

**10am HC Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July**

**Gal 6:1-16 (Isaiah 66:10-14, Luke 10:16-20) – Why gardening and Christian living alike need a good grounding, good habits and to be engaging with growth**

I am not a gardener. But I do live with a gardener and there are a lot of other very good gardeners in my family. And I have learnt from all these people that good gardening has a lot in common with good Christian living.

First, a good garden, and a good Christian life, begins with knowing what is important, and why nothing else will do. If you want your garden to be a peaceful, green haven, you need to keep that vision firmly in mind. If you want your garden to be a riot of colour, you mustn't be talked out of achieving that by the people who think you should be following a different set of rules; who perhaps are telling you that a garden isn't a garden unless it has a lawn in the middle of it, or that gardening has to be organic, or that it mustn't be organic, or that you can only prune your shrubs at a particular time of year. There are so many different viewpoints that every gardener needs to have a strong sense of what they're doing and why they're doing it.

The context for Paul's letter to the Galatians was an ongoing row between Paul and the people who were saying that new Christians needed to adopt Jewish practice, including male circumcision. Paul warns that those people have their own agenda: they are trying to compel new believers to be circumcised, hoping that then ***they may not be prosecuted for the cross of Christ***. Perhaps these Jewish believers, having reached a *rapprochement* of sorts with their non-Jewish neighbours, were hoping that the new believers would just blend in, and then everything could carry on as before, without attracting any attention from the authorities. Or, possibly, there was a bit of a numbers game going on here, since Paul says ***they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh***. Anyway, Paul is clear how much better it is to ***never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ***, because in him we are a new creation, and ***a new creation is everything!***

The foundation of being a Christian - the central fact of our Christian lives - is the cross of Christ. Everything was changed, for ever, and for everybody, on the cross of Christ. It was at that point that anything that could get in the way of being us reconciled to God was nailed to the cross, with Christ. Guilt, shame, the struggling and failing to prove ourselves good enough in our own eyes, let alone in God's eyes. Because of the cross we are able, like Paul, to say ***the world has been crucified to me; and I to the world***. And, with Christ's death on the cross comes freedom from the fear of being cut off from God by death.

So, Christ's death on the cross means a new beginning with God, but we do need to remember that we have a new beginning with God, that our sins have been forgiven, every day of our lives. Because just as there is always some new thing to do in the garden; some new thing to be working on, as Christians we are always works in progress.

And just as the gardener will know that there are no short cuts to a good garden, so we soon discover there are no short cuts to living the Christian life. It soon becomes obvious that ***you reap whatever you sow***. As every gardener will know, sow the right kind of seed, the right

quality of seed, and sow plentifully, and you will have the right kind of crop, of good quality, and plenty of it.

And it is the same with Christian living. If we carry on living in the way that the rest of the world does: thinking that there's nothing wrong about watching porn, or in putting expensive vegetables through the self-check-out in the guise of the cheaper ones, or in gossiping, then we're living the old way of life; the way of life that doesn't do us any good in the long run; the kind of life that Paul is warning about when he says: ***if you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh***. That's the way of living that Christ died to save us from. But if we live in the way that is opened up to us by the Holy Spirit, we can have a better life, for ***if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit***.

John Stott, writing about this chapter of Galatians, quotes an old saying that goes like this:

*Sow a thought, reap an act;  
Sow an act, reap a habit;  
Sow a habit, reap a character;  
Sow a character, reap a destiny.*

Just as a plant will grow and become healthy and strong with regular feeding and watering, or a tree will grow in the right way if it is regularly pruned, if we develop regular habits of prayer and bible reading, we will start to see how the Holy Spirit can change us.

The gardener is never working alone, because they are always working with the sun and the rain. And Christians, too, are never alone. Having received the Spirit on their accepting Jesus as their Saviour, Christians are always working with the Holy Spirit. They are growing in the gifts of the Holy Spirit and letting the Holy Spirit change how they engage with others. Christians, ***having received the Spirit***, will ***restore*** anybody who's made a mistake ***in a spirit of gentleness ...*** They will ***bear one another's burdens***, and they will ***share in all [the] good things*** they've received through hearing the Word of God. They ***work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith***.

The gardeners amongst you will know that when you have a garden, you are never done with the work of it. There is always more to be done. And the same is true of Christian living. There is always more that we could be doing: more people to pray for; more Christian books to read; more of the acts of kindness that we could be doing for our neighbours and colleagues.

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But we must not think of the things that we could be doing as a burden. After all, there's no point in creating a garden if you never have time to sit in it or to enjoy it. We must not ***grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up***. The harvest time will come; and even as we wait for the harvest, we must not forget to take time to be still, and to be thankful that we can know the peace and the mercy of God.