, a congregation should strive to leave their minister “free from worldly cares and avocations.”

A congregation’s willingness to financially support their minister, and the broader ministry of the church according to their ability, is an indication of the value that they place upon the church’s ministry. As James Boice notes, “few things more clearly disclose the priorities of the heart than [how we use our money.]” [503] When we truly

understand the importance of the Word of God, we will want to support the work of the church as best as we can. Calvin's remarks on this are especially worthy of our reflection, as he writes, "What return will [believers] make for the invaluable treasure of eternal life, which is communicated to them by the preaching of those men?"

Of course, the financial relationship between a minister and his congregation can be abused, and it can be abused on both sides. There are plenty of examples of ministers who have been greedy and have taken advantage of their flock or have been slothful and have failed to do the hard work that is necessary for ministry to be effective. And there are plenty of examples of congregations that have employed guilt tactics and other forms of manipulation to convey that if their minister was more spiritual he would not need so much money. There are temptations on both sides of the pastoral relationship, and both ministers and congregations need to be aware of them.

One of the ways for a Christian to live a spiritually-minded life is to be generous in supporting the church's ministry. That is the point of verse 6. In verse 7, Paul raises a more general principle of Christian living, the principle of sowing and reaping. You reap what you sow. This is a basic principle, something that is true in all areas of life. Our actions have consequences.

Paul introduces his teaching on the sowing and reaping principle with a warning, saying, "Do not be deceived." We are very capable of deceiving ourselves into thinking that we will be spared from the consequences for our actions, that we will not reap what we sow. But Paul reminds us that those who buy into this line of thinking are only

deceiving themselves. And he underscores this by reminding us that “God is not mocked.” You cannot trick or outwit God. God knows our every thought, our every word, and our every deed. The person who tries to erect a façade of holiness while living to satisfy the flesh will be found out. There is no fooling the Lord. As God said to Babylon through the prophet Isaiah,

“You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, ‘No one sees me’; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’ But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone; and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.” [Isaiah 47:10-11]

The Lord saw the wickedness of Babylon, and she eventually reaped what she had sown. Disaster fell upon her when the Medes and Persians conquered her. And it will be the same for anyone who thinks that God can be mocked.

The fact that Paul speaks of sowing and reaping right after a verse in which he talks about providing material support for ministers may indicate that the particular kind of sowing that he has in mind here is being generous towards others. And this is made even the more likely by a parallel passage in 2 Corinthians 9, where Paul writes the following

words in a section in which he is urging the Christians in Corinth to give generously to provide relief for the church in Jerusalem:

“whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” [2 Corinthians 9:6-7]

In the heavenly economy, being generous towards others is sowing seeds for an eternal harvest.

In verse 8, Paul talks about two different kinds of sowing. A person can either sow to the flesh or he can sow to the Spirit. The contrast between flesh and Spirit has been an important theme in Galatians. As we have repeatedly noted in this sermon series, ‘the flesh’ corresponds to fallen humanity’s natural, corrupted state, while ‘Spirit’ corresponds to the new, regenerate state of believers in Christ. And Paul has made it clear that although believers have been made alive by the Spirit, the flesh is a reality with which we still have to contend. After all, why would Paul go to the trouble of telling the Galatian Christians not to use their freedom to give an opportunity to the flesh if the flesh is not still an operative factor in a Christian’s life? This tells us that when Paul speaks of sowing to the flesh he is talking about living to satisfy your old, fallen nature. And sowing to the Spirit means living to please God. Sowing to the Spirit is the same thing as

walking by the Spirit. It is living your life under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit so that your life bears the fruit of the Spirit.

The reason why Paul uses the analogy of sowing and reaping to describe these two ways of living is because he wants us to understand that our life in this world matters for eternity. Every thought you have, every word you speak, every action you take is the sowing of a seed, a seed that will produce some kind of crop, whether good or bad. Everything that you do is a seed sown either to the flesh or to the Spirit. And if you profess to be a Christian, your profession of faith in Christ will be tested by whether your life was characterized by sowing to the Spirit or sowing to the flesh.

There are several important implications that we can draw from this. For one thing, the sowing and reaping principle shows us that we cannot reap holiness if we are always sowing to the flesh. Holiness is a harvest that is brought about by cultivating the habit of walking by the Spirit and putting sin to death. And the same principle holds true for the flesh. The more you sow to the flesh, the more you cultivate fleshly habits and fleshly character, and the more difficult it is to break free from the power of the flesh.

Another thing that we can learn from the sowing and reaping principle is that there is a correlation between this life and the life to come. And this is not only true with regard to the question of whether we will be welcomed into heaven or condemned to hell. It is also true with respect to the capacity that individual believers will have for the enjoyment of heaven. Our experience in heaven will be connected to how well we have loved and served God in this life. The more we have sought to glorify and enjoy God in this life,

the greater will be our capacity to glorify and enjoy him in heaven. Listen to what John Owen says about this:

“Not all who desire to go to heaven are fit and ready for it...Should they be admitted, they would never enjoy it...Music cannot please a deaf man, nor can beautiful colours impress a blind man. A fish would not thank you for taking it out of the sea and putting it on dry land under the blazing sun! Neither would an unregenerate sinner welcome the thought of living forever in the blazing glory of Christ.” [Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, 7-8]

We have to be made fit and ready for heaven, and this life is the place where this preparation takes place. In heaven we will reap what we have sown in this life.

This is why the Christian life needs to be a heavenly-minded life. Our heavenly reaping will be in proportion to what we have sown to the Spirit in this life. Your yield on the last day will be in proportion to what you have sown in this life. When we make Christ and his gospel the supreme concern of our lives, when we are generous towards others for the sake of Christ and his gospel, God promises a return on our investment. When we give of ourselves and our resources to help others in Christ’s name, the things that we give away are not lost. There is a concept of reward in the gospel. Even though salvation is by grace alone, the Scriptures repeatedly tell us that believers will be rewarded according to their works. While the good works that we do as Christians are

themselves the result of God's grace at work in our lives, God has told us that he will reward us for them.

In verse 9 Paul uses this concept of reward to encourage us to press on in the work of sowing to the Spirit. It is easy for us to grow weary of doing good. The service that we render to others often goes unrecognized or unappreciated. We can get discouraged when it seems like the good that we do is not really having much of an effect. But Paul reminds us that a harvest awaits us, if we do not give up. We have to persevere in faith and in Christian good works for as long as we remain in this world. We are not free to stop running our race until the Lord brings us across the finish line.

In verse 10, Paul tells us that this life is to be viewed as the day of opportunity – not an opportunity to get all that we can out of life for ourselves, but an opportunity to do good to others. And we are to do good to both unbelievers and believers. First, Paul says that we are to do good to everyone. Each person who crosses your path is someone that the Lord wants you to serve. Make it your mission to good to these people, in one way or another. And then Paul says that we are especially obligated to serve those who are of the household of faith. While we are to do good to everyone, our brothers and sisters in Christ have a special right and claim to our help. How can a true Christian fail to care about the needs of those who are members of Christ's body? As the old Scottish minister John Brown put it, "For a Christian to be unkind to a Christian, is not only wrong, it is monstrous." [cited in Ryken, 267]

Here, then, is Paul's teaching on the principle of sowing and reaping. It may be surprising to us that Paul would say such things in Galatians, a book in which he has laid so much emphasis upon the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But here you have it. It is true that no one is saved by his works, but it is equally true that no one is saved without works. Paul tells us that the things we do today have ramifications for eternity. As Jesus says in the very last chapter of the Bible: "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done." [Revelation 22:12] We do not always see the sowing and reaping principle in perfect proportion in this life. People do not always reap according to what they have sown in this life. But at the end, on that great day when the Lord Christ returns to judge the hearts of everyone who has ever lived, each person will reap in perfect proportion to what he or she has sown. Let that truth always be at the forefront of your thinking. If it is, I do not think you will grow weary of doing good.