

*Brothers and sisters, even if a person is caught in any transgression,
you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.
But keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.
Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ.
For if anyone thinks that he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.
But let each one test his own work, and then he will have reason to boast in himself alone,
and not against his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.
Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.
Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever a person sows that will he also reap.
For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption,
but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.
And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.
So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good for everyone,
and especially for those who are of the household of faith.*

Galatians 6:1-10

"Sowing and Reaping, the Spirit and the Flesh"

Last week, Paul described for us two entirely different ways of life, the first impelled by the wants and needs and desires of our flesh, and the second evoked by the work and presence of God's Spirit in our hearts. And the implication was that our having given our lives to Christ has initiated a struggle within us where the person we once were only slowly and gradually gives way to a new set of hopes and dreams and affections that the Holy Spirit breathes into us in those moments when we attend to God, reading his Word, praying for help, worshiping with each other, and teaming up to learn and to serve and to give to others as the Spirit leads.

So Paul wrote: "... *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...*". All qualities much the opposite of what we're like if we just do what comes naturally, so Paul closed last week's passage exhorting us to choose where the Spirit leads over and against where our gut might take us. He said, "*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*" And what Paul means is that, when some ugly quality arises in us, we need to see it as sin, reject it as wrong and leave it at the Cross with the rest of the sins Jesus died for, so we can follow the Spirit toward something better. Paul said, "*If we live by the Spirit, let us hold to the Spirit.*"

This morning, Paul goes on to teach what that means in practical terms in a congregation like ours where people have to live out this flesh and Spirit struggle together. He writes, "*Brothers and sisters, even if a person is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*" Remember last week Paul gave us a whole long laundry list of sins that were about as common in the ancient world as they've become in our society during our lifetimes, a sexual lawlessness so widespread that it actively undermined the affections that held husbands and wives and children together, a spiritual lawlessness which so obscured right and wrong, true and false, that no boundary or fence could hold people near to God and away from evil.

With false religion in play, it all became a matter of opinion! And in the confusion, people lost track of the art of give and take, too proud to bend, too angry to listen, too far in to stop now, one thing led to another, and pretty soon what held Christians together went beyond their reach, "*enmity,*" Paul wrote, "*strife, misplaced zeal, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy,*" that strange irony that the more tolerant we become of sin, the harder it gets for us to get along. So next Paul urges his readers to prepare for the inevitable, "...*even if a person is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*"

That word "*restore*" appears in verse 3 of the Twenty Third Psalm and I think Paul means it here much the same way David meant it there. David sang about his Shepherd in heaven, "*He restores my soul, he guides me in the paths of righteousness.*" We have tended to want to read this that God finds us tired and worn, and he "*restores*", refreshes and renews us. He sends us to a spa! But in fact, the verb in Hebrew more usually means he found me in the wrong and he straightened me out, which fits the context better. "...*he guides me in the paths of righteousness,*" David went on to sing. And this is what Paul wanted from the elders in Galatia if and when one of their members ended up on the wrong side of the market square partying at the temple of Zeus.

Paul said to "*restore him,*" straighten him out, "*in a spirit of gentleness,*" he wrote. John Calvin wrote that Paul wanted "*gentleness*" for disciples "*caught in a transgression,*" because the word "caught" implied that the brother or sister had tripped up, gotten caught up in something that got away from him, and now everybody knew and it had to be dealt with. Did you know that John Calvin had a fifteen year old step daughter who came up pregnant out of wedlock? The pastor's daughter and not just any pastor! John Calvin! Her parents brought her to the elders, she told them what she'd done, cried some tears, got warned by the old men to go home, respect her mother and step father, and have that child. And then... life went on.

Calvin spent no small amount of ink in my commentary warning of the danger of overzealous outrage about sins that are sin, but momentary, people overwhelmed by passions, betraying who they really are in a bad moment, who want to come back to Christ and only really need help and accountability. Do you think Calvin may have had his step daughter in mind? Another reason Paul gives for our treating one another's sins *"in a spirit of gentleness"* is that the rest of us disciples wear the same flesh as the people who need our help and guidance. So Paul warns his elders, *"...restore him in a spirit of gentleness. But keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."* In other words, get too full of ourselves, and who knows where our own flesh may carry us.

Paul goes on to write: *"...if anyone thinks he's something when he's nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not against his brother."* Winston Churchill once said of one of his opponents that he was "a modest man with much to be modest about." And that's what Paul is saying about all of us this morning. *"Each one will have to carry his own burden."* Paul wrote. We all will approach Judgment Day still wrestling with sins that ought to keep us humble and gentle when we are faced with other peoples' sin in church.

Paul wrote: *"Bear one another's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ."* What Paul calls *"the law of Christ,"* I think is the principle Jesus taught at the Last Supper that we should love and serve each other just as Jesus loved and served his disciples that night. He washed their feet, just as he would wash their souls and ours on the cross the next day. Washing feet and restoring souls can be dreary, difficult work, but it is what God calls us to do for each other as each of and all of us struggle to get clear of the flesh and learn from the Spirit a new way of life founded on forgiveness and grace.

Paul moves on to housekeeping details, he writes: *"Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches."* Back then, as now, learning the gospel required that someone in the congregation take extra time and apply special skills to study God's Word to make sure that we understand its meaning aright. The gospel is weighty and complicated enough that a few quick glances on Saturday night, a quick momentary reaction to a single set of words won't get the job done. This is a way of life God has given us in the 66 books he inspired people to write in the 1500 years between Moses and the Apostles.

And believers through the centuries have generally read Paul's words *"share all good things"* to mean give that pastor money. Well, he does mean that, but the verb he uses involves much more than a simple financial investment. The verb is *"koinoneo"* and it means *"become partners with, work in fellowship with"* the person who teaches you the Word. A pastor should be reasonably compensated, but what is far more important is that he or she should not be alone, without partners as they handle the gospel treasures and pearls that Jesus has left in the custody of the church. The gospel should be treated as precious by all hands and not just one.

And that background makes sense of what Paul says next: *"Don't be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever a person sows that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."* Don't be deceived, Paul warns. In a congregation where the Word of God is not robustly taught and carefully learned, it's easy to be deceived! Our gut instincts will steer us all sorts of strange places.

Throughout the Bible, sowing seeds is a euphemism for investment, and not just money although what we do with money is a pretty good indicator of where our hearts lie. But really it's about where we invest time, affection, thought and commitment as well as resources. Paul challenges to live in the realm of the Spirit, where morals and ethics and guiding principles are spelled out in the Word of God. He wants us to invest our time, center our thoughts, build our relationships there, in his kingdom, among his people. He closes today: *"...as we have opportunity, let us do good for everyone, and especially for those who are of the household of faith."*

Against what our eyes and ears may tell us, against where gut instinct may lead us, this is the place where God's Spirit is on the move and his Son is in our company.