

REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

SERIES: YOU ARE THE MAN

by Steve Zeisler

Historians will remember 1998 as the year when the concerns of our national leaders became indistinguishable from soap operas. "Sex, lies, and videotape" have become the preoccupation of the greatest nation in the world. How should Christian citizens respond? Some suggest that we ought to thunder words of indignation at those who defend immorality or at those who attack it with pompous pride of their own. Some say that we should withdraw and mourn the death of a great nation because it's too late to fix it. Some suggest that we ought to advance into the world of lost souls and offer the binding of wounds that the gospel makes possible.

I've been put in mind of J. B. Phillips' book *Your God Is Too Small*. (1) His thesis is that people who worship a great God become a great people, that if the God who inspires our worship and calls for our devotion is himself noble and holy and loving and merciful, if he is infinite in power and authority and good beyond description, then we become noble and righteous and godly people. But the reverse is also true. If we imagine God to be out of step, old-fashioned, incoherent, powerless, weak, good only for ceremonial occasions but having little else to offer, if our conception of God is small, we become diminished as people.

It seems to me that this is what is at the heart of the contemporary problem. Despite all the conversation, very few people have given God his place at the center. What matters most to God in the contemporary events? What work is he doing?

In this series we're going to go back three thousand years to the time of King David, when a circumstance essentially the same as the one that obtains now in Washington took place: David's adultery with Bathsheba, his covering up, and his exposure. But what was different then is that David, Nathan the prophet, and the people were most concerned about the words and actions of God. The case of David and Bathsheba should enable us to think more clearly about God's purposes than about tomorrow's polls and yesterday's gossip.

To prepare for this study, you should read 2 Samuel 11-13 and Psalm 51. In the next message ([Discovery Paper 4591](#)) we're going to start working through this material, trying to understand what happened and why.

However, in this message, we're going to start the process of considering these themes with a warning from Galatians 6. It's a warning to people who imagine, perhaps without even realizing it, that God is not great, powerful, majestic, and holy. If we heed this warning, we'll be well-launched on the right perspective to study the story of David and Bathsheba. Does God mean what he says? Is he One whose integrity can be trusted? Does he have the authority to accomplish his purposes? What kind of world do kings and presidents and House Judiciary Committees operate in? What reminders do we need of the greatness and certain purposes of God? Do we serve a majestic deity, or do we serve one who is too small?

Galatians 6:7-10:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. 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. 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.

The word translated "destruction" is better translated "ruin" or "corruption." It was used of the decay of dead bodies in New Testament times. It describes not a violent destruction but a kind of corrupting ruin that takes place over time.

THE LIE THAT THERE ARE NO CONSEQUENCES

There are three short phrases in verse 7 that are easy to understand, but the more we think about them, the more profound they will seem to us. Let's look at the first two: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked." That is a reminder of the fall of the first human pair in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3). God made everything for the first man and woman beautiful and fulfilling. He told them to eat of all the trees that he had made, to enjoy all the wide creation that he had established for them. He said, "There is nothing prohibited you except one thing: the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of it, you will die." Then the tempter came to the first human pair and began to deceive them as to what God might really have meant. The serpent was enchanting, the fruit was attractive, the possibilities were marvelous. "You can become like God. He really wants you to do what he said he doesn't want you to do. He expects you to grow up and challenge him a bit."

The serpent was insisting in a clever way that God could be mocked, that he was a bit of a buffoon, that his statements were not reliable. He was making God out to be sort of like the Wizard of Oz: "I am Oz, the great and terrible." (2)The voice resounded and the images were impressive, but behind the screen was a ventriloquist from Omaha who didn't really have any power to do anything. The argument of the serpent in the Garden was, "When God pronounces consequences, he's wrong. He's unable to do what he says, so you can get around him." The argument that you can ignore God to no peril, that you can have it your way and he'll do nothing, that there are no consequences of your choices is the first and last lie.

"God cannot be mocked." He is not like the gods of ancient pantheons who were often drunk, drowsy, puffed up with pride, or easily tricked. The ancient people spent most of their time trying to figure out how to trick the gods. The people who were most looked up to in the ancient world were the savvy insiders who knew their gods' secret shortcomings. They knew how to play off one god against another, how to beat the system, how to have it their own way. Paul was writing here that it is an immense foolishness to imagine that the God of the Bible is such a god. He will not be ridiculed. He means exactly what he says. None may prevent him from carrying out his plans.

Let me use a baseball analogy. Many of our contemporaries think of God sort of as a cagey old veteran pitcher, probably left-handed. He used to have a fast ball that was hard to hit. He's still good for a couple of innings. He can keep hitters off balance for a little while. But the young generation of players has passed him by. Some believe that we live in a world that is much too diverse for the God of the Bible. Technology has passed him by. He's on his last legs. We ought to venerate him every now and then, and he'll be voted into the hall of fame, no doubt. But he's not really significant anymore. There's a mocking of God that the contemporary world engages in when they think those things. What Paul is saying in Galatians 6 is clear. He is sounding a warning that we need to hear: Don't listen to such conceptions of God.

Where are you likely to be deceived about these things? Where are you likely to believe that you can get away with mocking God, that you can engage in behavior that you know God forbids and skate past the consequences? In your car you may have warning lights that go on when the oil is low or you're running out of gas or a door is ajar. There are areas in your life (every one of us has them) where you are more tempted to believe lies than in other areas, and what you need to do is brighten the "warning lights" there: "This imagining that I can proceed in secret and get away with it isn't true!" The simple reality, in the third short statement in verse 7, is this: What you sow, you reap.

REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

We have a neighbor who is indifferent about his yard. Often dandelion seeds blow from his yard and settle

in ours. Now, I never want dandelion seeds to grow, but once the seeds are in the ground, they produce dandelions. Seeds pay no attention to the desires of others. They grow according to their nature.

Consider the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). He rejected his father, took his inheritance, went off, and spent it on parties. One day he woke up feeding pigs. The prodigal never intended to end up where he did-he only wanted to have a good time. But once the choices were made, the crops grew.

Often we find ourselves wishing things were different, wondering how events occurred, and the answer is that we made some choices, and the results were inevitable.

You may remember Aesop's fable about the shepherd boy and the wolf. He found tending his sheep tiresome, so he ran toward the village shouting, "Wolf! Wolf!" The villagers came running to drive off the wolf, and there was no wolf. Well, that was great fun, so he did it again every now and then. The people would always come running, and no wolf. Then one day a wolf really did come. The frightened boy yelled, "Wolf! Wolf!" but no one came. If you had asked him as the wolf was killing all the sheep, "Did you intend for this to happen?" he would have said, "No! I was just having a good time. I was just bored. I was doing this innocently, I thought." But his choices had established him as someone who couldn't be believed, and that cost him dearly.

That's the argument that Paul is making here. Eventually when the crops begin to grow and you wish they wouldn't, it's too late to say, "This isn't what I meant to have happen." What you reap is what you sow, not what you wish for.

Now in the case of spiritual things, what does it mean to sow to the flesh or sinful nature, or sow to the spirit (verse 8)? We have choices every day regarding what we are going to value, what our convictions are, how we will treat people, what we will decide is right and wrong, how we are going to enter into relationships, how we are going to deal with the things we're afraid of. We can either choose to let the Spirit of God himself influence us and remind us of God's word, to take seriously all the great themes of the gospel, to be servant-hearted instead of selfish, to be courageous when we want to run away, to be gentle with people, to be honest with them-or we can decide to be self-serving and short-sighted and shallow and fearful. All such choices have consequences, and eventually the consequences add up. Most people I know who have addictive behaviors have them because they made a lot of choices over a period of time. Hebrews 12:15 talks about a root of bitterness that bears a terrible fruit. It is a deep, malignant root of resentment and anger at someone that takes over your heart. Every time you think of their name or encounter them, whether they see it on your face or not, you feed the resentment, stoke the anger, allow it to fester. Eventually it has a powerful grip on who you are. But you arrive there over time, not overnight. Greed, self-pity, arrogance, prejudice, cruelty, laziness all grow over time. You become those things by choices you make.

The converse is also true. When we choose to trust God, we become more like him. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When you listen to and are shaped by the mind of God, over time you become somebody more and more like him, and the result is beauty of character, security of emotions, confidence in life. When you're honest over time, doors open because people learn to trust you. When you're courageous, you become confident in who you are. When you are gentle, eventually you are able to get near people who otherwise would flee from you and resist you.

Your essential nature is becoming more and more like one thing or the other. Jesus talked about whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27-28). You can paint a tomb so that it looks good on the outside, but inside it's full of decaying bones. And externally, for a very long time you may appear to be the person others have always thought you were-a good, happy, outgoing, positive, confident, engaging person, while inside you're becoming something much worse. Inside decay is happening, and the facade is less and less true. On the other hand, as Christ forms himself in us, we become more and more secure in him and have more and more of his character on the inside.

Another observation I would like to make about consequences concerns bringing hidden things to light. There is no such thing as secret behavior, ultimately. Jesus made this stern observation: "...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 upon the housetops." (Luke 12:2-3.) I will probably never again read those verses

without thinking about the Starr report-four hundred plus pages of shouting from the rooftops what was spoken in the inner rooms, what was done in secret, trumpeted in mind-numbing detail, revealing tawdriness, selfishness, and arrogance. What was done in secret will become public. Your life will have an accounting, not just for the things you intend but for everything.

Beauty is revealed as well. Three times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said this: "...Your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). The kindness, sincerity, integrity, goodwill, sweetness of spirit, and service you have offered that no one noticed or applauded is valued. Your heavenly Father sees it, and he will reward you. There is no righteous behavior that will remain secret, and there is no unrighteous behavior that will remain secret. And that is a lot of what Paul is saying here. The fruit is finally apparent. What you sow, you reap.

WAITING FOR THE HARVEST

In verses 9-10 Paul discusses two ways of thinking about the future. First he says, "Don't quit too soon. Don't grow weary in doing good. You will reap if you don't give up." The problem for people who have determined to make decisions by the power of the Spirit is that there is a time lag between those choices and the fruit. Our tendency will always be to quit too soon, to not want to wait for the harvest to come. It becomes wearisome. We're sincerely, genuinely giving ourselves to the things of God, and it seems as if nothing changes. The eternal life and the fruit of the Spirit that are promised don't seem to come. And so Paul's encouragement is "Don't quit. What you sow, you reap. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

A FEW OPPORTUNITIES TO DO GOOD

The other problem with the time lag between planting and harvest is from the opposite direction-not weariness, but urgency. Who knows how many days you have left? Today might be your last. "While you have the opportunity," he argues, "do good. Make loving choices. Plant good seed. Buy up every opportunity you have-time is fleeting."

The story of David and the story of President Clinton have this in common: Once someone begins to experience the corrupt fruit, they can spend the rest of their life trying to deal with the consequences and, in doing so, plant more unrighteous seed. They commit adultery, and it threatens public disgrace, and so they have to tell lies to cover up the adultery. And the more lies they tell, the more lies they have to tell, and the wider the circle becomes. They have to intimidate and take advantage of people in order to keep the lies hidden. And every day that they're doing more unrighteousness to deal with the consequences of former behavior, they're planting more seeds, because today's sins are going to have their consequences.

What Paul is saying here is that you can stop the process any time you choose, and take the consequences. Whatever consequences proceed from the things I did in the past, I can't do anything about. I'm not going to cover those things up any more, defend them, claim that they're something they're not, or blame anybody else. But I can start today to put different seeds in the ground. I can trust God. I can love those who are difficult. I can exhibit courage. If I do that, I can look forward to their harvest someday as well. While I have the opportunity, I can do good.

Is your God too small? That was the question we started with. Do you serve a God who is more like the Wizard of Oz, who can't defend himself against tricky people, who gets buffaloed easily, who is past his prime? Or is the God of the Bible, who means what he says, still the God of the universe? If so, the wise person will trust God's word and live to honor him. Whatever the past was, today is the day of salvation. Today is the day to begin a new pattern that will bear its own fruit someday. Don't believe the oldest lie in the world, the lie that says there are no consequences. That was the beginning of the human tragedy, and it is the ongoing heart of the human tragedy. There are consequences, including those that are eternal and glorious. While we have opportunity, let us do what is good.

Notes:

1. John B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*, © 1987, Macmillan, New York.
2. L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*, © 1956, The Reilly and Lee Co., Chicago. p. 120.

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