

“A Man Reaps What He Sows”

Text: Galatians 6:1-10

Throughout this great letter to the Galatians, Paul has let the Galatians have it—with both barrels. But before he wraps up his letter to this struggling church, the apostle stops to give some practical pastoral advice to those suffering from the effects of the dissension that the Judaizers had brought to this church.

It is in the last two chapters of Galatians that Paul really begins to address the practical consequences of the false doctrine taught by the Judaizers—the havoc wrought by a theology based upon justification by human effort and compliance to law and ritual. The consequences of this are frightening, as we have seen. As Paul has argued in Galatians chapter 5, those who have been taken in by the Judaizers and who seek to be justified on the basis of human merit—submission to ritual circumcision, obedience to dietary laws and the keeping of the Jewish religious calendar, the so-called emblems or badges of Judaism—do indeed risk being severed from Christ and falling from grace. Paul describes how people in the church were now provoking and envying each other, and devouring each other as wild animals would do. To make this point, the apostle has set out the unmistakable contrast between the fruit of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. It is the fruit of the Spirit which is the characteristic of every Christian believer—since they have been freed from sin, death and the Law—although as Paul has also made clear, the Christian will inevitably struggle with the flesh and indwelling sin until they die, or Christ comes back, whichever comes first.

And so here in Galatians chapter six, before he concludes this great epistle, Paul now opts to address some of the specific issues facing the churches in Galatia as a result of the self-righteousness and judgmental attitude introduced into the church as a direct result of false teaching. If the Law is indeed fulfilled in love, as Paul has been saying, there are specific points of application that need to be made in response to the turmoil and dissension created by the Judaizers.

Turning, then, to the first ten verses of Galatians chapter six, Paul makes a series of comments—practical advice—in which his prior discussion about the Law being fulfilled in love is now applied to specific situations.

1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load. 6 Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. 7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 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. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Paul has repeatedly described how the deceptive actions of the Judaizers and the false gospel that they were teaching 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 judgement and acrimony in the church. As we have seen repeatedly, the Judaizers were seeking nothing less than to re-enslave the Galatians to the bondage of the "basic principles of the world." These false teachers were demanding that Gentile believers submit to ritual circumcision, keep the dietary laws and observe the Jewish feast days, as well as obey the Law of Moses, all as a means of obtaining or maintaining justification. The tragic result of all of this was conflict in the church, fear and doubt about one's relationship to God, and not an atmosphere of Christian liberty—which was 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—actually, "self-righteousness"—Paul is reporting 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 natural consequence of thinking that your merit is greater than another's.

As a result of the leaven of the Judaizers spreading throughout the church, says Paul, things were coming unraveled. 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 live as those who "walk in the Spirit"—the very characteristic of the Christian believer—and to behave in an appropriate manner even under the difficult circumstances then facing them. For heresy, strife and animosity is the fruit of the self-righteousness on the part of those who oppose the gospel of free grace and justification by an imputed righteousness received by faith alone. In effect, Paul now gives the Galatians a list of specific applications of what it means to "walk in the Spirit," and, 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—namely that people are justified by believing that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, but that they enter or stay in relationship to Jesus Christ through ritual circumcision and good works, was bad enough. But the theological problem generated a number of practical problems as well—all of which are the fruit of such self-righteousness. First of all, if envy and conceit are manifestations of the false gospel of the Judaizers and fall under the heading of the "fruit 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 there 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 very midst of the Galatian churches spying on people's liberty in Christ Jesus, and 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. According to the Judaizers, the very fact that they caught a sinner in the act, is proof that the problem is Paul's gospel. Paul, the supposed libertine, was talking out of both sides of his mouth preaching one gospel to Jews and another to Gentiles. It was charged, no doubt, that the presence of such "sinners" in the church was offered as 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. But in verse 1, Paul declares, "*if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.*" In other words, given the atmosphere which is created by the death of Christ—namely Christian liberty, which is defined as freedom from the guilt of our sins, freedom from the yoke of the Law as a means of justification, and freedom from the so-called

things indifferent, that is things not explicitly forbidden by the Scriptures—Christians should not treat those who struggle with their sin as “pariahs”¹ who should be cast out in shame and humiliation, instead they are to be restored if repentant.

Now it is important to point out that 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—a practice which he clearly advocates in the case of scandalous sin, as in 1 Corinthians 5:11—but rather for those who are “spiritual,” that is, those who are mature in the faith and who manifest the fruit of gentleness, to restore such a one. Paul puts it this way because the Judaizers were obviously finding such people and systematically devouring them, driving them away from Christ and his cross—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 confession of sin and a declaration of pardon.

The two errors that are most easily made in such situations are first, to do as the Judaizers were doing and attack these individuals, holding them up to ridicule and shame, or second, for the leaders of the church to take the easy way out and simply ignore such things. But to ignore smoldering embers is to soon have an 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 so that public scandal does not result, bringing injury to Christ’s church and the gospel.

But Paul also knows that the struggle with the flesh affects not only those who get caught, but those assigned to restore as well. Thus, Paul wisely exhorts those exercising this gentle restoration to all be on their guard, lest “*you also may be tempted.*” So as not to end up like the vice-cop, who over time becomes worse than the criminal he’s trying to trap, so too, those to whom God gives the responsibility for exercising discipline must always be on their guard that they not become involved in the sins of those they are to restore. Paul is basically telling us that those who do not think it 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 both pleasurable as well as deceptive and sin most easily traps us when we are unaware and 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 “*carry each other’s burdens.*” As we have seen, the Judaizers were likely 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. This was the false gospel—for we could 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 could fulfill 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 judgement yet to come. As Paul has said earlier, that

¹ Bruce, Galatians, 260.

indeed was the purpose of the law—to crush our self-righteousness, not foster it—so that we would seek a savior.

For Paul, on the other hand, seeing things now through the eyes of faith in Jesus Christ, the Law is a yoke of slavery, which the Christian—now free from that yoke through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ—does not need to bear. Paul certainly knew of our Lord’s own words— “my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” But since the Law is fulfilled in love, as Paul has just argued, it is clear that 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 various turmoils of life. In Romans 15:1, he writes, “*we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*” Since the Judaizers have, no doubt, left behind a host of the carcasses of the people they have devoured in their wake, Paul exhorts the Galatians to bear with those who are weak, and who struggle. While the Judaizers seek to devour the weak, the struggling Christian is to be supported by his or her brothers and sisters—for this is the inevitable fruit brought forth in our lives by the Holy Spirit when we come to see that we are graciously justified by the merits of another—namely Jesus Christ—and not through our own efforts and righteousness. In doing this, says Paul, we fulfill the law of Christ. Therefore, Paul exhorts us to bear with those who struggle to keep up, as the apostle has no tolerance whatsoever for the self-righteous and the hypocrite, who lord it over the weak and frail, and destroy their confidence in Jesus Christ and his gospel.

At some point, we must deal with the question, “what does Paul mean by the very disputed phrase the ‘*law of Christ*’”? Is Jesus simply a new and improved Moses who gives us easier laws to keep? Hardly. Suffice to say, Paul is probably not using the phrase the “*law of Christ*” as a figure of speech for the Law of Moses. For one thing, the context is that Paul is reminding Christians that they are to “walk in the Spirit,” by 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 in 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), and 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. Since Paul says that the Law is fulfilled in the command to love one another, the Christian, in effect, fulfills the law of Christ, when indwelt by the Holy Spirit, now serves his 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. “*If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*” Again, the immediate context is the self-righteousness implicit in the teaching of the Judaizers, which would have, no doubt, 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, and to their way of thinking, had obtained a greater degree of righteousness than others. Thus self-righteousness is intrinsically judgmental and detests weakness. Paul’s comments are intended to remind us that obedience to the Law does not justify. Indeed our attempts to be justified by law only condemn

² Schreiner, The Law and Its Fulfillment, 159.

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.” This is why 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 indeed think we are something when we compare ourselves to others. But when we are measured not by others, but by the light of the Law, we realize we are nothing. The great paradox in this is that in ourselves and our own efforts we are nothing—a fact that the self-righteousness cannot grasp. But in Christ, even the weakest sinner is a king or queen and an heir to all of the treasure and riches of heaven that are found in Christ. This is Paul’s point—why look to ourselves, when we can instead gaze upon the glories of Jesus Christ? This is the great folly of self-righteousness.

For Paul, this now becomes a matter of “*testing [our] own actions. Then [we] can take pride in [ourselves], without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load.*” It is clear when we come to Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life and sanctification, that he stresses 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’s 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 here is the Judaizers in the Galatian church running around snooping and spying on everyone’s liberty. Paul has identified such behavior as fruit of the flesh—discord, jealousy, envy, factions and dissension and the like and he is wonderfully commonsensical in his approach here—those who need help, need help. The strong help the weak—showing generosity, and the weak accept the help from the strong—demonstrating graciousness. It is also quite evident that Paul is not happy with busybodies or those too lazy to carry their own weight—as these things clearly are manifestations of the fruit of the flesh.

Next, in verse 6, Paul raises an issue with the Galatians that may make some of us uncomfortable—but which is clearly an apostolic injunction, namely—“*Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.*” The point here is as follows: “The teacher relieves the ignorance of the pupil; the pupil should relieve the teacher of concern for subsistence.” The same principle is stated in Luke 10:7—“*the worker deserves his wages.*” In 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul elaborates on this giving a bit more detail—“*The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.*” Paul, therefore, implores the Galatians that even though they were used to paying pagan priests for performing sacrifices and other religious, they were not used to paying for someone to teach them, and they need to support those who were teaching them. 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, not all elders are ministers who 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, therefore, able to devote themselves to their callings.

³ Bruce, *Galatians*, 262.

Beginning in verse 7, Paul spells out one of the great principles of the Christian life, the principle of “sowing and reaping,” and in doing so, the apostle ties together the practical advice he has just given, with the Fruit of the Spirit, which he has discussed in chapter 5.⁴ Paul is quite serious about what follows for he begins with the pointed warning to his hearers, “*do not be deceived, God cannot be mocked.*” The point is simply this—a person cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ and 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 fruit of the flesh, also set out in the previous chapter. But there is an important qualification here—recall that Paul has 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, but the non-Christian—that is, 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.*” For those who grew up in an agrarian society—as did most of those in Paul’s original audience, the principle was very simple. 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, “*the one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction.*” Now remember the context—this principle of the Christian life must be seen in light of the fruit 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 them, Christians must submit to ritual circumcision, keep the feast days, obey the dietary laws in order to be justified. They were clearly 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. Thus, it is the false gospel of the Judaizers which is the seed spoken of here which is sown to the flesh. And 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 the fact that people were 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 then, 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 judgement! For God will not be mocked! He will see your fruit for what it is and he will not be at all impressed with your self-righteousness 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, a time was at hand when Israel was sowing seed to the wind, and reaping the whirlwind. She came under God’s judgement. The same will be true for the Judaizers and those who sow to their false gospel.

Again, the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit is clear—“*the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*” That is, the one who believes the gospel as taught by Paul sows

⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, 294.

seed that also produces a certain kind of crop—a crop which will manifest not the fruit of the flesh, but the fruit of the Spirit. And the result will be equally certain—though in this case the result is not destruction, but eternal life. And so 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.

And so Paul now reminds his hearers, that despite the difficulties they face, “*let us not become weary in doing good* [i.e., doing what is good, that is, believing the gospel and sowing to the Spirit], *for at the proper time* [when Christ comes back] *we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*” Therefore, Paul concludes, even though the Judaizers may be eating each other alive as they manifest the fruit of the flesh, we on the other hand, “*as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people* [i.e. sow seed to the Spirit], *especially to those who belong to the family of believers.* This, of course, emphasizes the fact that 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 here that do indeed relate to us as a congregation. The whole problem ultimately 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. The Law was intended to “level the field” so to speak, and destroy all self-righteousness. But because of human sinfulness, the Judaizers saw the Law of Moses as a means of accruing merit and earning a right standing before God. Hence, instead of being crushed by the Law—they deceived themselves into thinking they were keeping the Law and they became proud, boastful, arrogant and utterly destructive to the well-being of the Galatian church. By sowing to flesh—which is seeking to be justified by human effort—the Judaizers would produce a crop—a crop which is called the fruit of the flesh. False doctrine produced 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, on the other hand, sow to the Spirit, and though they will struggle with the flesh until they die, they will nevertheless bear the fruit of the Spirit. God will ensure it! Thus the application of this to the church is simple. We are not to devour, spy, backstab, cause dissension and so on. For justified sinners are to bear with one another, help the struggling and the weak, and to be patient with those who are at different places in their sanctification. This behavior, says Paul, is the manifestation of the Spirit’s fruit in Christ’s church.

Paul’s point about 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, for a man or woman does indeed reap what they sow. Which will it be? “Are you sowing to the flesh by trusting in your own righteousness, or are you sowing to the Spirit by trusting in the righteousness of Jesus Christ?” If you sow to the flesh, you will produce a crop—a crop called the “fruit of the flesh,” and you will suffer eternal loss. If you sow to the Spirit by renouncing your own righteousness and seek the righteousness of Jesus Christ, you will also bear a crop—a crop called the “fruit of the Spirit,” and this is the crop which leads to eternal life. For even now, the savior bids to us with open arms, inviting us to come him and recline on his breast, and in doing so, we sow to the Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of everlasting life.