

Sowing and Reaping:
What you put in, is what you get out
Galatians 6:6-10
Luke 6:43-45

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
October 16th. 2016

You are what you are (except by the power of God's grace)

⁴³ "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ For every tree is known by its own fruit. For *men* do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

One day, a scorpion looked around at the mountain where he lived and decided that he wanted a change. So he set out on a journey through the forests and hills. He climbed over rocks and under vines and kept going until he reached a river. The river was wide and swift, and the scorpion stopped to consider the situation. He couldn't see any way across. So he ran upriver and then checked downriver, all the while thinking that he might have to turn back. He saw a frog sitting in the rushes by the bank of the stream on the other side of the river. He decided to ask the frog for help getting across the stream.

"Hello Mr. Frog!" called the scorpion across the water, "Would you be so kind as to give me a ride on your back across the river?"

"Well now, Mr. Scorpion! How do I know that if I try to help you, you won't try to *kill* me?" asked the frog hesitantly.

"Because," the scorpion replied, "If I try to kill you, then I would die too, for you see I cannot swim!"

Now this seemed to make sense to the frog. But he asked. "What about when I get close to the bank? You could still try to kill me and get back to the shore!"

"This is true," agreed the scorpion, "But then I wouldn't be able to get to the other side of the river!"

"Alright then...how do I know you won't just wait till we get to the other side and then kill me?" said the frog.

"Ahh...," crooned the scorpion, "Because you see, once you've taken me to the other side of this river, I will be so grateful for your help, that it would hardly be fair to reward you with death, now would it?!"

So the frog agreed to take the scorpion across the river. He swam over to the bank and settled himself near the mud to pick up his passenger. The scorpion crawled onto the frog's back, his sharp claws prickling into the frog's soft hide, and the frog slid into the river. The muddy water swirled around them, but the frog stayed near the surface so the scorpion would not drown. He kicked strongly through the first half of the stream, his flippers paddling against the current.

Halfway across the river, the frog suddenly felt a sharp sting in his back and, out of the corner of his eye, saw the scorpion remove his stinger from his back. A deadening numbness began to creep into his limbs.

"You fool!" croaked the frog, "Now we shall both die! Why on earth did you do that?"

The scorpion shrugged, "I could not help myself. It is my nature."

Jesus' teaching in Luke 6 is one facet of the Biblical message that many modern people find difficult, challenging, and even offensive. Jesus teaches that the fruit of our lives is a reflection of our nature. What we are, determines the fruit we produce. As the Bible puts it in another place, asking the rhetorical questions, "*Can a leopard change its spots?*" "*Can an Ethiopian change his skin?*" We are what we are, and cannot change that fact, **except** by the power of God's grace at work in our lives.

On one level, this should not surprise us. In every area of existence, we reproduce what we are. Apple trees produce apples, not pears or oranges. Fig trees give figs, not pomegranates. With apologies to Stuart Little, human mothers give birth to little baby humans, not mice. Some things are fixed. Living things produce and reproduce according to their kind. As humans, we *teach* what we know. We *reproduce* what we are. What is on the inside is ultimately reflected on the outside.

Jesus says that you can tell the nature of the tree by the quality of the fruit that is produced. We cannot peer into another's heart. We cannot see with unveiled clarity the nature of another. But we can look to the fruit we see in their lives. The fruit will give us some indication of what is inside.

We must be careful at this point: Christian's often mistake *works* for *fruit*. Let me illustrate this for us. As Christians, we rightly believe that one indicator of spiritual maturity is a willingness to be inconvenienced, to personally sacrifice, on behalf of the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We celebrate the stories of believers who remain true to the gospel, even at great personal cost. The Christian anthropologist, Alex Bolyanatz, notes that in Papua New Guinea one way in which such personal sacrifice is expressed is through the willingness of pastors and evangelists to *walk* from one village to the next as they travel

preaching the gospel. Walking is perceived as indicating a spiritual virtue. The result of this belief today is that it is customary for pastors and evangelists to travel from one village to the next by car or public bus, and then to disembark at the outskirts and then to *walk* the final distance into town. From one perspective, we can applaud the fact that in this way the gospel is shown to be worthy of sacrifice and personal effort. From another perspective, we realize that when this perceived spiritual virtue was established, public transportation by motorized vehicles was quite rare. Pastors and evangelists had no other choice but to walk from one village to the next to preach. Was it right to turn necessity into a spiritual virtue in the first place? Today, is there true spiritual significance if a pastor rides from town to town but walks the last half a mile?

This is the natural tendency of people in general, and Christians in particular, anywhere in the world. We tend to look to the outward things to indicate the level of a person's spiritual maturity: are they a member in good standing of a good church; have they ever prayed a sinner's prayer asking Jesus into their heart; have they been baptized; do they serve on the board; travel on church mission trips; do they abide by the solemn don'ts: they don't drink, or swear, or chew, or go with girls who do? Do not misunderstand me: praying a sinner's prayer is important, being a church member is necessary, baptism is a sign of entry into the covenant community of Christ, I am all in favor of mission trips—these are all good things. What I am saying is this: *they are not fruit!*

For this reason, these outward things are very poor indicators of what is truly going on inside a person's heart and mind. The fruit Jesus is referring to is the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the spirit is what we are called to cultivate in our lives. The fruit of the spirit was listed by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Galatia: (Galatians 5:22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. The growth and presence of these things, these character traits, of this fruit, is what tells us our lives have been regenerated and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I will come back to this shortly, but for now, note that saying, as Jesus does, that we are what we are, does not relieve us of the responsibility for our choices and actions in life. As Paul makes clear to the Galatians, what you put in is what you get out.

What you put in, is what you get out

⁷ Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

Jesus' image of a fruit tree emphasizes the natural idea that fruit reflects the nature of the tree. A tree does not do anything in particular to produce fruit; rather, if the conditions are right—sun, soil, water, and temperature—fruit occurs naturally. In contrast, Paul's image implies a greater responsibility on our part. A

sower sows. He spreads the seed. He determines what seed will be planted. The emphasis here is upon our action, upon what we do.

However, Paul is similar to Jesus in his warning against self deception, against believing that we can deceive, mock, God himself. Like Jesus, Paul is saying that the fruit that grows will be clearly seen. What you plant is what grows. What you put into the ground determines what comes up out of it. One day, whether in this life or the next, the crop will be seen for what it truly is.

You may be asking yourself, *"Pastor Mark, how do you reconcile the tension between Jesus' words, emphasizing what comes naturally, and Paul's words, emphasizing what we are supposed to do? How can both images be true?"*

I would understand it in this way. From our human perspective, our individual walk of the Christian faith begins when we are spiritually regenerated, which in due time leads to a moment of conversion, of confession of faith in Jesus Christ. We understand that something has changed in our heart. Whereas in the past we were not interested in spiritual things, now we find an interest in them. In the past we found that worship was a chore, an obligation, and now we discover that it is a delight and blessing. The point is that those who have been truly reborn by the power of God will find their heart changing regarding the things they want to sow, the places where they wish to spend their time, the interests or dreams that capture their imagination.

This is key: the spiritual transformation that is regeneration happens by the power of God and is not something we choose or create by our human efforts. At the same time, as we grow in our spiritual life, we have the spiritual obligation to cooperate with God, actively yielding ourselves to the expression of the fruit of the Spirit in our life and circumstance. We should grow in love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control.

You may be asking, "Pastor Mark, how do I practically cooperate with God in cultivating the fruit of the spirit in my life?" The way that is done is to put the big rocks in your life first.

Put the big rocks in your life first

⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

You have probably heard the story. I believe it was popularized by Stephen Covey in "First Things First." A seminar presenter pulled out a wide-mouth gallon jar and placed it next to a pile of fist-sized rocks. After filling the jar to the top with rocks, he asked, *"Is the jar full?"*

The group replied, "Yes."

He then got some gravel from under the table and added it to the jar. The speaker jiggled the jar until the gravel filled the spaces between the rocks. Again, he asked, *"Is the jar full?"*

This time, the group replied, *"Probably not."*

The speaker then added some sand and asked, *"Is the jar full?"*

"No!" shouted the group. (They were quick learners ☺).

Finally, the speaker filled the jar to the brim with water and asked the group the point of this illustration.

Someone replied that you could always fit more things into your life if *"you really work at it."*

"No," countered the speaker. *"The point is: if you don't put the big rocks in first, you will not get them in at all."*

Put the big rocks in first and other things will fit in their proper place in your life.

If you ask me, "Pastor Mark, what are your priorities in life? I will answer: first God, then Lois Ann, then my children, then my grandchildren, and then, in fifth place, my work." These are my priorities. These are the big rocks of my life. I would argue that these should be your priorities as well. God is first. We are called to set aside time each week to worship him—the most important hour of your week. This is why God wove the Sabbath into the rhythm of creation. After God, your spouse, if you are married, is the next big rock; after that, your family.

Be aware that Paul's reference to *"sowing in the flesh"* is not limited to carnal or licentiousness desires. It can be that of course. But Paul's words have wider application. Sowing in the flesh simply means living as though God does not matter.

The latest issue of Philadelphia magazine includes an article on multigenerational poverty in the city. It tells the story of families who have been caught in the cycle of poverty for three, four, or even five generations. The author assumed that the solution to chronic poverty would be found through right politics, good government, effective education and wise policy making. These can be very good things. I was struck by the absence of any mention of spiritual realities in the article. There was no mention of God. We are creating today a world full of decent, godless people. God and things of the Spirit are simply not one of the big rocks to be valued today. That is regrettable.

The fruit we produce in our lives matters, but the fruit is the indication of the hidden, unseen reality of our heart and soul. And so, for this reason, we realize that the choices we make; make a difference.

The choices you make do make a difference

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

Some wag once observed that many people spend their youth sowing their wild oats only to find themselves later praying for a crop failure. The choices we make have consequences. One of the profound dangers of the modern world is our desire for instant everything: news, television on demand, email, Instagram, snap chat, texting, microwave meals, MRE's, Ipods, smart phones, etc. The modern world has fulfilled, with a vengeance, the revolutionary call in The Doors' song *When the Music's Over*, "*We want the world and we want it now.*" There is great danger in demanding things *now*. The communist criminals of the 20th century, Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, Megustu, each committed his crimes believing that the violence he authorized was necessary and valid, for in sweeping away the old he could replace it and usher in the new vision of the communist man, living in the new communist era of a worker's paradise. They sought heaven here on earth, *now*.

The Christian, by contrast, is called to persevere. The fruit of regeneration is sanctification—being remade into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ—and that takes time. It does not happen instantaneously, *now*. Jim Boice once wrote that we Christians tend to overestimate what God may accomplish in one year, and underestimate what he might accomplish in ten years.

What matters are the ordinary commitments we make and attend to in our lives. It is the daily routines that bring about change over time. Paul warns us not to grow weary in doing good. He reminds us that there are natural rhythms to life: seed time leads to harvest time. Some things open the door to other things. There is an order, a priority to life. Sequences must be followed. If you choose rightly, Paul tells us, in due time you will enjoy the harvest. Provided you do not lose heart. The promise Paul is suggesting is that no matter how weary things may be in the world about us, one day we will see Christ's promised kingdom, one day we will enter his heavenly rest. Don't lose heart now, for the best is yet to come.

Paul admonishes us to sow in the spirit. The world sows in the flesh. It lives by false, worldly principles. In contrast, Paul teaches that we sow in the Spirit when we 1) learn godly principles and 2) seek to implement them in our lives.

We sow according to the Spirit when we 1) learn godly principles

⁶ Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.

What would the perfect Christian life look like? Is the perfect Christian life a retreat to a monastery and a life of perpetual prayer? Is the perfect Christian life that of a missionary taking the gospel to hidden tribes in the Amazon jungle? Is it to be found living among the poor in the slums of Calcutta? Is the perfect Christian life singing “*You are my all in all*” around the camp fire on the beach in Ocean City? The perfect Christian life is not super spiritual; it is not other worldly. What God calls us to is not to escape from the world, but to live for him in it. The perfect spiritual life is to learn to balance properly all that God has given to us.

Think of life in the Garden of Eden, before The Fall. The elements of life included permission—they could eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it included prohibition—there was one tree set apart as forbidden; there was work—Adam tilled and kept the garden; there was creativity—Adam named the animals, adding his unique contribution to God’s creative efforts; and, at the center, there was marriage—Adam and Eve together as husband and wife. Later, though sadly this would be after the expulsion from the garden, there would be added children and family life. The perfect spiritual life is to balance what God gives us, to learn to give each of these aspects of life their right and proper place.

According to Paul, we are to *sow to the Spirit*. What does he mean by that? How do we sow to the Spirit? I would argue that sowing to the Spirit involves two steps: the learning of spiritual truths God has revealed to us and the weaving of the application of those truths into our lives.

The first thing needed is to change our understanding. This is one reason why the idea of spiritual teaching is so central to the Christian faith. Paul writes, Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches. Spiritual teaching and preaching teach us the truths of God. In learning God’s truth, we are sowing in the Spirit. In Romans 13, Paul speaks about how the world seeks to squeeze us into its mold. A battle is going on in the life of the Christian. The world seeks to influence our thinking, our understanding. We are to resist the conforming pressure of the world. Paul tells us that we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds; doing so is to sow in the Spirit. We change our understanding and that yields the fruit of changed outward action. We are to learn godly principles and then implement them.

and 2) seek to implement them in our lives

⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

This past week the Vision Team held its final meeting. Over the past two years, the Session, the Vision Team, the prayer support team, and others, have worked together to articulate Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church’s process of discipleship. A version of that process appears in our Sunday morning

program each week. Our discipleship process is how we seek to sow to the Spirit. The apostle Paul writes, ⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. The discipleship process is our way of fighting against the conforming pressure of the world around us. In shorthand, we are committed to Worship → Connect → Know → Serve. These are our big rocks as followers of Christ.

We believe that discipleship begins with a commitment to worship, the most important hour of our week. In today's world, the very act of gathering with other believers in worship is a revolutionary endeavor. The world wants a weekend: not a Sabbath. Sundays used to be owned by the church. Today Sundays are owned by the NFL together with other community sports teams. This is the first thing we do to sow to the Spirit.

The next step in discipleship is to connect. There are all sorts of ways to connect with one another. At Fairview we are emphasizing the use of Small Groups as a key mechanism to connect relationally with one another. Cheryl Faust oversees our ministry of discipleship and a key facet of that is encouraging people to join, be a part, of one of our small groups. Next week our newest small group will be organized: MORA – Men of Retirement Age. Interested? Speak with Don Titus.

The third facet of our discipleship process is knowing, knowledge. As we touched on earlier, part of discipleship is to have our thinking transformed. The world around us is continually seeking to sell us a false bill of goods. We study the scriptures and grow in spiritual understanding in order that our minds be transformed.

The last facet of our discipleship process is service. We serve others; we serve the Lord, in the name of Christ. Many of you were present yesterday for our Stop Hunger Now event. We raised three thousand dollars, and worked hard to pack 10,000 meals, to be sent in the name of Christ to the poor.

Worship, Connect, Know and Serve: these are the fourfold ingredients to Christian discipleship here at Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church. This is how we sow to the Spirit.

Review

Our theme today has been reaping and sowing. Jesus said that a tree will bear the fruit of its nature. We noted that what you put in is what you get out. What you sow, is what you reap. Related to the idea of sowing, we noted the importance of putting the big rocks of life in first. Make the big commitments to God, family, and faith first in your life. The choices we make in life make a difference. Paul challenges us to sow to the Spirit to learn the principles of godliness and to implement those principles in our lives.

One last thing as we close: we began by hearing Jesus' words, For every tree is known by its own fruit. Jesus' words are a direct challenge to us. What sort of fruit are you bearing in your life today? Are you yielding the fruit of the Spirit? Bearing spiritual fruit that pleases God begins with placing one's faith in Jesus Christ. On our own, in our own initiative, we cannot bear the fruit of the Spirit. In order to bear the fruit of the Spirit, we must be in Christ. He must give us his Spirit.

Have you turned to Christ in faith? Do you believe in him? I am inviting you to do so today.

Say 'Amen,' Somebody

⁶ Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.

⁷ Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. ⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

⁴³ “For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ For every tree is known by its own fruit. For *men* do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.