

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Sowing to the Spirit

Galatians 6:1-10

I sometimes speak of how we're called to praise God with both our lips and our lives. The fact that today's worship gathering will conclude with a business meeting to elect deacons, as well as officers and committees, for 2022-2023, is a good example of that. Once we've finished singing, praying, giving, and preaching, we'll confirm the ways that we plan to worship and honor the Lord by our specific places of service in his church. And as we do that, today's text from Galatians can help us see what that means.

First, let's note where we're at in Paul's letter. Paul has just finished giving a passionate defense of his belief that the Spirit, whom we often refer to as the Holy Spirit, is sufficient to guide the community of Christians in its life together. When Paul speaks of the Spirit, he's talking primarily about the personal, powerful presence of God, dwelling within each believer and within the community of believers as a whole. Remember that when the gospel had been preached among the Galatians, it had evoked faith. They had placed their trust in Jesus Christ, and as part of that experience had received the Spirit into their lives. So in the second half of chapter 5, Paul talks about what life looks like in a congregation where the Spirit is active. He does this by contrasting the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness . . ." (5:22). Many of you may recognize that list.

So by the time we get to chapter 6, the beginning of this morning's text, Paul is still talking about what it means for a congregation to walk by the Spirit. Notice that he doesn't just speak in broad, abstract terms. Instead, he gets right down into the nitty gritty of life together in the church. He commends specific practices to them that will help them live out their calling as God's people. They should practice mutual correction and bear one another's burdens (vv. 1-2). They should practice self-examination (vv. 3-5). They should practice generosity through financial support of the congregation's teachers (v. 6). Then, in the concluding paragraph of our text, Paul gives them a general admonition to do good, broadly to everyone and particularly to others in the community of believers. That's where I want us to focus our attention today.

Paul says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (v. 7). These are bits of proverbial wisdom that Paul takes and applies to the Galatian church's situation. He's essentially reminding them of the certainty of God's final judgment. As one commentator has put it, Paul is basically telling them, "Remember, this is God you are dealing with here, not some image of your own construction. Don't think you can get away with anything, for God judges everything in the end."¹

Then Paul reinforces this sense of accountability to God by using agricultural imagery. He talks about sowing and reaping, as a reminder that actions have consequences. One father tells about how he and his wife were discussing the meaning of the season of Lent with their three daughters. After describing what Jesus gave up for us, they explained how some people like to focus on God by giving up something that has become important to them, like

computers or coffee or dessert or television. Dad announced that he and mom were going to give up all desserts until Easter. Then he asked the girls to think of what they could give up. The oldest daughter said sweets. The middle daughter chimed in, "Me too." But the youngest daughter, who was six years old, pondered the question a little longer. Finally she nodded with satisfaction and said confidently, "I want to give up consequences!"²

Paul's exhortation to the Galatians reminds us that that's not the way it works. We live in a world made and loved by God, who sent his Son to redeem us and bring us into his family. And this gracious God will have the final say over our lives and over the world. The way we respond to God's grace, the choices we make in life, and the way we conduct ourselves, have consequences. Particular courses of behavior lead to particular results. We reap what we sow.

But Paul is even more specific. In verse 8, he speaks of "sowing to the flesh" as contrasted with "sowing to the Spirit." In a previous edition of the NIV, the word translated as "the flesh" is rendered as "sinful nature." This phrase may get at part of what Paul is describing, but it doesn't fully capture what he intends. For Paul, "flesh" isn't just a matter of personal, inward desires and impulses. "Flesh" is also a power that opposes the Spirit of God. "Flesh" would have us live autonomous lives, apart from God and from one another. The "Spirit," by contrast, aims to bring us into right relationship with God and with one another. To "sow to the flesh" means to build your identity on something other than relationship with Christ and to seek security in anything other than the promise of God. To "sow to the Spirit" means to place your confidence and hope in the working of God's Spirit, Christ living in you and in us. The bottom line: Sowing to the flesh brings decay and death, while sowing to the Spirit brings the life-giving power of God.

C. S. Lewis once wrote:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to one state or the other.³

In view of what's at stake, Paul says, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (v. 9). That verse is the inspiration for the message that's currently on our church sign: DON'T GROW WEARY IN DOING GOOD. It's significant that all those passing by, both believers and non-believers, can see and hear that kind of exhortation. But it's especially important that we ourselves, who see that message and then immediately turn right onto Downs Drive, reflect on how we can resist growing weary or giving up.

At the heart of our perseverance is a promise, the promise that there will be a harvest. "At the proper time" is another one of Paul's allusions to God's final judgment. So the faithfulness of God, revealed most of all in the death and resurrection of Jesus, assures us that all our seed-sowing isn't in vain. But we have to hold to the sequence. First the planting, then later the crop. Authors Bruce McNicol and Bill Thrall tell of a woman who has a dream where she wanders into a shop at the mall and finds Jesus behind a counter. He says to her "You can have anything your heart desires." Astounded but pleased, she asks for peace, joy, happiness, wisdom, and freedom from fear. Then she adds, "Not just for

me, but for the whole earth." Jesus smiles and says, "I think you misunderstand me. We don't sell fruits, only seeds."⁴

The church is a community where we take the seeds that we have through Christ and scatter them into one another's lives and into the life of the world, relying upon God to make them fruitful. And that takes time. As Eugene Peterson says, "The person who looks for quick results in the seed planting of well-doing will be disappointed. If I want potatoes for dinner tomorrow, it will do me little good to plant them in my garden tonight. There are long stretches of darkness and invisibility and silence that separate planting and reaping. During the stretches of waiting, there is cultivating and weeding and nurturing and planting still other seeds."⁵

The life of our congregation is an ongoing agricultural project. We're continually sowing and waiting, sowing and waiting. "Therefore," says Paul, "as we have opportunity..." (v. 10). Another translation renders it, "whenever we have an opportunity" (NRSV). But the phrase literally means "as we have time." So the expression doesn't mean, "Whenever it's possible to do good, or whenever you get a chance to do good, do it," though that is certainly true. Instead, there's an urgency about doing good, in light of God's promised judgement. In other words, "While the opportunity remains, let us seize the moment to do the good."⁶

Now, this is probably a good moment to step back and emphasize that neither Paul nor I are saying that doing the good will earn you a place in the kingdom of God. Being right with God comes solely through Christ's triumph for us, a forgiveness and freedom that you experience personally through faith. When Paul speaks about our "work" (v. 4) he doesn't mean something we achieve in and of ourselves. Rather, it's the fruit of the Spirit working in you and through you. Only by having Christ dwelling in us can any of us stand before God's judgment not in fear but with assurance and hope. What ultimately matters, as Paul stressed earlier in his letter, is "faith expressing itself through love" (5:6).

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (v. 10). Paul closes our text by emphasizing obedience in love and faithfulness in service to all, both within the church and beyond. In other words, our Spirit-generated efforts have a global scope, but a local intensity. While we're called to do good to all, we have a special and unique obligation to those in the household of faith. That's where we're supposed to particularly focus our energies in doing good.

That brings us back to where we are this morning, assembled to praise God not just with our lips but also with our lives. And one of the ways we do that is through our participation in our congregation's various ministries. By now many of you have already received a copy of the Nominating Committee's recommendations for who will be serving where in our church's life and mission. Remember that this is way more than just a list of volunteers. It's a printed promise, a declaration of how folks have pledged themselves to specific forms of mutual responsibility and service. It tells us where each of us plans to commit our time, our energy, our resources, our faith, and our hope. In other words, it tells us how we're planning to sow to the Spirit.

Most of you will be scattering seed in the same part of the field where you've worked before. You've been planting and cultivating for a long time. In some respects, you've witnessed fruitfulness in that part of our church's life. In other respects, you may still be waiting to see what God may do with your efforts. And some of you may still be somewhat new to your place of service. You're still learning the lay of the land in your territory. But whether you've served in the congregation for a long time, a short time, or some time in between, the exhortation is the same: Don't grow weary in doing good. Keep on sowing to

the Spirit, relying upon the life-giving power of God, who is faithful to his promise, and will complete the saving work he has begun through Christ.

¹ Richard B. Hays, "Galatians." *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) n.p.

² Deron Smith, Springfield, Missouri.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001) 86-87.

⁴ Bruce McNicol and Bill Thrall, *The Ascent of a Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1999) n.p.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Leadership*, Vol. 8, No. 4.

⁶ Hays, "Galatians," n.p.