

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“What goes Around, Comes Around”**

**Psalm 30
Galatians 6:7 – 16**

July 3, 2016

Fifteen or twenty years ago, I was having lunch with the Presbytery Executive of Muskingum Valley Presbytery, in beautiful New Philadelphia, Ohio. I was in town for some committee meeting or other... and afterwards, the Exec asked me to join him for a burger, before heading back to my home in Ashland. As we ate, we discussed a wide array of topics... and eventually turned to the subject of a former pastor in the presbytery, who'd taken a call to a church in another state. It seems this guy had gotten out of town just ahead of a scandal that broke in his former church... that had something to do with unethical or immoral conduct on the part of the pastor.

I really don't remember the specifics of the scandal, and at this point, it doesn't matter; the point of our conversation was simply about how crummy it was that this person was able to just walk away from the damage he'd done in Ohio... and land in a plush position out west, as if nothing had ever happened. I think I said something along the lines of, “That really stinks.” To which the Presbytery Exec responded, *“Rick, you've got to remember: sometimes the wheels of justice turn slowly, but they do still turn!”* Meaning that, eventually, this fellow's indiscretions were going to catch up with him... and that he would one day have to pay the piper. It was kind of a dignified way of saying, “What goes around, comes around.”

I really liked that way of looking at things; although, in this case those “wheels of justice” must be moving extra-slow... because, the last I heard, nearly twenty years later, the guy's still doing great, without the faintest trace of any accountability raising its ugly head to bother him. But, you never know, maybe someday the chickens will finally come home to roost for this pastor... and his actions will finally “come around” and bite him on the bottom!

You know, I thought about my former Presbytery Exec's sage advice, as I reflected this week on our Scripture lesson from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Because that same basic message about justice is at the heart of Paul's words, too. Our text is something of a closing exhortation from Paul, as he brings the letter to a close. As Paul often did, before he signed off he offered his readers an advisory reminder about the importance of godly living. And in this case, what he told them was:

“Do not 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 receive eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

And with these words, Paul is pretty much giving us two very important pieces of information. First, he's reminding us that, no matter how hard we try, we can't pull the wool over God's eyes... that, although we may be very clever in the opinion of our fellow humans, Almighty God will always see through any scheme we might put together in an attempt to deceive Him. This

is what it means to say that “God is not mocked.” “*God knows your heart,*” Paul is saying. “*He knows the condition of your soul. So if you go through the motions of just **acting** pious and righteous, everybody else may be impressed... but your Heavenly Father won’t be fooled. And you **will** ultimately be accountable to Him.*”

And that leads us into the second thing that Paul is saying here, which is that, as we reap... so shall we sow. This is the “wheels of justice turning slowly, but still turning” part of the passage. If you live a life of sin and evil... you can expect sorrow and judgment to come your way; but if you live a life of godliness and integrity... you can expect justice and mercy to surround you. Or, again, as we sometimes like to put it, “What goes around, comes around.”

Now, the first part of what Paul had to say, the part about God not being mocked, is something that most of us can probably accept without too much difficulty. I mean, from time to time we may like to think that we can hide our bad behavior from God; or put on a “good guy” act that’s so convincing that even the Lord Himself is fooled. But, deep in our heart of hearts, we know that Paul is right... and that God’s not fooled by even a first-class acting job. If there’s one lesson that permeates the Bible from beginning to end, it’s the message that our Heavenly Father knows us even better than we know ourselves. Our hearts, and souls, and minds are an open book to God... and there’s nowhere we can hide from that fact.

Which, most of the time, we really do appreciate! Unless we’re trying to get away with something, it’s usually a comfort and a joy to know that God is with us intimately... that He knows how we’re feeling, and understands what we’re facing, and promises to be by our side every step of the way of life. To know that “God is not mocked” isn’t a burden to us... because we don’t *want* to mock God! No, what we want is to build a lasting, loving, honest relationship with Him... in which we find the hope, and the meaning, and the wisdom that we need for life in our troubled world. So, God is not mocked... and that’s just fine by us!

But the other side of Paul’s equation, the part about “reaping what we sow,” is sometimes not so easily digestible. And, not because we don’t want to have to bear the consequences of our actions... I think that, most of the time, we understand and accept the fact that, when we mess up, there *is* a price to pay. No, what bothers us is the fact that, so often in life, it appears that things do *not* work in the way that Paul describes. Too often, it seems as if good people reap heartache and misery... while evil people reap power, prestige, and success. Too often we see honest, decent people getting thrown under the bus... while unscrupulous, mean-spirited people get praised and treated with honor.

Not that that’s the way things always work, obviously; but it happens often enough to make us wonder if Paul really knew what he was talking about. And this isn’t just a modern problem, of course. Throughout biblical history, the people of God have been bothered by this apparent lack of fairness and justice... and they haven’t been shy about bringing the situation to God’s attention.

For example, the Old Testament Book of Job is completely dedicated to the question of why bad things sometimes happen to good and godly people. And many of the Psalms are open laments to God about the injustice that’s so common in the world, and about God’s apparent lack of action to set things right. And in the New Testament, Jesus was also confronted with this issue. One of the reasons why so many of the religious elite of Jesus’ day disliked Him, is because He proclaimed God’s love and blessing on people that the muckety-mucks believed were evil... like Samaritans, tax-collectors, and prostitutes. These worthless people should be reaping judgment and condemnation, so the thinking went, not mercy and forgiveness.

And, at the same time, Jesus proclaimed judgment against the people who were supposed to be the most righteous, like the scribes, priests, and Pharisees. These people believed that they deserved to reap all of the good gifts and blessings that God could give; but Jesus told them that they were in danger of getting a swift kick from the Almighty. All of which helps us to understand that, when Paul told the Galatians that a person is going to reap what he or she sows... he was stating a truth which was sometimes very hard to understand and accept. Which, as I said, we also know from our own experience.

So, all of that being said, how are we supposed to apply Paul's counsel to the Galatians, to our own lives... and our own efforts to be faithful disciples of Jesus? Well, first of all, we can keep in mind that, for all of us, it's very good news that we *don't* always "reap what we sow," and don't always "get what we deserve." Because, if we *did*, we would *all* be in serious and irredeemable trouble!

Keep in mind that Paul also wrote, in his letter to the Romans, that everyone, all of us, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And, because of this sin, we all deserve God's condemnation. But, because of the grace of God given to us through His Son, Jesus... we receive mercy and forgiveness, instead of condemnation. Our God is a God of mercy and grace, and that mercy and grace has been freely given to each of us... so, no matter how we might feel about the current balance of reaping and sowing in our world, we should remember that we ourselves have reaped a lot of goodness from God, even when maybe we didn't really deserve it.

Second, I think it's helpful for us to remember what my old Presbytery Exec had to say about the "wheels of justice" turning slowly. Just because we don't see an immediate "reaping" of whatever unjust behavior was "sown," doesn't mean that Almighty God has forgotten about it. It doesn't mean that evil has won the day, and that there's simply no point in trying to be just and honest.

One of the problems that we face in this area, is the fact that we are finite and limited by our very earth-bound human perspective. But God is *not* so limited, and what may seem like a very, very long time to me and you... may seem like no time at all to God. God works on a completely different schedule than we do. So, who's to say if it's taking a long time, or not, for some maliciously evil person to reap the miserable crop that he or she has sown?

And, for that matter, God isn't limited to just this life... when it comes to bringing those wheels of justice to fruition. For now, we *are* limited to this life... and the only point of view that we know is what we can see right here, and right now. But God sees everything from an eternal perspective... and who knows what kind of justice might be waiting in the new creation to come?

So, it's perfectly fine for us to believe that we will reap what we will sow; and that "what goes around, comes around;" and that the wheels of justice sometimes turn slowly, but they do still turn. But we have no idea when, or where, or how that reaping is going to happen... or what it's going to look like when it gets here. Such questions are for God to answer... and God alone. It's not for us to know the details... it's just for us to trust them all to the Lord who made us, and loves us, and has promised to work all things out according to His sovereign and holy will.

Finally, I think that Paul's words are just a plain, good reminder to us to do our best to be honest, transparent, and faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our goal as Christians is to serve the Lord to the best of our ability; to make whatever difference we can for the cause of good,

and to renounce whenever possible the forces of evil; and to live each day in the sure confidence that our God will never let us out of His loving care.

When the wheels of justice are turning more slowly than we would like; we can take heart in the biblical promise that, one day, Almighty God will set things to right. And we can also remember that, without the grace of God at work in our own hearts and lives, we, too, would be in a world of spiritual hurt! With that perspective, may we live every day with courage, with confidence, and with the sure conviction that our Lord is with us always!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!