

“Sowing and Reaping: A Cumulative Effect”

Galatians, chapter six, verse seven: “Don’t be misled (don’t be deceived) – you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant.” (NLT)

Sometimes, when I’m getting ready to preach a sermon, (a series of sermons), I’ll be preparing them and be thinking to myself, “They really need to hear this.” I’ll prepare a series thinking about you, about how you need to hear it, and I’ll discover during that preparation time that I really need to hear it, too.

There’s nothing like preaching a sermon and finding out (half way through) that God’s talking to you. He’s talking to me. You’re convicted by your own sermon, but it happens more often than not. I’ve actually learned to expect it.

Sometimes I’m preparing a series with you in mind, but I’m really talking to me. Often times, though, when I’m preparing a series, I’m thinking about what I need to hear, what I’ve needed to hear (in my own spiritual journey) and it turns out that what I needed to hear is something you needed to hear as well. It goes both ways.

There are sometimes, though, with certain passages of scripture, biblical truths, where there’s no question we all need to hear it. It doesn’t matter where you’re at in life. It doesn’t matter how long you’ve been a Christian or whether you’re just checking things out. There are some things we all need to hear. It applies to all of us, different areas of our lives.

That’s true when it comes to this passage of scripture from Galatians, chapter six. No matter where you’re at, what season of life you’re in, it’s something we all need to hear.

What we’re going to be talking about these next few weeks is something really simple. In some ways it’s obvious, and yet it’s challenging to hear it and apply it in our lives.

The title for this series is “Sowing and Reaping.” We’re going to be building on this idea that you will always reap what you sow. (It always happens.) You can’t get around, avoid it.

The title for this first week is a bit more focused: “A Cumulative Effect.” There’s a cumulative effect in the things we do. There’s a gradual building up; it doesn’t happen all at once, in one single moment, one event, but it happens over time, by gradual additions along the way. Small things, seemingly insignificant things that (over time), build up and become significant. They have this cumulative effect.

Who we are: our relationships, our finances, our health, our spiritual life, all of those things are greatly influenced by this same principle; more so than we realize. All kinds of seemingly insignificant choices and decisions and actions have been building up (over time) to define us and to shape who we have become.

We don’t realize it at the moment. We don’t see it happening (when it happens), but it’s happening all the time. It’s all building up. It has more power than we realize. It has this cumulative effect in our lives. As a result, the decisions we make today are really defining who we are going to be in the future.

Now, there are a number of ways in which this plays out. (We’ve all seen it.) You see it when it comes to our finances. A person can become a millionaire by winning the lottery, but that doesn’t happen very often, more the exception than the rule. What’s more often the case (more common) is that someone who’s wealthy has built up that wealth a little at a time, over a (long period) of time.

Maybe you read the book “The Millionaire Next Door.” It illustrates how most people who have wealth (in our culture) are not people who had some incredible invention, some lucky lotto ticket; they’ve just (over time) made some small decisions that with (enough time) have this cumulative effect.

And so you read the story of this 25-year-old young lady who decides she’s not going to order the expensive coffee (in the morning), have soda at lunch, (a few little changes each day), but every day she’s going to set aside ten dollars into savings – invest it. It’s not very much. Anybody can do that. It’s not hard to do it. She decides she’s going to do it.

Her friends (at lunch) they say, “Go ahead and get a coffee. It’s just a coffee. Don’t worry about that soda. It’s not that much. It’s just a soda.” She sticks with it and every day she does it. By the time she retires, with just ten dollars a day, she’s saved more than a million dollars. That’s the power of this cumulative effect. In the moment, it doesn’t seem like much but, over time, it adds up.

We hear examples like that and it all sounds too easy. A lot of us like a big solution. We want to solve the problem with one big decision. But the cumulative effect most often happens as a result of things that are easy to do, but are also easy not to do.

It’s easy to order water (instead of soda); anybody can do that. It’s also easy not to do it. It tends to build based on decisions that are easy to do, but also easy not to do.

Conversely, you talk to someone with thirty thousand dollars of credit card debt and ask them how that happened, they didn’t go on a thirty thousand dollar shopping binge. They just started with that first purchase of twenty dollars, and didn’t pay it off, and did it again, and again and again - twenty dollars here, thirty dollars there - and (over time) they end up with this incredible debt. You ask them and they don’t even know how it happened. It just happened, with time, over a long period of time. It’s this cumulative effect. It can work for you or against you.

It’s the same thing with our health. You don’t become a body builder overnight, decide tomorrow to try out for the Olympics. It takes time, a lot of time, and with time and over time, (if you work hard enough and you have the gifts) you end up in Rio and you’re competing for gold. It all happens over time.

A while back there was this TV show called “My 600-Pound Life.” It was a show that documented how it happened in the lives of these different people. It’s not that they woke up one day and decided they wanted to gain a lot of weight. It was just one meal at a time. (It’s not that big of a deal.) They were going to stop the next day, when it started happening. But it didn’t happen, and so it kept on happening. It has this way of accumulating, and it tends to be made up of things that are easy to do, and things that are easy not to do.

That’s also true in our relationships. It’s not uncommon for me to talk with a couple who is having troubles in their marriage. Sometimes they can point to an event. Most often, it’s a series of events and they’re not even sure when and how. They say things like “I don’t know what happened. For years, we’ve just been growing apart.” “I just fell out of love with him, fell out of love with her.”

In other words, there’s this cumulative effect. All of those late nights at work just started to add up. It was not a big deal, at least not at first, but it kept building. “I don’t know how it happened.” (“It just kept happening.”)

Each criticism was another brick in the wall that separated them. It was OK when it started, didn’t seem like a big deal, but it just kept building until all of a sudden, it was too late.

It was OK at first, but eventually (all of the) unrealistic expectations, and the habitual selfishness, and unmet needs, and the weight just started feeling overwhelming. They could handle it at first, but over time it became too much. There was this cumulative effect and it became too heavy.

It can also work for you. (It works both ways.) A couple gets married and decides they’re going to pray together each night. It’s not that big a deal; only a few minutes before they go to bed. It’s easy to do. It’s also easy not to do. But they decide to do it. And there’s never a night where they say, “This was the night that made all the difference. This is when it all happened.” No, it just happened. There was this cumulative effect: a deeper intimacy, a stronger foundation.

This is true for us in every area of our lives. We end up being defined (for the most part) by the little things that are easy to do, but that are also easy not to do; these little things that just begin to grow.

Now, in many ways, this is an obvious principle, but (for some reason) we have a hard time (recognizing it) and remembering it. And so Paul’s going to talk about this in Galatians six.

He’s coming off the fruit of the Spirit in chapter five, where he talks about how the seeds planted by the Spirit bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. That’s the fruit of the Spirit.

Then (in chapter six) he’s going to warn us that there are other kinds of seeds that get planted, and when those seeds get planted, (you should know) that the harvest is going to come. And so he says (in verse seven), “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”

You can't mock God. You can't fool him. You can fool your parents, your co-workers, your teacher, your boss or (even) your spouse, but you can't fool God. They may not know, but God knows. Paul says a man reaps what he sows.

God has built this law into the universe. This cumulative effect, it's another way of talking about sowing and reaping. It's this reality that what we sow begins to bear fruit in our lives.

When God created the world, he built all kinds of laws into his creation; physical laws, mathematical laws, but spiritual laws as well. You may not understand them, but that doesn't mean you're exempt from them. They can still either work for you or against you. They're still laws.

I don't understand the law of magnetism, but if I'm lost I'll pull out a compass and use it to my advantage. I don't get it, couldn't teach it, but if I need it and I'm stuck, I'll use it. (It still works.)

The law of gravity? No one can really explain it. There's a lot we still don't understand, but whether you understand it (or not) it's either going to work for you or against you. You may not like the law of gravity, but the law of gravity doesn't care. You may not agree with it, but that doesn't matter. It's still a law.

You go out in the parking lot (after church) and trip on one of those speed bumps (I've seen it happen), it's not going to stop working just because you don't (understand it) agree with it. You're still going to fall and get hurt. It doesn't matter. It's the way it works.

It's the same thing with the law of sowing and reaping. God built this law into the universe and it's consistent. It would be interesting if it worked on some days and not on others. You'd never know what to expect. Mondays are gravity days. Tuesdays are not. It would be interesting, but it's not how it works. It's always true.

It's the same with sowing and reaping. Paul says "You will always, you will always reap what you sow." It's how it works. You don't have to like it, to understand it, to agree with it, but it's the way it is. It's true. And it can either work for you or against you.

In the first chapter of the Bible God explains (in physical terms) the law of sowing and reaping. In the creation account, (it says) "Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.' And it was so." (That's how it happens.) The seeds bear the fruit and the fruit bears the (same seeds) from which they came.

Now, there are a number of take-aways from this truth that we're going to be lifting up in the next weeks, but (in this first week), I don't want us to miss it: this law of sowing and reaping, this cumulative effect. It's where it all starts, so it's worth saying (even if it's obvious), and that is that the seed you plant matters. (The seed you plant matters.)

Now, I know that's obvious. (We all know that.) If you want corn, you don't plant beans. If you want pear trees, you don't plant apple seeds. If you want pear trees and you plant apple seeds, you shouldn't get all upset (feel cheated) when you end up with apples, because that's what you planted. What did you think was going to happen? (We all know that.)

But somehow in our lives we're surprised, (don't seem to understand) when what we planted actually begins to bear fruit. It's not what we wanted. We wanted pear trees. (That's what we wanted.) But we planted apple seeds, so we end up with apple trees. The seed you plant matters. You shouldn't be surprised when what comes out of the ground is what was planted in the ground. It's how it works.

Hosea chapter ten, verse thirteen, God says, "You planted wickedness; now you've reaped evil." What did you think was going to happen?

If you sow seeds of lust? I know you want to have this satisfying, fulfilling relationship, but if you sow seeds of lust, you're going to reap a harvest of dissatisfaction and frustration. That's what you've planted.

If you sow seeds of greed and selfishness, you're going to reap a harvest of discontentment. If you sow seeds of laziness and passivity, you're going to reap a harvest of disappointment and regret. If you sow seeds of anger and rage, you will find that you're reaping a harvest of fighting and arguing and constant discord in your relationships. What did you think was going to happen? Those are the seeds you've been sowing.

Here's what we do. When we want pear trees, but we end up with apple trees, we have this tendency to blame other people. (That's what we do.) We've all seen it, if not done it.

"I wouldn't have been planting these seeds of anger, if my parents had been (always) yelling at me when I was growing up, if my dad would have paid more attention." "It's not my fault that I'm planting seeds of passivity in my life; no one listens to what I say, anyway; no one respects my ideas. It's not my fault."

And so we have this tendency to blame other people when the seeds we've planted don't bear the fruit we want. We don't take the responsibility.

I see this as a pastor, where people don't get the harvest they wanted, so they blame God. A husband comes and he's angry at God because his wife has left him. How could God let this happen? (What did you think was going to happen?) You've been sowing seeds of neglect for fifteen years. What kind of harvest did you expect? What did you think would happen? You've been sowing seeds of conflict every day. What kind of harvest were you hoping to receive? And so we blame God. We don't get what we want, so (somehow) it's God's fault.

That's not how it works. It's not that God's sitting up in the heavens waiting for it happen so he can get us. It's what he's built into the universe. It's a law that's at work. There's this law of sowing and reaping, it's this cumulative effect. It's the little things that end up defining who we are. They have this tendency to build up and make a difference. All these things that we think don't matter, they really do matter.

And so a wife comes in and she wants a good relationship, but she's always planting seeds of criticism and a harsh tone, and these weeds are chocking out any chance they might have. Or, you want joy to grow in your life (with your friends), the fruit of the Spirit, be a more positive person, but you're sowing seeds of bitterness and you refuse to extend forgiveness, and you're always bringing up the pains of the past.

You can't have it both ways. If you want joy in your life, then you need to start planting seeds that bear that kind of fruit. If you want a harvest of peace, you need to plant seeds of gratitude and thanksgiving and respect. It's the way things work. You need to pay attention to the kinds of seeds you are planting.

And so, Paul puts it this way. Galatians six: "Don't 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." The law of sowing and reaping can work against you or it can work for you.

Now, I realize today, this has all been pretty basic, and that we've been talking more about the negative side of this law than the positive. We'll say more about (the flip side) next week. But we need to hear this because, although we all know it and understand it, we, more often than not, live as if it's not true. It is true.

And so, let me close with this. And I share this not as a commercial, but as a word of encouragement. As you heard (at the beginning), starting today we're taking sign-ups for "Grow Groups." For ten weeks, starting in September, these groups will be meeting for the sole purpose of sowing of the kinds of seeds that will (with time) bear the kind of fruit (I believe) we all want to see. No matter where you're at in your relationship with God, these groups are designed to help you take the next steps in developing that relationship.

Now, they're not going to give you a quick fix to whatever it is in your life that needs repair, and they're not going to turn you into a more faithful follower of Jesus overnight. But they will be an encouragement to your faith, and they will challenge and support you in your faith-walk with Christ.

Let me put it this way. This whole discipleship focus (over the past few years) - our new Vision to "Know, Grow, and Go" - this isn't being done by accident. It's not just another thing. It's being done for a reason. It's what God wants, what Jesus has called us to be about, and it's the thing we're going after, for those reasons.

Beyond what we do on Sunday mornings, the kind of discipleship growth we hope to see happen takes place (most effectively) when we meet (in smaller groups) throughout the week. We've seen it. We're seeing it. And we'll continue seeing it, as we take the next steps.

My friends, we need each other. We need the support we can gain from each other. It's how disciples are made and formed. But it's only going to happen if we plant the seeds. Amen.