

The Law of Sowing and Reaping

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Galatians 5:1 (NIV)

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Galatians 6:1-10 (NRSV)

⁶ My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴ All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵ For all must carry their own loads.

⁶ Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸ If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Our Lenten study has been about **Finding Freedom in Forgiveness**

Unforgiveness is a source of pain and perhaps the strongest form of bondage. As it has been said, "For me to forgive another is to unlock the cell door and realize I was the prisoner."

At the most basic level, forgiveness is about cancelling a debt. It is our willingness to say to another, "You don't own me anything." When we don't hold it against them anymore, we are set free.

So what have we learned so far?

We always default to our training, and Jesus trains us in forgiveness. He taught in the Sermon on Mount, includes it in the Lord's Prayer, and modeled in the Last Supper. We want to be as skilled at practicing forgiveness in response to sin as Sully Sullenberger was skilled at landing a plane in response to two failed engines.

People who practice forgiveness are sources of life and light in the world. We learned that Dolly Parton's popularity and legacy are grounded in a deep but simple faith that enabled her to bless Porter Wagoner when he went from being a friend to an enemy. When we live ever mindful of Christ's forgiveness for us, we can be forgiving people able to express creativity and generosity that blesses the world.

Practicing forgiveness always feels like a risk. It requires us to "prime the pump" by forgiving others so that we are able to draw from the deep and endless supply of God's grace. If we can't pour ourselves out in this way – as Jesus does on the cross – then we cannot be empty in the way necessary to receive God's gift.

Forgiveness and grief are always close together. When we lay aside shame – the lie that says "I am bad" and instead embrace guilt – the truth that "I am human and I sometimes I do bad things" – then grief is an appropriate and healthy response to our need for forgiveness. From that place, we can see Jesus for who he truly is, and our natural response to him is love and devotion. But if we avoid grief through anger, resentment, and judging others, then we are cut off from Love even when He is right in front of us.

In all this, what we begin to understand is that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is not an ethical teaching. In other words, Jesus is NOT saying the "Forgiveness is something you should do if you want to be a good person." If we reduce it to a rule or something you ought to do, then the force and power of Jesus' teaching is totally lost to us. Even worse, we start thinking that forgiveness is an "impossible rule" that can only be followed by the holiest of people. Jesus, Mother Theresa and Desmond Tutu can talk about forgiveness because they are special. But Jesus doesn't really expect ME to forgive THEM.

What Paul teaches us in Galatians chapter six is that the act of forgiving – along with every other choice we make in life – is not governed by a rule but by a law: The Law of Sowing and Reaping.

God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.

When Paul uses the word “Law,” he is usually speaking of the Law of Moses – that is, the human codes of conduct in the first five books of our Bible. But here we are speaking of Natural Law. The Law of Sowing and Reaping is like the Law of Gravity. It is just how the universe works. And like the Law of Gravity, we ignore it to our peril!

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul has been vigorously arguing that trying to live by the rules won’t bring about the change-of-heart that the power of the Holy Spirit can bring. Inner transformation only comes through the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When that change comes, our ability to see and act within the-way-the-universe-really-works becomes straightforward. With the light of Christ, we see life as it really is. We can operate in reality.

And here’s what’s really real, Paul says: Whatever you put out into life is what is going to come back to you.

If you sow distrust, resentment, and fear then that is what will come back to you.

But if you sow love and forgiveness in your relationships, that is what is going to come back to you. For Paul, this adds up to One Big Thing: Freedom!

Neil Anderson is a well-known Christian author who teaches about freedom in Christ. When teaching about forgiveness he will often tell about a woman who came up to him after the first of retreat talks and said angrily, “I will NEVER forgive them!”

“Forgive who?” he asked.

“My ex-husband and my ex-best friend,” she said. “I can never forgive them for betraying me and destroying our marriage to go off and be together.”

“Oh,” Neil said. He could feel the rage in her and could see it in her face distorted with hate and resentment. “When did this happen?”

“Twenty years ago.”

“Are they still together?”

“Yes.”

“Are they happy?”

“What kind of question is that?” She shot back. “Yes, they have gone off and had a great time together.”

“So apparently your unforgiveness isn’t keeping them from happiness. It doesn’t appear to affect them at all. But it is affecting you. As long as you refuse to forgive them, this hurt will continue to make you miserable.”

“Maybe so, but I am still never going to forgive them,” she snapped. And she stormed off.

The next day, after his talk, a woman came up to Anderson – her face beaming - and said, “I did it!”

“Did what?” he asked?

“I forgave them! I went back to my room yesterday and wrestled with God about it most of the night. Finally I gave up and said, ‘God, I want to forgive them. I need to forgive them. Please help me. And then it was like an enormous weight came off of me. I just let it go.’”

Anderson was taken aback. He honestly did not recognize this person as the same one he had spoken to the day before. Instead of the ugliness of anger and resentment, this woman now glowed – her features softened and her whole countenance full of light.

The moment she chose to sow forgiveness, she was able to reap freedom. She became a whole new person.

Those who sow forgiveness reap freedom – Freedom to love and freedom from fear/guilt/resentment. Out of that freedom, all the good that can be done, gets done.

The Law of Reaping and Sowing is so important that Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend list it as the first of their “Ten Laws of Boundaries.” Back in 1992 these two Christian psychologists decided to write a book to help Jesus followers have a healthy understanding of relationship boundaries. In the most recent edition of the companion video series, they say that they never would have imagined their book would continue to have such an impact nearly thirty years later. People – and Christians in particular – have a hard time understanding what good and healthy boundaries are, and how to create them.

Because of this, It is true that sometimes people don't reap what they sow. Sometimes we step in and reap the consequences that rightly should be experienced by the person who did the sowing. We might convince ourselves that, if we really love the person then we should protect them from the consequences of their choices. For example, if every time you overspent, your mother sent you a check to cover your overdrafts, then you wouldn't reap the consequences of your choices. Your mother would. Your mother would be protecting you from the natural consequences, which in this case would be a poor credit score, aggressive creditors, or worse.

Today we call a person who continually rescues another person a codependent. Paul may not have ever heard that word, but he was certainly familiar with the situation, as evidenced by the two instructions connected to this Law of Sowing and Reaping. He says in 6:2 that we are to Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. But then in verse 5 - For all must carry their own loads. Burdens are like couches. Nobody can carry a couch by themselves. They shouldn't even try. Nobody should go through divorce, or the death of a loved one, or unemployment, or pandemic alone. Loads are like chairs. Most of us can handle carrying a chair, and if carrying my own chair means the difference between having a comfortable place to sit or having to sit on the floor, then it's up to me to do the work that out. Showing up to work on time, paying my bills, finishing my school assignments – these are my loads.

What does this have to do with Forgiveness? This could be a good conversation starter for you and your family aka shelter-in-place buddies! But here's a starter idea. The more we understand the difference between a "burden" and a "load," the easier it becomes to wholeheartedly help each other with burdens and be compassionate toward each other as we each carry our own loads. We are no longer sowing to our own egos, but sowing the loving, unifying work of the Spirit. As we do this, doing good isn't wearisome but energizing and we are more able to work for the good of all and especially those of the family of faith. The more we live according to the Law of Sowing and Reaping, the easier it becomes to not take what other people say or do personally. It gets easier to cancel debts. Or for those of who have been watching way too much Disney + lately, the Law of Sowing and Reaping helps us LET IT GO.

The great thing about the Law of Sowing and Reaping is that, like the Law of Gravity, it is always and immediately *testable*. If I am in conflict with someone, that is my opportunity to ask: If conflict and animosity is what I am reaping here, then what have I sown? How have I contributed to us being in breakdown like this? This is what Jesus meant when he said, "take the log out of your own eye first. Then you can help the other person with the speck in their eye."

If you don't like what you are reaping: SOW SOMETHING DIFFERENT!

This is the part where you'll say: Wait a minute. What if THEY are the one sowing discord? Then let them reap that. But you don't have to be a part of it! Romans 12:18 reminds us: If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Before I close in prayer, let me offer you a couple reflection/ discussion questions:

- How do you see the Law of Sowing and Reaping at work in your life right now?
- With whom do you long to sow more compassion, canceling of debt, and forgiveness? What would that look like?

Let us pray.

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