

GOD IS NOT MOCKED

SERIES: GALATIANS

By Steve Zeisler

One November, a friend of mine put a couple of small pumpkins in his backyard compost pile. When he spread the compost in his garden to help things grow the following spring, what grew were scores upon scores of pumpkin plants! His garden was covered by hundreds of broad green pumpkin leaves, covered, by the determination of God, not his own, by a species of plant he never intended to grow. Seeds will always respond to their nature. They will grow, and take no account whatever of your assumptions. They never ask what you intended, but will grow as their nature dictates.

The passage before us today in the book of Galatians uses the imagery of seeds and harvest to raise a very important warning. We have seen that this section of Galatians concerns the serious condition of Christians who sin and face suffering. Paul speaks first to those who are spiritual. Those whose lives are in line with the calling of the Spirit of God have a responsibility to help those who are hurting. If that is your condition in this season, then your responsibility is to turn to the needy, those who are, burdened either by sin or by difficulty, and help them. “Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

The passage we will look at today is not so much addressed to those who are spiritual, but to those who are deceived, and those who are headed toward deception. Galatians 6:7-10:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

The words of Galatians 6:7 are simple. The phrases are easily understood. Even a child can understand the metaphor that Paul uses. Our problem is not with understanding what the apostle is talking about, but with being willing to deal with our love of deception. We tend, by nature, to deceive ourselves. Our natural inclination is to choose to be deceived rather than to face truth that is painful and unpleasant. If you need proof of that, just look at the political process. It seems to be the consensus today that it is impossible to get elected to national office by telling the truth. Instead, politicians poll their constituents to find out what they want to hear, then, depending on the results of the polls, say things calculated to leave a certain impression. The way to get elected is not to cast ideas in the clearest, most forceful terms, but in ways that will massage the hopes and interests of people. Even attempts to take a strong position for the truth are perceived to be part of the old sincerity ploy: “Be sincere whether you mean it or not.” Is it any wonder that voters are apathetic over the political process?

In counseling situations, I have many times seen husbands and wives deliberately choose deception rather than truth. Faced with conflict, they ask, “Please help us have good feelings for one another without making us face the problems that have brought us to our present impasse. Reassure us, whether your analysis is accurate or not.” Time and again I have seen

people go back into relationships, either business relationships or love relationships, with those who have hurt them and lied to them, all the while hoping that the next time things will be different. Fortunes are made in this country on people who buy diets, beauty and health aids that purport to make their users svelte and beautiful without the need to make critical changes in their lifestyle. Our natural human inclination is to prefer pleasant lies in place of difficult truth.

Choosing to be deceived with regard to diet may be a fairly innocuous decision, but as far as our spiritual life is concerned it is very, very dangerous to choose to be deceived. That is why this warning comes with such urgency. In no uncertain terms, Paul admonishes, "Do not be deceived. God will not be made a fool of." We sometimes think that the Lord is like the Wizard of Oz: he is apparently great and terrible, and capable of mighty manifestations, but he gives in when he is challenged even by a little girl. We proceed as if God can be gotten around; that he is either incapable or uninterested in carrying out his determination that there is to be a moral harvest in life. But our Lord, the dread "Yahweh Sabaoth" (the Lord of Armies) is not one to be trifled with. No one will ever stand before him at judgment, laughing at him, and say, "I got away with it. You were incapable of making me live by the truth. I made your universe work to my benefit." None of us will be able to accuse him of failing as the Sovereign of creation.

Do not be deceived at this point. Be deceived about your diet, if you want to, be deceived even in your family life, if necessary, but do not be deceived at this point: God will not be made a fool of. He has determined that what is sown is what will be reaped. If you put pumpkin seeds into the ground--whether you intend them to grow or not--pumpkin seeds will grow into pumpkin plants. That same process operates in the spiritual arena too, so be warned. Jesus himself reminds us of this truth in his words, "There is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and whatever you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed from the housetop."

Thus Paul declares that those who sow to the flesh reap corruption, while those who sow to the Spirit will reap eternal life. The words "flesh" and "Spirit" are used over and over again throughout the book of Galatians. A new concept is added here, however, the concept of sowing seeds. What exactly does the apostle mean in the words, "Sow to the Spirit," and "Sow to the flesh?" Here Paul recognizes that life is built in the same manner as a building is erected, i.e., one brick at a time. Choices are made one at a time. By our individual choices we put in place one brick after another, and the kind of life that results from our decision-making depends on the hundreds and thousands of individual choices that went into it. The warning in this section of Galatians is to make those choices based on what God's Spirit is concerned with. We are charged to do so day in and day out rather than listen to the temptations of our lower nature.

I passed by the field of the sluggard, And by the vineyard of the man lacking in sense; And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles, Its surface was covered with nettles, And its stone wall was broken down. (Prov. 24:30-31)

"I went by the home of the lazy man," the proverbist is saying, "and in his garden what I saw was tragedy, broken walls and thistles."

When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, and received instruction. "A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest," Then your poverty will come as a robber, And your want like an armed man. (Prov. 24:32-34)

A little laziness, a little inattention, a little folding of the hands, a little disregard. . . Little choices, but suddenly, it seems, the garden is overrun with weeds and its walls are broken down. John Stott in his commentary on Galatians says,

To “sow to the flesh” is to pander to it, to cosset, cuddle and stroke it, instead of crucifying it. The seeds we sow are largely thoughts and deeds. Every time we allow our mind to harbor a grudge, nurse a grievance, entertain an impure fantasy, or wallow in self-pity, we are sowing to the flesh. Every time we linger in bad company whose insidious influence we know we cannot resist, every time we lie in bed when we ought to be up and praying, every time we read pornographic literature, every time we take a risk that strains our self-control, we are sowing, sowing, sowing to the flesh.

Conversely, our option is to sow to the Spirit. Two verses from the book of Philippians have always helped me remember what it means to plant the kind of seeds that concern the Spirit of God:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you. (Phil. 4:8-9)

Think about things that are worth thinking about. Practice what is worth carrying out. . . and the God of peace who brings peace will be with you. It is by means of thoughts and actions that we sow to the Spirit or sow to the flesh, choices we make regarding our minds and regarding our actions.

I want to talk for a moment about the words “corruption” and “eternal life.” Those are the results of seeds sown: seeds sown to the flesh bring corruption; seeds sown to the Spirit bring eternal life. “Eternal life” here is not the same thing as popularity, being well received and well spoken of. At times the harvest of eternal life may well make us unpopular. The character produced by the Spirit of God may challenge the status quo. It may make us appear foolish as we give money away rather than embrace it with the thrift our families try to impress upon us. Our concern for the hurting and needy of this world may very well bring us into touch with disreputable people. Thus the harvest of eternal life should not be equated with popularity. It will not necessarily raise us in anybody’s estimation. It may even put us at odds with people we care about. Yet that is no indication that the harvest is not of God.

Secondly, Paul is not sharing the Ben Franklin kind of wisdom of Poor Richard’s Almanac--the “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise”--type of worldly wisdom. Eternal life has nothing to do with prosperity and health. Eternal life has to do with what is going on in the inner man, in our character, thus it is much deeper and much more significant than external changes. Eternal life means we are in a right relationship with God, we are at peace with ourselves, our self-image is focused in Christ. Our thought processes, our system of values become more and more Godlike. There is no guarantee, however, that our circumstances will change. These verses do not promise that sowing to the Spirit will make illness go away, or make your boss more reasonable. The promise is for life within, for the character which will enable you to face whatever life throws at you.

Both corruption and eternal life are notions that proceed out of the future, out of the eternity that stretches out before us. There is coming a day when the Lord will return again to reign on earth, then wickedness will be done away with, and righteousness will be the standard. We began to participate in the eternal state the day we were given life in the Son. What is pictured here is that everything that is true of eternity begins to flow backwards toward us now; that wickedness is being

done away with and the Lord reigns more completely in our lives; our convictions about ourselves and about others begin to change; there is joy and peace in the inner man. That is what this verse is saying: if you sow to the Spirit you reap eternal life.

On the other hand, however, if you sow to the flesh, corruption is what you will reap. Again, we are speaking of an eternal kind of corruption, being cut off from God, with the darkness and despair that that entails. That too becomes true of us as we make choices today to sow to the flesh. Again, outward circumstances are not the primary concern here. The lives of people who sow to the flesh are not guaranteed to fall apart. The world is filled with arrogant and selfish people who seem to get on just fine in life. Paul is talking about a corruption that is going on inside people, the godlessness and the darkness that is true of eternal corruption. If we are looking only at the outward things we may be confused by what seems to be the harvest of sowing to the flesh. But, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked..." The bitter harvest of sowing to the flesh is certain.

In Scripture, the interplay of sin, righteousness and judgment is complicated. The Jews in Jesus' day tended to think it was simple: if you sinned you suffered; if you were righteous everything would be fine. But Scripture does not teach that. Nor did Jesus teach that either. When the disciples asked him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?" (John 9), they were thinking in those terms. Jesus refuses to accept either option, however. "Your question is invalid," he replied, in effect. "What is important here is not the question of who sinned, this man or his parents. God's purposes in this man being born blind are much more profound than that."

The whole question of our circumstances being determined by our choices is a very complex one. These verses are not in any way implying that it is a simple matter, that you can tell by your neighbor's misfortune that he is being punished for what he did 10 years ago. If we, looking at life with our finite minds, try to equate someone's hard circumstances with what we imagine their sin to be, we are not hearing what is being said here. It's usually unprofitable to spend your time examining the past in an effort to discover what seeds resulted in what harvest. That is not what Paul is advocating. What he is saying is: let us begin to make good choices now, begin today to sow to the Spirit, plant your thoughts and your actions as God's Spirit directs you and look forward to the harvest that will result from that.

One of our pastors, Ted Wise, has said that he frequently turns to these verses in counseling situations. People whose lives are a shambles, who are heartsick about what has happened to them, come to him for counsel, and one of the things he tells them is, in effect, "Undoubtedly what you are reaping was sown a long time ago. There's nothing we can do about that now. You should not be surprised that the seeds which you spread all over the place have sprouted and grown. The issue is, what are you going to do now? Are you going to start sowing a different kind of seed, the seed of sowing to the Spirit, so that you can look forward to the day when you will reap eternal life? Rather than being discouraged by today's hardship, let us hear what the Lord has to say and get on with the business of putting something else in the ground."

"Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." Here, in simple words repeated in verses 9 and 10, Paul teaches how to sow to the Spirit: "Do not lose heart in doing good" (Gal. 6: 9), and, "While we have opportunity, let us do good" (Gal. 6:10). Sowing to the Spirit is not all that complicated: it is deciding, by the power of his Spirit, to start doing what is good. And we know what God says is good: begin to value what he values, be a blessing to other people, invest in the lives of others, work for their freedom, bring light where there is darkness and truth where there is error, support those who are in need, share Christ with them--be about whole business of doing good, in other words.

These are very helpful verses first, because they give us a simple and clear direction; and secondly, because they deal with the very difficult issue of timing. And the last important issue in this analysis is the fact that God's timing is different than ours. We are like children who plant beans one day and dig them up the next to see if they have grown. We feel sure that our good choices ought to bring results, and they ought to bring them soon and along lines we expect. But that is not taught in the Word of God. The timing depends upon God. "In due season," in the right time, as God's perspective determines it, those seeds will bear fruit. But that time may be much farther away than we expected (although it may very well be sooner than we expected). Further, the fruit may come in a different form than we expected. Yet God's timing remains in his control. So let us not lose heart. Let us hear the warning of Scripture that the choices which we make today are going to have an effect on our future. Then, having heard that, let us determine to do good, to be involved in what matters, both in our thought life and in our actions. "Let us not lose heart."

Two different mental images, one in 6:9 and one in 6:10, occur to me as I read these verses. If I were to attempt to draw these images, what I would come up with would portray a very striking contrast between these concepts. In the first image, Paul is picturing someone whose life is hard, someone who is reaping misery, and that person has henceforth determined to begin to sow to the Spirit, to make different choices in the future. But he finds that he is frequently disheartened in his determination, that it is a wearisome process. He barely can put one foot before the other. As he scans the horizon he sees no reason to be of good heart, but he knows that the Lord wants him to slug it out anyway.

Galatians 6:10, in contrast, portrays a totally different attitude. "While we have opportunity, let us do good," writes the apostle. Here the image is of someone who is trying to slow life down because there are so many good works to be done and so little time available in which to do them. To one of such a mind, 80 years seems an utterly inadequate lifespan to live for Christ's sake. Buy up opportunities while you may, is Paul's counsel; plant seeds in the Spirit while there is yet time. Do you see how different the two images are? One portrays someone who is weary and forever losing heart, while the other pictures one who is filled with excitement because there are only a limited number of opportunities to be a blessing. It is that attitude, that tone, that heartbeat that marks the change from Galatians 6:9 to 6:10.

It may very well be an implication of this section that part of the harvest of eternal life is changing from the former of those conditions to the latter. Rather than the Christian life being wearisome, instead of our saying, "Oh Lord, I have to trust you even though everything in me shrieks against trusting you, I have to reach out to people I don't like and pray for people I can't stand," we now find that there is not enough time in the day to be involved in the good works which the Lord has for us.

For many I have known, the harvest of eternal life is precisely that transformation from weariness to hope, the transformation that makes one a different person. Although the outward circumstances may not have changed, their attitude, what they do in the midst of all that is going on has changed.

The analysis is really simple. "Do not be deceived." God will not be mocked. Nobody will stand face-to-face with the Lord of Armies and laugh at him. If you think you will, you are deceived. There is a relentless quality to the harvest. Whatever is sown will be reaped as eternal life or corruption. The conclusion is, start proper sowing now. No matter what you have done in the past, begin to sow to the Spirit now. Let us do good. Let each one of us look for opportunities while there is yet opportunity to do good. Let us bring life and hope to the hopeless, let us bind up hurts and speak the truth. Let us do what is good and look forward to the spiritual harvest to come.

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