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Sermon

Sowing and Reaping

Galatians 6:1-10

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Introduction

I intend to focus on today's portion from Paul's letter to the Galatian Church. Remember that this epistle argues for freedom from legalism and warns against licence. Paul emphatically argues that we are not saved by keeping the Jewish Law or any set of rules. That would be our own effort and we would be saved by the merit of our obedience. No - we are saved by God's free gift of life - a gift of grace which we receive by faith: Jesus has done everything necessary to save us from God's judgement of our sins. We must throw ourselves on his mercy.

Yet Paul also warns against the opposite error of licence - running loose in sinful behaviour. We heard in last week's reading the dreadful list of the works of the flesh - our sinful nature:

Galatians 5:19-21 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

No, we are called to be free of the tyranny of such lifestyles - for tyranny it is.

Galatians 5:13-16 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself, ... So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Helping each other (1-5)

Chapter 6 continues by unpacking this living by the Holy Spirit. In some practical ways, what does it look like?

We are to carry each other's burdens (v2). Yet in verse 5, he says "Each should carry his own load." Has Paul contradicted himself?

Of course not - Paul is far too intelligent for that. There is a significant difference between the terms. We are to carry one another's heavy burdens. This has the sense of crushing loads. When someone is under a great load, we are to step in and help. However, the load we are to carry ourselves is the normal daily load. It is the day pack in tramping terms. So Paul is quite practically saying we are to carry our reasonable loads ourselves in normal situations, but when the going gets tough, others need to step in and help.

Restoring one caught in sin

Carrying burdens is also related to helping to restore someone caught in a sin. The word 'restore' is also used of the disciples mending their nets. What a good analogy! Think of fishermen mending their nets. What are they dealing with?

They will be getting rid of seaweed and other rubbish which has got caught in the net - cleaning it.

They will deal with strands caught up or knotted together - untangling it.

They will tie up the tears in the net - where it is torn by being dragged across rocks or logs or encountering oversized fish - repairing.

Cleaning, untangling, repairing. Do you hear the practical - even quite matter of fact - attitude? People will get caught in sins - we shouldn't be surprised by that and they need help to get free.

When we are caught in sin, we need cleaning. We need to know that as we repent of our wrong doing and ask God for forgiveness, that he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Perhaps we need untangling from wrong ways of thinking, confusion or psychological knots which have distorted our thinking and emotions and therefore our behaviour. There are ways we deal with wounds which mess us up. We may believe lies about ourselves which prevent us from being whom God intends us to be. We may be bitter in unforgiveness which distances us from God and corrodes our nature. We may form judgements about categories of people which distort our ability to live and relate in love. These need untangling.

There may be even more profound wounds to our personality which need patient rebuilding under God's care to restore us. These are like the repairing and retying of the strands of a net.

We are gently to help them get free but we are warned to be very aware that we all can be caught, tricked and trapped. So we need to watch ourselves lest we are also tempted and perhaps fall into a snare ourselves.

We have all heard the quote: "Pride goes before a fall." Arnold Palmer, the great golfer recalled a lesson about overconfidence:

It was the final hole of a Masters tournament; I had a one-stroke lead and had just hit a very satisfying tee shot. I felt I was in pretty good shape. As I approached my ball, I saw an old friend standing at the edge of the gallery. He motioned me over, stuck out his hand and said, 'Congratulations.' I took his hand and shook it, but as soon as I did, I knew I had lost my focus. On my next two shots, I hit the ball into a sand trap, then put it over the edge of the green. I missed a putt and lost the Masters. You don't forget a mistake like that; you just learn from it and become determined that you will never do that again. I haven't in the 30 years since.

Paul says we are to help those in need but one of the dangers in such a situation is pride. A reaction to someone else's entanglement with sin is to think we are better than him. But Paul says,

"If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else..."

Basically don't compare yourself with others – it is a recipe for either pride or discouragement. Instead, we are to test our own actions – privately. We are to check that we are living in the Spirit. That does not require comparison with others. The question is how we stand before God.

Sowing and Reaping (6-10)

In verses 6-10, Paul uses the principle of sowing and reaping: "Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. [v7]"

It is a principle of nature which was stated in the creation account of Genesis 1:11:

And God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth." And it was so. [RSV]

Consider with me for a moment the agricultural basis of the metaphor.

1. If you want a crop of something, some seed must be sown. No seed - no crop.
2. The kind of harvest is related to the nature of the seed sown. If you want wheat, plant wheat seeds; if you want sweetcorn - plant sweetcorn.
3. The harvest is related to the quality of seed sown. Poor quality seed gives a poor harvest. Good seed gives a good harvest.
4. The quantity of the seed sown affects the quantity of the harvest.

My cousin's husband, John, has a large agricultural contracting business in the Waikato. He specialises in maize production. If you want a harvest of maize you have to plant maize seeds. So first, he ploughs the land and plants maize seeds.

When you drive past maize fields you will see signs on the fences advertising the particular seed planted there. The seed companies grow the best quality seed they can for various factors valued by the farmers.

John uses a seed drill to place the seed carefully in the furrow to minimise wastage and maximise return. He plants many hectares because he and his customers want many tonnes of maize in the harvest.

Then after tending the fields through the growing season, he returns with the combine harvesters to gather a huge crop of maize.

It is the same Paul says in all of life: what you sow is what you reap.

He gives us three applications: Christian Ministry, Christian Holiness, Christian Well-Doing.

A. Christian Ministry (v6)

The Christian teacher sows the Word of God. Paul says that the teacher should receive from those who are taught. The teacher sows the word and reaps a livelihood. As Jesus said in the gospel reading (Lk 10:7), "The labourer deserves his wages." John Stott wrote: "The minister should be free from secular wage earning in order to devote himself to the study and the ministry of the Word, and to the care of the flock committed to his charge."

B. Christian Holiness (vv7-8)

In verse 7, Paul points out that whichever we encourage will affect our life direction.

"A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

We have already heard Paul's list in the previous chapter of the sort of behaviours that come from the sinful human nature. There he contrasted those things with the beautiful qualities of life lived in the Spirit of God, which might be seen as different facets of the jewel of God's love:

Galatians 5:22-23 ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

If we pander to and encourage the old sinful nature it will dominate us. If we cultivate the Spirit, he will empower us.

To return to the analogy of sowing seeds. If you sow wheat, wheat will grow and you will reap a crop of wheat. If you sow gorse or thistle (or indeed if you allow them to grow without rooting them out), you will reap a harvest of gorse or thistle.

Do you know how hard it is to get rid of gorse? It is a tough plant. Not only that but it has very sharp spines to wound you when handling it. It is not enough to cut it down, you have to dig up the main root or it will grow again. Burning it does not necessarily kill it - in fact the seeds survive the fire and grow readily in the ashes of the burnt plant material. It takes painstaking consistent work over some years of perseverance to

clear the land of gorse. And like those noxious weeds, it is much harder to get rid of the sins of our selfish nature than it is to give in to them.

Paul puts it more strongly still by relating the harvest not just to what our life is like in the short term but the ultimate standard of our life. The harvest we reap from following the leading of the Holy Spirit is eternal life, but we reap destruction from the habitual ways of the sinful nature. The old adage puts it well: "Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny."

What do sowing to the flesh and sowing to the Spirit look like?

To quote John Stott again: "The seeds we sow are largely thoughts and deeds. Every time we allow our mind to harbour a grudge, nurse a grievance, entertain an impure fantasy, or wallow in self-pity, we are sowing to the flesh. Holiness is a harvest; whether we reap it or not depends almost entirely on what and where we sow."

"To sow to the Spirit is the same as to set the mind on the Spirit and to walk in the Spirit. ... We are to seek and set our minds on the things of God. By the books we read, the company we keep and the leisure occupations we pursue we can be sowing to the Spirit. Then we are to foster disciplined habits of devotion in private and in public, in daily prayer and Bible reading and in worship with the Lord's people on the Lord's Day."

C. Christian Well-Doing (vv9-10)

This section of Galatians finishes with the words,

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Paul includes good works under this metaphor of sowing and reaping. He doesn't specify the harvest but the law of sowing and reaping ensures there will be a harvest if we sow in well-doing. He doesn't spell out the nature of the harvest. It may be help or comfort for people in need; it may lead someone to faith in Christ; it may make us salt in the world to arrest moral decay; maybe it will increase people's respect for what is beautiful and true.

But whatever we sow, we are assured of a corresponding harvest.

In what ways do you already do good to those who belong to the family of believers? Are there ways you know you are called to respond to that command?

Is there some call you have sat on and not been willing to fulfil? Is there a nudge from God that you should giving more than before or even to start giving regularly to church, but ... well ... it was a bit scary. Actually, there is great joy in being generous. The Bible says, "God loves a cheerful giver." The word there is *hilaros* from which we get *hilarious*. It means cheerful, merry, joyous. And if you are very generous out of obedience to God, there can be a wonderful joy which goes with it.

Whether it is in giving of our money, our time, our effort, our patience it is all sowing righteousness which will sprout and bring blessing to others and a harvest of righteousness to us as well. It is a win-win formula!

Let's hear that last verse again:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Application

This has been a wearying time. These last 26 months of pandemic have drained us and demanded much of us. Our attendances are down and we have been restricted in many activities. But Paul would say to our situation, "Don't give up. You may feel weary, but keep persisting in doing good, persist in your worship and devotion to God, get back to gathering together to worship. And in the proper time you will reap a harvest."

So can we pray for each other not to grow weary? Can we pray for those who are not attending to be able to come in the doors again?

Can we pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest in our church and our area?

Can we? Can you? Will you?