

Galatians 6: Reaping an Eternal Harvest

In this chapter, Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia is drawn to a close. While continuing with several more points of spiritual application, the apostle shifts his focus from the individual to the local church before saying farewell. Paul often begins and ends his letters by pointing to Christ, and such is the case in Galatians 6.

BEARING WITH BRETHREN (vv. 1-10)

Walking in the fruit of the Spirit is no quick-fix to one's life; as the nature of a fruit suggests, it takes time to plant, grow, and harvest. Keeping in mind the false teachers who struggle to separate the old and new covenants, Paul begins this section of Scripture by speaking of another kind of trouble that may come from within. During the pruning process, some may find themselves struggling to put away the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21); and it is for this reason that Paul now offers teaching on how to correct such a circumstance.

- To whom does "you who are spiritual" refer (v. 1)? Relate this identifier to Galatians 5:22-26.
- How does "bearing one another's burdens" fulfill the law of Christ (v. 2)?

No Christian is immune to the darkness of sin. Certainly, walking with Christ provides strength and courage to overcome evil, but God's gift of free will requires every believer to abstain from that which is impure. It may happen that a brother or sister in the local congregation struggles with sin and becomes "overtaken in [a] trespass" (v. 1). The correction process, especially in public matters, needs to be handled with the utmost delicacy and care. Paul says we must be gentle (meek KJV) in this regard; restoration of church members can be tricky business, made trickier without the proper attitude.

Brethren who are "spiritual" are called to assist in this good work. The established leadership in a congregation—mature, experienced brethren—most often assumes this role in shepherding the flock. These qualities are important in the life of the restorer "lest [he] also be tempted" (v. 1). While we don't naturally crave the difficult conversations and actions that fall under church discipline and restoration, it is both necessary and good for growth.

James 5:19-20 says that one who turns a wanderer back to the truth "*will save a _____ from _____ and cover a _____.*"

When reflecting on this physical life, we often feel a burden that can amount to a heaviness that makes the way more difficult. Hebrews 12:1 calls it a "weight" created by "the sin which so easily ensnares us." Like all people, the Galatian Christians experienced individual burdens, but none so heavy as the burden caused by the grief of sin. This notion is especially important in light of the work Paul describes in this portion of his letter. In Galatians 6:3, he

implores humility throughout the process of restoration. While some may look down upon one who has become overtaken, it is important to remember that *all* have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). Paul reminds the Galatians that any number of them could also be in need of this spiritual assistance, hence the call for gentleness.

We studied the law of Christ in Galatians 5:7-15. Paul sums it all up in v. 14: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This phrase is spoken by Jesus in Matthew 22:39, which is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18. Worldly philosophy perhaps inadvertently refers to this teaching in the well-known Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated. In bearing the burden of a fellow Christian, we fulfill the law of Christ because we are honoring the Lord's compassion—He carried the cross for us after being subjected to agonizing physical pain. When the sins of our fellow man offend and cause us inward pain, we should be willing to walk with him and "bear his burden" as he seeks reconciliation. The Preacher writes of this companionship in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10:

"Two are _____ than one... for if they _____, one will _____ his companion. But _____ to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to _____."

To close this thought, Paul writes one important caveat in Galatians 6:5: "...each shall bear his own load." The type of bearing mentioned here must differ from that which is referenced in verse 2, lest Paul be found contradicting himself. Verse 4 holds the key: "...let each one examine his own work." Every person will stand accountable for his own actions come Judgment Day. No matter the perceived weight of a burden that presses while here on Earth, it is up to each individual to be reconciled to God, as far as sin is concerned. Christians are called to aid in restoring those who have fallen into temptation; this assistance is accomplished through prayer, community, and regular study of God's word. Beyond this assistance, however, the fallen brother/sister is responsible for getting back to God.

Paul continues this theme of helpfulness in the local congregation in vv. 6-10, now placing emphasis on teachers and preachers of the word. Though not easily understood in a quick reading, the language used in this passage speaks of financial support and material prosperity for those who make the spreading of the gospel their life's work (e.g. "sharing in all good things" and "reaping what a man sows"). Paul writes with similar language in 1 Corinthians 9:6-14, Philippians 4:15, and 1 Timothy 5:17-18.

- How does one "sow to the flesh" or "sow to the Spirit" in regard to monetary investments (v. 8)?
- Why does Paul add that we are to do good "especially to those who are of the household of faith" (see 1 Timothy 5:8)?

The illustration of sowing and reaping begins all the way back to the Creation account in Genesis 1-3 where Adam is charged to look after the Garden of Eden. In order to reap worthwhile benefits, a person must often work. There are parallels to be found within the previous chapter's teaching on the fruit of the Spirit in opposition to the works of the flesh. Sowing to the flesh would be to use material possessions for selfish gain. With his money, a man can satisfy the physical needs of hunger, thirst, and shelter; but these fleshly needs reap only temporary rewards, the ultimate end being corruption (v. 8). Paul contrasts this shortsightedness with the eternal harvest found in sowing to the Spirit. Of course, man must meet physical needs in order to sustain life; but as far as the superfluous cash-grabs offered by the world, our "sowing" is far better spent on that which is spiritual.

In verse 9, Paul admonishes his readers to "not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap what we sow...." In keeping with the financial context of "doing good," let us consider the nature of spiritual works. Time can be a difficult factor in the reaping/sowing process; when we invest our money in a cause, we want to be sure that it will do good, preferably sooner than later. Supporting the work of local preachers and elders may not provide that instant gratification, but again, we ought to consider the nature of the work.

The Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-23 illustrates the different types of soil in which the word may be sown. In dealing with people and the spread of the gospel, there will always be the unknown variable of free will. Some works may take more time than others, while some works may not pan out at all. Nevertheless, Paul's encouragement stands: we must not lose heart! Sowing to the Spirit reaps an eternal reward; and while the fruit of this labor may never be evident in another's life here on Earth, there is always confidence in knowing the Father is well pleased with those who support and are instrumental in the work of spreading the gospel.

CONTINUING IN CHRIST (vv. 11-18)

Closing his remarks to the churches in Galatia, Paul makes sure to leave his teachings centered on Christ, whose message is the sole purpose of the apostle's missionary journeys. In the body of his letter (chapters 2-4), Paul addresses the doctrinal difficulties found in this region: the passing away of the need for circumcision and the distinctions of the new covenant. Both of these issues are addressed for a final time in this passage of Galatians 6.

- Why might the Jews have "boasted in [the] flesh" of those who still submitted to circumcision after the old covenant was fulfilled through Christ (v. 13)?
- Circumcision functioned as a sign of the old covenant. What is the clear sign of being made a "new creation" as found in the gospel plan of salvation (v. 15)?

While the hypocrisy of the circumcision party likely remained for many years after Paul's writing, the truth of the matter stands strong. An old covenant sign is not to be bound upon the

new covenant Christian. In Philippians 3:2-8, Paul writes that we are to have “no confidence in the flesh.” He groups his own circumcision with a long list of past titles and works that he now counts as rubbish in light of his conversion to Christ. To continue waving the banner of circumcision is to place confidence in the flesh and personal works of the law. Romans 3 & 4 have much to say about the danger of adhering to anything but the law of faith found in Christ.

At this point in the Bible timeline, circumcision is no longer a sign of the current covenant, so these devout Jews are found boasting for all the wrong reasons. Paul asserts that we should not boast “except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14). It is through Him that we can be created anew, a fact that Paul repeats in 2 Corinthians 5:17. So, if circumcision no longer distinguishes God’s people from the rest of the world, what does? Jesus answers this question for the Pharisee, Nicodemus, in John 3:5:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is _____ and the _____, he cannot enter the _____.”

This spiritual rebirth comes about only through the means of baptism that now saves us (1 Peter 3:21). When the Holy Spirit falls upon the uncircumcised Gentiles in Acts 10:44-48, Peter does not suggest circumcision as a sign of their new lives in Christ; rather, he asks, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Even among religious groups today, we find those who continue to uphold Old Testament practices that have been done away with by the law of Christ. Though perhaps modern Christians are not as pressured as the new Gentile converts once were, Paul’s teaching to the churches in Galatia is important for all New Testament Christians to grasp, “lest [we] also be tempted” at any point in time (Galatians 6:1).

CONCLUSION

This series of studies has brought to light many themes that are relevant to the church today. When thinking of Galatians, the fruit of the Spirit instantly come to mind; yet, we’ve noticed that this teaching is only a point of application made to support the overarching message of Paul’s letter. The truth of the gospel shines through as Paul refutes the Judaizers of the day who strove in futility for a salvation of works. Today, we recognize that we stand justified by God only through an obedient faith, adhering to the perfect law of liberty found in Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

- What new thoughts/teachings have I gleaned from this study of Galatians?
- How can I help to bear the burden of someone currently in my life?
- In what ways can I support the local work of the church, both financially and personally?