

“Whatever One Sows, That Will He Also Reap”

The Twelfth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 6:1-10; Hosea 8:1-14

Throughout his Galatian letter, Paul has let the Galatians have it—pointedly reminding the Galatians of the gospel which he preached to them, and then exhorting them to stand firm and not give in to the false teaching of the Judaizers. Before he wraps up this letter to these struggling churches, the apostle stops to give some practical and pastoral advice to those suffering from the effects of the dissension and back-biting which the Judaizers brought upon the Galatian churches.

In last two chapters of Galatians (chapters 5-6), Paul addresses the consequences of the false doctrine taught by the Judaizers—the inevitable havoc wrought by a theology based upon justification by human effort and compliance to law and ritual. As Paul argued in Galatians 5, those who have been taken in by the Judaizers risk being severed from Christ and falling from grace. Any who seek to be justified on the ground of circumcision, obedience to dietary laws, and the keeping of the Jewish religious calendar (the so-called “emblems” or “badges” of Judaism), will be greatly disappointed.

But if the Law is fulfilled in love—which, as Paul has been saying flows out of justifying faith—then there are of number of specific points of application which need to be made in response to the self-righteousness and judgmental attitude introduced into the church as a direct result of false teaching. In his response, the apostle sets out a sharp contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. The presence of the fruit of the Spirit is characteristic of every Christian believer, now freed from sin, death, and the Law. But Paul also makes clear, Christians will inevitably struggle with the flesh and indwelling sin until they die, or Christ comes back, whichever comes first.

Turning, then, to the first ten verses of Galatians chapter six (our text), Paul offers practical and pastoral advice, in which his prior discussion about the Law being fulfilled in love is now applied to the specific circumstances in Galatia. Paul is dealing with the consequences of the deceptive actions of the Judaizers and the false gospel that they were teaching—all of which led to a very difficult situation in the churches throughout Galatia. Many of those influenced by the Judaizers had stooped to such a low level that they were now spying on each other’s liberty, and, in doing so, created an atmosphere of judgment and infighting in the church.

The Judaizers were seeking nothing less than to re-enslave the Galatians to the bondage of the “basic principles of the world.” The tragic result of all of this was conflict in the church, stemming from fear and doubt about one’s relationship to God created in the vacuum of the absence of Christian liberty—the very blessing which Jesus Christ died to secure for his people. Since the false gospel of the Judaizers was based upon human compliance to law, and therefore, grounded in human merit (“self-righteousness”) Paul reports that many of those who had been taken in by the deception of the Judaizers, were now acting in a conceited manner, provoking, and envying each other—all of which is the inevitable consequence of thinking that your merit is greater than another’s.

Paul has expressed his amazement at how quickly the leaven of the Judaizers spread throughout the churches. People were not only confused about the gospel, but, as a result, they were behaving like wild beasts. This is why Paul so pointedly urges the Galatians to “walk by the Spirit.” Christians are to act in an appropriate manner even under the difficult circumstances now facing them. Heresy, strife, and

animosity are the bitter fruit brought forth by those who oppose the gospel of free grace and justification by an imputed righteousness received by faith alone. Paul will give the Galatians specific instruction as to what it means to “walk by the Spirit.” As is typical of Paul, these are all very straightforward and make a great deal of sense in the context of the situation then facing the Galatian Christians.

The theological problem created by the Judaizers—people are justified by believing that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, but enter or stay in relationship with Jesus Christ through ritual circumcision and good works—was bad enough. But the theological problem generated a number of practical problems as well, the fruit of such self-righteousness. If envy and conceit are manifestations of the false gospel of the Judaizers and fall under the heading of the “works of the flesh,” the same should not be true for the Christian. Christians who walk in the Spirit should be willing to come to the aid of those who are struggling with sin since they of all people, should understand that if God was gracious to them, calling them to faith in Jesus Christ even though they were unworthy sinners, then, they too, should be gracious to others called by Christ into his glorious kingdom through the gospel of Christ crucified.

The Judaizers were in the midst of the Galatian churches spying on the Gentile’s liberty in Christ Jesus. As a result, there were instances where someone was caught red-handed in his or her sins. Paul’s command is that the Galatians are not to devour such a person—as the Judaizers were doing—but, instead the Galatians are to *restore* such a person as Paul puts it plainly in verse 1; *“brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.”* According to the Judaizers, the very fact that they caught a sinner in the act, is proof that the problem is Paul’s gospel. No doubt, Paul was accused of being a libertine, and that the presence of such “sinners” in the church was proof that those who believed Paul’s gospel were not at all concerned with their sins, since Paul has taken good works and human effort out of the equation. According to the Judaizers, a few more rules and more attention to the faith of the fathers would put a stop to such things.

Christian liberty is not an invention of Paul, but created by the death of Christ, who freed us from the guilt of our sins, freed us from the yoke of the Law as a means of justification, and freed us from the so-called things indifferent, things not explicitly forbidden by the Scriptures. In light of Christ’s cross Christians should not treat those who struggle with their sin as “pariahs”¹ who should be cast out of the church in shame and humiliation. Instead those who fall are to be restored, *if* repentant.

In this case, Paul probably does not have in mind scandalous sins—sins which are public and potentially bring scandal to Christ’s church and the gospel. Rather, the context here seems to be those who are caught as a result of being “spied-out” by the self-righteous Judaizers. Paul’s instructions are not to discipline such a person publically—which he clearly advocates in the case of scandalous sin, as in 1 Corinthians 5:11. Paul intends that those who are “spiritual,” that is, those who are mature in the faith and who manifest the fruit of gentleness, restore such a one.

Paul puts it this way because the Judaizers were obviously finding people struggling with sin and systematically devouring them, driving them away from Christ and his cross, in effect, theologically mauling them with a false gospel as a pack of wolves maul an animal that they have managed to isolate from the safety of the herd. Those who are spiritual—perhaps a reference to the elders—are to gently restore such a one whose sin becomes known through such self-righteous “tattling.” Such gentle restoration certainly involves instruction from the word about the propriety of the conduct in question, a

¹ Bruce, *Galatians*, 260.

confession of sin and a declaration of pardon, followed by the expectation of repentance.

The two errors that are most easily made in such situations are *first*, to do as the Judaizers were doing and isolate these individuals, holding them up to ridicule and shame. Or *second*, that the leaders of the church take the easy way out and simply do nothing. To ignore smoldering embers is to soon have a raging inferno on your hands. Therefore, Paul's advice is that those who are caught in sin are to be restored, not only for their own well-being, but also so that public scandal does not result, bringing injury to Christ's church and the gospel.

Paul knows that the struggle with the flesh affects not only those who get caught, but those assigned to restore them. Paul wisely exhorts those exercising this gentle restoration to be on guard and "*keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.*" So as not to end up like the vice-cop, who over time becomes more jaded than the criminal he's trying to trap, those to whom God gives the responsibility for exercising discipline must always be on their guard so that they not become involved in the sins of those they are attempting to restore. Paul is warning us that those who do not think this can happen to them, often become victims of their own sinfulness. Both the sheep and the shepherds need to be on guard because sin is pleasurable as well as deceptive, and easily traps us when our guard is down.

Unlike the methods of the Judaizers who prey upon those who struggle, using them as an example that Paul's doctrine of justification is dangerous and leads to license, instead Paul exhorts those who walk in the Spirit to "*bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*" The Judaizers were portraying the Law, ritual circumcision, and the keeping of dietary laws and feast days as a yoke that those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah would gladly bear so as to be given a right standing before God. But we can never bear such a yoke. The very notion that we could, utterly distorts the true purpose of the law and circumcision, which was to point us not to the merit of our own efforts, but to the merits of Jesus Christ who alone fulfills the demands of the law. In fact, the yoke of the Law was intended to crush us under its weight so that we would look to the merits of Jesus Christ as our only hope of withstanding the judgment yet to come.

Therefore, from one perspective (that of the second use of the law), Paul sees the Law as a yoke of slavery, from which the Christian is now freed through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, and does not need to bear. Paul certainly knew of our Lord's own words (Matthew 11:30), "*for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" Since the Law is fulfilled in love, in the case of those who are Christians and who struggle with burdens of all kinds, one way in which the burden and load is lightened is when those who are weak are aided by those who are a bit stronger. Paul has a tender place for those who struggle with sin, difficult circumstances, and the turmoil of life. In Romans 15:1, he writes, "*we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.*" Since the Judaizers have left in their wake a pile of carcasses of those whom they have devoured, Paul exhorts the Galatians to bear with those who are weak, and who are struggling with their sins.

While the Judaizers devour the weak, the struggling Christian is to be supported by their brothers and sisters. This is the inevitable fruit brought forth in our lives by the Holy Spirit when we come to see that we are justified by the merits of another (Jesus Christ) and not through our own efforts and righteousness. In doing this, says Paul, we fulfill the law of Christ. Paul exhorts us to bear with those who struggle to keep up. But the apostle has no tolerance whatsoever for the self-righteous or the hypocrite, who lord it over the weak and frail, and destroy their confidence in Christ and his gospel.

But "what does Paul mean by the disputed phrase the '*law of Christ*'"? Is Jesus merely a new and

improved Moses who gives us easier laws to keep as Rome argues? Hardly. Paul is not likely using the phrase the “*law of Christ*” as a figure of speech for the Law of Moses. In context, Paul is reminding Christians that they are to “walk by the Spirit,” taking avail of the means of grace (word and sacrament), as well as taking avail of prayer and fellowship. The apostle has just said that Christians “*walk by the Spirit*” (5:16), that they “*are led by the Spirit*” (5:18), that they manifest the gifts of the Spirit (5:22-23), and they “*live by the Spirit*” (5:25). He will go on to say that Christians are to “*sow to the Spirit.*”

In context this would mean the “law of Christ” is the spontaneous obedience wrought in the heart of each Christian believer by virtue of the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and as such, the “Law of Christ” stands in direct contrast to the “Law of Moses” which demands perfect conformity to its every stipulation as an external set of rules. Since Paul says that the Law is fulfilled in the command to love one another, the Christian fulfills the law of Christ, as indwelt by the Holy Spirit, when we serve our brothers and sisters in love.² In this case, this is evident when Christians help to bear the burdens of those who are weak and who struggle with sin, want, and other such burdens of life.

In verse 3, Paul once again takes the opportunity to level the field and destroy any last vestiges of self-righteousness. “*For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*” The immediate context is the self-righteousness implicit in the teaching of the Judaizers, created a dynamic in which those who thought they could obey the Law of Moses and had attained a right-standing before God through circumcision and obedience to the traditions of the father, to their way of thinking, obtained a greater degree of righteousness than others and looked down on Gentile “sinners.”

Self-righteousness is intrinsically judgmental and detests weakness. Paul reminds us that all attempts to be justified by our obedience only condemn us all the more. It was Bernard of Clairveaux, who once lamented, “not only can I not give account for my sins, I cannot even give account for my righteousness.” Paul exhorts us to see ourselves for what we really are, sinners, who cannot be justified by our own obedience, but only on the basis of the merits of Jesus Christ. Self-deceived by self-righteousness, we may think we are something when we compare ourselves to others. But we are not measured by others, but against the Law of God. This is the great folly of self-righteousness. The paradox in this is that in ourselves and our own efforts we are nothing—a fact which the self-righteous cannot grasp. But in Christ, even the weakest sinner is an heir to all of the riches of heaven found in Christ. Why look to ourselves, when we can instead gaze upon the glories of Jesus Christ?

For Paul, this now becomes a matter of “*let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.*” Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life and sanctification is grounded in the principle of personal responsibility.³ As one famous wag put it, “there is often confusion in the minds of many about the apostolic principle of ‘bearing one another’s burdens.’ It too often translates into ‘minding other people’s business.’” Let us not miss the point that Paul is putting into practice what he exhorts the Galatians to do, as he is very gently restoring us, his readers and hearers by telling us that the Christian life is, at least in part, minding our own business and carrying our own weight if we are able. Again, the context is the Judaizers in the Galatian church snooping and spying on everyone’s liberty. Paul has identified such behavior as works of the flesh: discord, jealousy, envy, factions and dissension and the like. He is wonderfully

² Schreiner, The Law and Its Fulfillment, 159.

³ Bruce, Galatians, 262.

commonsensical in his approach. Those who need help, need help. The strong help the weak, showing generosity, and the weak accept the help from the strong, demonstrating graciousness. Paul is not happy with busybodies or those too lazy to carry their own weight, which are manifestations of the flesh.

In verse 6, Paul raises an issue with the Galatians that may make some uncomfortable, but is an apostolic injunction, “*let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.*” The same principle is stated in Luke 10:7, “*the laborer deserves his wage.*” In 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul elaborates on this giving a bit more detail. “*In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.*” The point is “the teacher relieves the ignorance of the pupil; the pupil should relieve the teacher of concern for subsistence.” The Galatians were used to paying pagan priests for performing sacrifices and religious rituals, but they were not used to paying for someone to teach them. Paul implores them to think differently.

It is likely that Paul is not so much making the claim on his own behalf, but on behalf of those faithful teachers and preachers who labored in Galatia in the face of fierce opposition from the Judaizers. The practical application for us is obvious; those who labor to teach and preach are to be supported by those who call them. It is from texts such as these that we derive the idea that even though ministers of word and sacrament hold the rank of elder, ministers serve Christ’s church on a full-time basis. Those who are called to the ministry of word and sacrament are to be supported by the congregations they serve, so that their financial needs are met, and they are able to devote themselves full-time to their callings.

Paul spells out one of the best-known principles of the Christian life in verse 7, the principle of “sowing and reaping.” Paul ties together the practical advice he has just given with the Fruit of the Spirit, discussed in chapter 5.⁴ Paul begins with a pointed warning to his hearers, “*do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*” A person cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ but then believe the false gospel that the Judaizers were teaching about the means of justification. Nor can a person claim to be a Christian when their lives are characterized by the works of the flesh, as set out in the previous chapter (vv. 19-21).

That said, there is an important qualification here. Recall that Paul also said that the Christian life is inevitably characterized by a struggle with sin as the fruit of the Spirit begins to manifest itself in the life of every Christian. Paul is not talking about the Christian struggling with sin and fighting against the fruit of the flesh. He’s talking about a non-Christian, one whose life is characterized by the fruit of the flesh and who bears no fruit of the Spirit. Paul says such a one will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The reason why God will not be mocked is because “a man reaps what he sows.” Those who grew up in an agrarian society, as did those in Paul’s original audience, the principle was self-evident. If you plant wheat seeds, and then you water your crop and cultivate it, wheat will grow and you will, in time, have a harvest of wheat. The point is, if you plant wheat and cultivate it, a crop of corn will not miraculously appear in its place. This is what Paul is getting at when he says in verse 8, “*for the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.*” Remember the context. This principle of the Christian life must be seen in light of the works of the flesh/fruit of the Spirit contrast described previously in chapter 5, and in the light of the specific situation facing this congregation.

The Judaizers were teaching that the merits of Jesus Christ were not sufficient to justify, and according to

⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, 294.

them, Christians must submit to circumcision, keep feast days, obey dietary laws in order to be justified. They were teaching a false gospel and denying the gospel as taught by Paul, namely, that we are justified by the merits of Jesus Christ, received by faith alone. It is the false gospel of the Judaizers which is the seed spoken of here which is sown to the flesh. What was the crop produced from such seed? According to Paul, the crop was the fruit of the flesh, now evident for all to see in their backbiting and devouring each other, spying on each other's liberty, using deceptive tactics to introduce the false gospel, boasting about the number of their converts, acting in envy, creating factions, causing dissension, and so on.

Paul's warning to the Galatians is crystal clear—if you Galatians sow to the flesh, that is, if you believe the false teaching of the Judaizers, you will produce a crop consistent with such a false gospel, and will not be able to stand in the judgment! For God will not be mocked! He will see your fruit for what it is. He will not be at all impressed with your self-righteous offering of the crop produced by sowing to the flesh. Like the grain offering of Cain, your self-righteousness is called a harvest of destruction, for that is where it leads. As Hosea lamented of Israel (as in Hosea 8, our Old Testament lesson), a time was at hand when Israel was sowing seed to the wind, and reaping the whirlwind. Israel came under God's judgment. The same will be true for the Judaizers and those who sow to their false gospel.

The contrast between the flesh and the Spirit is apparent. *“But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”* The one who believes the gospel as taught by Paul sows seed that also produces a certain kind of crop; a crop which will manifest not the works of the flesh, but the fruit of the Spirit. The result will be equally certain, though in this case the result is not destruction, but eternal life. The principle of sowing and reaping is very clear. Which gospel will you believe? Paul's gospel, the seed which produces the fruit of the Spirit and leads to eternal life, or the false gospel of the Judaizers, which produces the fruit of the flesh and leads to ever-lasting destruction.

Paul reminds his hearers, that despite the difficulties they face, *“let us not grow weary of doing good,”* [i.e., doing what is good, that is, believing the gospel and sowing to the Spirit], *for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”* Even though the Judaizers may be eating each other alive as they manifest the fruit of the flesh, *“so then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”* The Judaizers were seeking to divide Christ's church, while Christian believers who embraced Paul's gospel are to embrace all those who struggle but who name the name of Jesus Christ as their only hope of heaven. This is something the self-righteous simply cannot grasp!

There are a number of important issues raised here which ought impact us as a congregation. Ultimately, the problem in Galatia boils down to the false gospel of the Judaizers and their misunderstanding of the place of the Law of Moses in God's plan of redemption. The Law is intended to destroy self-righteousness by exposing our sinfulness and exciting us to sin all the more, so that we turn from trusting in our own righteousness and flee to Jesus Christ for both the forgiveness our sins, and for a perfect righteousness (his own) which can cover our unrighteousness. Under this, the so-called second use, the Law was intended to “level the field” so to speak, and destroy all self-righteousness.

By misunderstanding the role and purpose of the law, the Judaizers saw the Law of Moses as a means of accruing merit and earning a right standing before God. Instead of being crushed by the Law, they deceived themselves into thinking they were keeping the Law. They became proud, boastful, arrogant and utterly destructive to the well-being of the Galatian churches. Paul calls this sowing to flesh. Seeking to be justified by human effort, the Judaizers produced a crop, identified as works of the flesh. False doctrine produces the dissension, factions, envy, backbiting, and the shameless devouring of the weak that we see here in the Galatian churches.

Those who embrace Paul's gospel of justification, by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, will sow to the Spirit, and although we will struggle against the flesh until we die, we will nevertheless bear the fruit of the Spirit. God will ensure it! The application for us evident. We are not to devour one another, spy on each other's liberty, backstab our neighbor, cause dissension in the church, and so on. As justified sinners, we are to bear with one another, help the struggling and the weak in our midst, and be patient with those who are at a different place in their sanctification than we are. Bearing one another's burdens, says Paul, is one manifestation of the Spirit's fruit in Christ's church.

The act of sowing and reaping is as important for us to grasp today as it was on the day in which this epistle was first read in the Galatian churches. We will reap what we sow. If we sow to the flesh, we fan the burning embers of sin with us. If you sow to the flesh, says Paul, you will produce a crop—a crop identified as works of the flesh. And, Paul says, you will suffer eternal loss.

But if you sow to the Spirit by renouncing your own righteousness and instead seek the righteousness of Jesus Christ, you will also bear a crop—the “fruit of the Spirit.” This is the crop which leads to eternal life. As Jesus bids us to sow to the Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of everlasting life, the question still remains. Which will it be? Will you sow to the flesh or Spirit. And be warned, whatever one sows, so shall they reap.