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Sermon

Sowing and Reaping

Galatians 6

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Oh, aren't the fruit of the Spirit wonderful things! Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control – you can just begin to see a shining, perfect person hovering about 12 inches off the ground. Sounds like a mystical person who never swears and always has a smile on his face. But Paul yanks the Galatian Christians back into the practical realities of daily life. Relationships and money. These places are where the fruit of the Spirit shows – not just at church on Sundays when we have our best face on.

He begins “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently, but being careful lest you also are tempted.”

When he says, “Brothers,” he is highlighting their special relationship to one another. Family ties. “Blood is thicker than water” – but in this case, the blood is Jesus' blood - shed so that we could be welcomed in to the family of God. It is a family situation where there needs to be give and take, and submission one to the other.¹

Peter talked last week about two kinds of fruit in people's lives. Whatever plant you have growing in your garden, it will produce fruit according to its kind. The fruit will dangle on the branches for all to see. The fruit of what you are thinking and doing in secret will show, no matter how hard you try to cover it up.

However, if someone is displaying fruit in their life that is not the fruit of the Spirit, but the fruit of sin, that is not the end of the story. Paul assumes that we are living in community and are helping one another to walk in the Spirit, so that we do not fall back into old ways. V2 says “Carry one another's burdens.” The word “Carry” can mean carry off, or take away. These burdens are moral burdens, not physical loads and they are large ones, not your everyday troubles and responsibilities.

To help someone shed a burden of sin is to fulfil the Law of Christ, Paul asserts. The Law of Moses has 613 rules, but the Law of Christ is “Love God and love your neighbour.” Jesus' emphasis was on the quality of your fulfilment of the law, not the quantity of rules. So his law is “Love God with all

¹ Ephesians 5:21

your heart, soul, mind and strength. And love your neighbour – HOW much? As much as you would want to be loved? And the love is not the sloppy, indulgent kind, but acting for that person's best interests. Hmmm...

So we can't ignore that person who is obviously struggling with a burden of sin. We must help them get rid of it. "Am I my brother's keeper?"² Well, yes, I am. We are not designed to do life on our own. The word for "restore" in v1 is a medical term for the setting of bones. What is wrong in the life of your brother must be set straight, but gently. It is not to be neglected or exposed openly. Bones and brothers do better treated that way.

Nor is it good fruit if we are imagining, "I am God's gift to so-and-so. That person needs me and only me to set him right." Let's not get puffed up in our thinking. Rather, the good and spiritual attitude is one of gentleness, being aware that we are *all of us* prone to fall. Gentleness helps stop unkind gossip and prevents more serious backsliding.

Paul is giving some concrete examples of what it means to live as an individual within a Christian community, when that community is guided by the Spirit of God. There is a balancing act here – personal responsibility (v5) and mutual accountability (v2) are both needed for us to live in Godly freedom.

We are called to live in a family, the family of God. So if you notice someone is missing from church today, the kind thing to do is to phone or visit them to see if they are OK.

If everyone here looks after the other church members in their sphere of influence, no-one will miss out. St Paul did just that – and he did not stop, even when he was in prison. He became a victor, not a victim of his circumstances. He did not give in to the temptation of "poor me" but he did what he could and wrote encouraging letters which are still blessing people several thousand years later.

Everyone has something to give. I remember an article I read in a magazine once where the owner of a B&B said, "There is gold in each guest who comes into my house– and I am determined to find it!"

That's wonderful! Let's be gold-diggers of the best kind!

And speaking of gold, the next point Paul makes in Galatians 6 seems to be about money. These four cryptic statements in verses 6-10 are not easy to interpret without a bit of background.

Few things more clearly disclose the priorities of the heart than how we use our money. It is true that this section can be applied well beyond that, but three factors can add up here: in verses 9&10, "do good to all" was a common euphemism which was to do with giving alms to needy people. And v7, "A man reaps what he sows" is a proverb which Paul used in at least one other place³ to talk about the use of money.

"A man reaps what he sows" is picture language. In St Stephen's, one way it is playing out is that people have worked hard to support the Op Shop in many ways. They have sown time and effort into that shop. The shop, as well as individuals, gave money to support Ian and me so we could travel to Africa and bless the people of Kondo.

V6 is thus being played out– "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor." Thank you so much to everyone who helped us get to Africa. Heaven and eternity will reveal all the good that has resulted from your generosity and there are also benefits that can be reaped here on earth as well. Lindy has organised a special event in August when we will be able to

² Genesis 4:9

³ 2 Cor 9:6-10

share with you all the good things that have come out of our trip. So you will be reaping what you have sown and receiving the blessing that springs from your giving.

Even though the koha will be for another charity, Ian and I will be giving a presentation about our trip during the next Super Soup Sunday on 14th August. Come and hear about all the good things that happened!

Many times we may not even realise that the law of sowing and reaping is what is in operation. Science gives an example of, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." When you see a result, it means there is a cause.

So when you see fruit, it means there is a root which has supported the tree which has produced the fruit. When we see the kindness and love and peace that some people display in difficult situations, it means they are drawing on the resources of the Holy Spirit deep within them. They have been planting good things in the garden of their lives by reading and believing the word of God. Other kinds of fruit, like swearing, hostility and poor money-handling have different roots in people's lives.

Two weeks ago we played host to an Elijah House School here at St Stephen's. The foundational teaching came from John and Paula Sandford, who are experienced ministers in America. They taught on how to identify the roots which produce the bad fruit in our lives.

They taught about the law of sowing and reaping which God has built into our world but also about how kind God is. He does not leave us to unavoidable reaping of our past sins and mistakes, but gives us hope of freedom through the cross of Christ. If you would like to find out more, please talk to Anne Aspden to me or Ian. We would be delighted to pass on what we have learned.

Now Paul is coming to the end of his letter. He summarises his main point in v15 "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation."

What he means is, keeping all the rules we know about will not keep us safe and give us what we need and desire. Sowing to please our sinful nature will not help us either. God is making all things new. When we look at our lives and the fruit thereof, what matters is not our track record, not that we have made many mistakes, but that we are "becomers". He wants us to partner with him in being **transformed**; transformed by the renewing of our minds.⁴

We are not to be bound by our past, or by the imprinting which our parents made on us. We are not to be kept in bondage by our past sins and mistakes. We are not to rest upon our laurels and say, "Well, I'm as good as the next person and probably better."

When Paul says, "Each one must carry his own load," he is indicating that we are all responsible to God for certain things and we must test ourselves to see how we are doing.

Peter Lloyd helped us to look at the lists of fruit of the Spirit and fruit of the sinful nature last week. These lists can be one benchmark to help us see how we are doing. We are supposed not to compare ourselves with someone else. It is odious to say, "Well, I am doing better than so-and-so. I'm not as bad as HE is." That is not our standard. Comparisons are odious. No, we say, "How am I shaping up regarding the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:20?"

We are to be "becomers" – people who are becoming something good; people in the process of being transformed from glory to glory.

⁴ Romans 12:2

God has provided us ways of transformation which free us from these old things. We are to receive his Word constantly into our innermost beings and **that** will wash us clean. We are to respond to his Word, thinking and acting in new and Godly ways.

We are to identify and get rid of those roots which are producing bad fruit in our lives. It's like gardening. Weeding out the bad, old stuff, planting new stuff, watering and tending, then reaping good results.

When God told us that we will reap destruction if we sow to please our sinful nature, it was not to condemn us. He was giving us the opportunity to see what was wrong and choose to do things differently. We bring our past to the cross and determine to live in the light of Christ's example, inviting the Holy Spirit to empower us.

So are you a becomer or someone who scrapes by just fulfilling a set of rules? Are you a becomer or are you a prisoner of old habits, thoughts and actions? Being a prisoner of your past, and a victim of other people's sinful actions is not your destiny. Your destiny is to be an overcomer, a victor in the battles of life.

Today you can choose to be a becomer, not just someone who is trying to make a good impression and fool the world, not just a wannabe; not just a "fake it til you make it" person, but you can choose to let Jesus make you a true-blue becomer and eventually an overcomer. God sees you and he is smiling. He has done everything necessary for your freedom. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Let's talk to him about it.

Lord Jesus, please bring us to the place where we are sick of sowing to the sinful nature and lead us into transformation by your Spirit. We want to step into your freedom and be overcomers in this world. Help us identify and get rid of the roots which produce bad fruit in our lives. Please write your law of love upon our hearts and so fill us with your Spirit that everyone whom we encounter tastes good fruit. Amen.