

Sowing to the Spirit

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[0 : 00] This time of the year in the Rajasthan desert, it's very hot.

The temperature has been climbing ever since February. By the end of April, beginning of May, we're into the mid-40s and 50s. And it's a long ways away from Vancouver.

The rations of last year are starting to run out. People have hoarded grain and wheat. They've kept a small amount, which they're going to use for seeding for that upcoming summer when the rains come.

Desperately watching that little cache of grain. And the heat is pressing down and increasingly becoming very difficult to bear. It feels like a wet, heavy, moist blanket.

It seems to just pull everything down. Not just the people, the animals, the cats and the dogs. Everyone seems to move more slowly. And everyone keeps looking toward the eastern horizon.

[1 : 12] As the heat builds up in May and moves into June, if it's a good year, one starts seeing a few wisps of cloud on the eastern horizon.

Gradually that builds up. And the clouds build up like a veritable wall extending from north to south as far as you can see. And sometime, if God is gracious, in the middle of June, those clouds suddenly break.

And you get a torrent of fresh rain that just pours down. It's like literally standing under a bucket when the monsoon hits. And the whole desert just erupts in joy.

Little kids are running around, jumping and playing, most of them without any clothes on, because they don't have a lot and it's quite hot. Our kids were part of that. But it still is so much so that when it first rains in Vancouver that we're back, my kids who are now in their early 20s, late teens, still run outside and want to just run out in the rain.

Because they have this memory of what it was like to experience the rain. And the animals are looking with more expectancy and hope and people are feeling encouraged.

[2 : 28] And then very quickly, the seeds come out, camels get booked. If you want to rent a camel, that's a very bad time to ask for one. I would run into it because as a physician, I would get people knocking at my door at 4 o'clock in the morning.

They would say, we'd like you to see me right now, I've got a headache. I'd say, it's 4 o'clock in the morning. He said, well, look at this, I borrowed the camel, I've got to get it back by 5. And I said, look, if I start seeing people at 4 o'clock in the morning, then it'll all come at 4 o'clock in the morning. And, of course, then they would go away and they'd wake up the head man, who was my neighbor, and they'd say, could you please use your influence on Dr. Curry because, you know, he won't see me. And, you know, so he'd come and say, please see this guy, he's a relative of mine.

And I'd say, look, if I break the rules, you know, now, you know, then it's all going to be 4 o'clock.

And he'd say, please, just this one time. Well, you can imagine how life goes on. The rainy season is a very busy time.

People are plowing. If they have a horse, if they have a donkey, if they have a camel, they've got their little plow out there and they're working their way through the fields. There's a sense of expectancy and hope. The heat has broken.

[3 : 34] And yet, after that first rain, there's oftentimes a big gap before the next one. And then the heat comes back even with more force because now we're into the end of June, beginning of July, and all this sand is wet.

The sun is now shining down on this wet sand. And you're just literally wringing out your clothes if you walk outside. And everyone is waiting, waiting for that next rain. To be a farmer in the Rajasthan Desert, you need to have faith and patience.

Faith that the seeds that have been carefully kept and saved from the past year will sprout. And patience to wait for that to happen. You see it as the fields have been sown, but there's no evidence of any fruit as yet.

There's nothing that's come up. Yet they're protecting those plots of land between the sand dunes where they've plowed. They've got little scrub fences out of thorn bush that they've built up and they protect that.

They're patiently waiting for the crops to yield. Paul knew something of that. Paul knew something of that expectancy. Paul lived in a culture that was very close to the culture of the Rajasthan Desert. [4 : 52] We were there in 2000 and people wrote to us, what's it like at Y2K for you guys there? And I said, we haven't even hit Y1K yet. For us, if the electricity goes that, it goes every day, sort of from 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Life continues on very much like the early church, like it was in Palestine in Paul's time. And he uses this example as he tries to explain spiritual principles of cause and effect, spiritual principles to the believers in Galatia.

The new believers, and those of you that are familiar, we have been working through the book of Galatians, one of Paul's first letters to an early church. A church that had no gospels, maybe had stories of Jesus collected, but it did not have a book like we do to draw on.

They listened to what Paul taught. They read avidly his letters, and they sought to be faithful to what they had received. And yet, fairly soon after Paul left them, a group of other teachers came in.

Paul had been teaching them something that was unique, something that was an incredible good news. Paul's teaching was the teaching of Jesus Christ, which said, we cannot work our way into heaven.

[6 : 06] We cannot become good enough so that God will accept us. Following Jesus Christ isn't something that we do so that we will be saved.

It's a gift that we receive because we have been loved. And the only requirement is that we humbly accept our need. On our knees, accept the fact that we are poor and sinful and need his help.

That was radical. In the culture of their time, religion was something you did. Religion was something that you built up formulas for. People had all sorts of formulas.

Who was going to be the most religious? Complex codes. And the Jews were the best of this at all. And so when these initially Jewish people started to follow Jesus Christ, seemed to throw out the code book, after Paul left, there were other people in the church who came along and told them, look it, you guys have got it wrong.

Circumcision? You can't just throw that away. We've been practicing that for 2,000 years. The dietary laws? Eating and drinking with Gentiles? Unacceptable. You guys are going to go to hell.

[7 : 16] What is Paul teaching you? Get back to the straight and narrow. And when Paul heard this, he was absolutely appalled. The very center of what he had been teaching, what he had received from Jesus Christ, the very center of his message and of Jesus' message, that it depends upon not what we do, but what has been done for us.

Not on our good works, but on the mercy of God. That was being attacked by this teaching. And so Paul sat down and dictated a letter. And I can just imagine Paul dictating a letter, just storming back and forth in the room.

The room probably too small to hold this very dynamic guy. And the amanuensis just writing away and probably saying, Paul, slow down, come on, can you get that again?

And here we, of course, spend years studying what he has written. And some of this you sense, as Paul writes, just his coming out. Great emotion. Where he says, don't leave the teaching that you receive.

Please don't go back into these old ways. This isn't the way of salvation. He pounds his arguments. If he had a typewriter, they would be punching holes in the letter.

[8 : 36] In fact, at the end he says, See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand. As he actually writes down the end of the letter. And he challenges them to remember what they had been taught.

Remember the fact that this new way, the new faith, is not finding the right formula of holiness so that God will accept us. Not the result of our effort, our goodness.

He prays and tries to help them understand that their acceptance in God's eyes comes not through what they do, but what has already been done on the cross.

Our acceptance comes through a humble acknowledgement that we are helpless and inadequate. And childlike trust in his work on the cross is all that can be done.

Well then, what does this mean? As Paul builds up, very clearly argues against a return to the old way of legalism.

[9 : 35] The old way of following a set of rules. So that we may be good enough to be loved by God. Well, what are the new guidelines? Which way should we go? Okay, we're not going to follow the Jewish dietary rules.

We're not going to do those things. Or we're not going to depend upon those things. We'll maybe put them in the cultural basket. Paul never said that people shouldn't be circumcised. In fact, he had his own disciple Timothy circumcised so that Timothy could fit culturally within the Jewish tradition. Paul who said, I'm a Jew to Jews, I'm a Greek to Greek. He had no trouble with culture. He affirmed it. But Paul sought very clearly to help them to separate culture from faith.

So what does this mean? If you're going to take some of these cultural landmarks out that the Jews had, what are you going to put in their place? What are the new guidelines, the new beacons to be followed?

The new markers on the trail to know that we're not going the wrong way. If they're not a set of rules and regulations, what are they? I remember climbing up in the Karakorums.

[10 : 37] It was about 16,000 feet. Jeremy, my son, and I were doing a trip up to a pass around 18,000 feet from which we could see K2.

That's about as far as close as I've got to K2. And Jeremy was in a lot better shape than I was. And so was my guide who was about 60 years old. A little skinny guy, about this tall.

He was carrying both of our stuff. So he was carrying a pack. And I had, of course, having a certain degree of pride. I still had my camera. A few things like that. And I am puffing.

And meanwhile, he's saying, it is so great. Finally got someone who I can speak to about religious things. Because I spoke Urdu. He said, finally, somebody I can ask questions of. So he was peppering me with questions.

You know, we as Muslims, we pray five times a day. How many times do you guys have to pray?

We fast for the whole month of Ramzan for 30 days. How long do you have to fast?

[11 : 34] And what about almsgiving? You know, we give 3% of our gross income. That is necessary for us to. How much do you guys give? And I'm sort of, meanwhile, just trying to catch my breath.

My camera is even getting heavy. And trying to answer these questions. Because Paul refused to give an easy answer. He refused to give a formula.

Paul and Jesus Christ, following his teaching, said that there is a different pathway. Different markers. Not the old markers. They're new markers. And what are they?

And Paul speaks all the way through Galatians. If there is a message of what it is not, there is also very clearly a message of what it is. And that message is walking in the Spirit.

And we don't have time. We've spent quite a bit of time looking at that over the past months as we've gone through the book of Galatians. But Paul speaks of this new way.

[12 : 30] It's not a formula. He says to the Galatians, Are you foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Live by the Spirit, not by our sinful nature.

Be led by the Spirit. Walk in the Spirit. In chapter 5, he talks about fruit of the Spirit. Signs that we are walking with God.

Signs of love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are not a set of rules to follow, but a person to know.

And over and over again, Paul seeks to draw his Galatian believers back to the principle, away from a legalistic view and into a relational view.

Let us keep in step with the Spirit. And then he goes on at the end of the book, at the end of the letter, sorry, having made such an eloquent appeal about what the Christian faith is not, to start fleshing out some of the implications of walking in the Spirit.

[13 : 42] We've read the passage, Galatians chapter 6, that we're studying particularly, verses 6 to 10, where Paul speaks very clearly about Christian giving.

and sowing in the Spirit. He initially speaks about the importance of caring for those that teach us.

In verse 6, Paul writes, Anyone who receives instruction in the Word must share all good things with his instructor. It goes on to say at the end, verse 10, Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

So both at the beginning of this passage and at the end, one is the specific, the responsibility we have to those who teach us and lead us in the community of faith. And then a more general one we have to one another.

Both of them directed towards the role of giving. And then Paul goes on to talk about what's sowing in the Spirit. Farming principles. I think there are two major principles that he wants us to understand.

[14 : 55] One is that we will reap the fruit of what we sow.

This is a spiritual principle which is as deep as the foundation of this universe, that actions have results. Cause and effect works in the spiritual realm.

If we live for ourselves, if we live for our own gratification, if we live to enjoy life only and seek joy and try to claim the good things as the highest good and leave behind us our commitment to one another, our commitment to the common body, we will reap a different crop.

One of the most powerful indicators of how we are motivated and what our true values is, is seen in how we manage our money. Jesus speaks about the power of money in man's life, clearly stating that we cannot serve it and God.

And he teaches us how that power can be broken. Jesus taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount very clearly, and I quote, Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them.

[16 : 22] If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men.

I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. A characteristic of deeds done in the Spirit is a conscious movement away from seeking credit and seeking honor.

Deeds done in the Spirit and by the power of the Spirit will reflect honor to God and to his church and not to us individually.

One of the most significant spiritual acts of the worship service is taking money that is rightfully ours, freely placing it in an envelope in the offering plate where no one will even know.

[17 : 28] I spoke to David before the church and I said, before the service, I asked him, who knows how much we give? Well, nobody does except one individual who keeps track and she doesn't attend this church and she doesn't give a list to David or anyone else.

So it's an act that we do that is totally anonymous. The only person who knows is God. So this act where no one will even know, where we will not be honored or praised, where that money will go to strengthening the common life of the church and assisting the community to care for those in need, this is indeed sowing in the Spirit.

Giving in the flesh demands credit, recognition, a plaque. How many of us have walked into great places where we see people honored? And that is acceptable, that is reasonable.

There is nothing wrong with honoring people. But that is not the pattern for our fellowship. I spoke in the earlier service about the Bill Gates Foundation, \$40 billion, huge amount of money.

And what's the name of the foundation? Bill Gates and his wife. Bill and Melissa Gates. Again, an act of kindness. This is money that he's giving to poor people to work on AIDS.

[18 : 41] These are very good things. But he is also receiving honor for that. People praise Bill. They say, what a honorable man. That's acceptable in the world.

But we have been called to a higher level. We have been called to be giving where no one will praise us. Well, no one will know. Only he who sees everything in secret.

Only he who knows the hearts, the hidden hearts of man. Amen. I remember being in a church service in Kathmandu, in the areas called Ganeshwar.

And the church was in a building about the size of St. John's, except that there were no pews. And the whole church was just a big carpet.

The sort of simple carpets, straw carpets had been laid out. And as you came in, you sat in rows cross-legged. And as more people came in, the rows got smaller and smaller. Probably there were

1,500 people crammed into that church.

[19 : 46] And most of them were poor, common, laboring people from the city of Kathmandu. As they sat, as they worshipped, there was a joy. There was an excitement in their worship.

Most of these people had come from Hinduism. Many had suffered significantly for their faith. It was just after the time when the rule was rescinded that you would be, a pastor could go to jail for seven years for baptizing someone.

I remember the sermon that was spoken by the pastor. His wife had just passed away. It was a powerful sermon on the God who is. I am who I am. And the fascinating part of the service was the offering.

Here you had poor people, most of them laborers who make less in a year than we would make in a week. And those offering baskets were full. They had to keep pushing them down because they had got so high.

And then after the offering was given and they gave thanks, the pastor spoke about the different things the church was doing. This church of poor people who had almost nothing was sending out missionaries to India.

[20 : 58] Here, a country that only recently accepted the good news of Jesus Christ already was with their own money sending out missionaries to another country.

The joy that was there was evident in their giving. And this giving was not for the Internal Revenue Service. There was no tax benefit to giving in Kathmandu.

This was money that they obviously needed far more than you or I. And yet it came out and it was joyously given. And what a church and what an exciting place to be.

The second principle of planting that Paul talks about besides the principle of reaping what you sow is the reality of discouragement and the ease of giving up.

If we give in secret, oftentimes we have no idea how that will be used. We have no idea how our particular contribution to the church, to an individual, how it went on being used.

[22 : 11] And so, we don't get that immediate feedback. We don't get the praise when we give. And oftentimes we don't get the feedback. Maybe we're in a church where there is difficulties.

Maybe we're in a church that's going through struggles. Maybe we're asking, why am I contributing to a church that I'm struggling with where I disagree with some of the leadership? That could be true.

Churches are not always easy places to be in because they're real. Because they're places where real people come together. Sometimes they have disagreements. Sometimes they have arguments. Yet it's a place where we have been called to gather. As much as any other institution, the only institution that we've been called to that's like it is marriage.

And any of you who've been married more than a couple weeks know that you'll have disagreements. That's part of it. But we love each other, we work with each other, we care for each other. And so Paul encourages the believers not to be discouraged, to believe that what they sow, what they give, will produce spiritual fruit.

[23 : 21] One day, they will see it. In the desert, everyone waits for the second rain. And sometimes it doesn't come.

Two out of three years, it does come. And when it does come, that rain, almost physically, the second rain, pulls the crops out of the dusty soil. Those seeds that have been planted have been growing little roots and sort of just waiting underneath in the hot sun, waiting for that second rain. When the second rain comes, these shoots just seem to spring out of the earth. Almost overnight, you see a layer of green. And then quickly, it's growing. And you have stalks of millet, fields of different types of legumes.

And for those people that have done it, even watermelon. I can remember when the second rains would come because in my clinic, I would get these little kids coming with sore bellies. And I'd say, I know what you guys have been doing.

Watermelons, right? They'd say, Dr. Sahab, am nekoshishki, kami abnita. You know, we tried, but we just couldn't resist it. And they would eat the watermelons green because they couldn't even wait because they'd been waiting for a whole year.

[24 : 36] They hadn't had any fruit in a whole year. And suddenly, here are these watermelons. Terrible to you and I. Even when they're ripe, they don't taste that good. They're not like the ones from California. But for these people and these kids, they were tremendous.

And so, the second rain produces a wealth of crop. It produces an abundance in the desert. Suddenly, milk is available.

People have butter. They haven't had any butter or milk for a whole year and suddenly, they have these things. And that's a little bit of picture for me about the fruit that eventually will be produced by sowing in the Spirit.

A lot of that fruit will only be seen on the day of eternity. A lot of it will not be seen here. A lot of the good that we do, we will never be thanked for.

And we will never discover what we did until one day we cross a threshold and we meet someone who says, thank you. I never had a chance to do that. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. [25 : 39] Someone else says, thank you for that gift. It made a huge difference in my life. We will walk through a gate and we will walk into joy.

We will discover the incredible bounty of people over the centuries who have sowed quietly, silently in the Spirit and given of themselves.

eternal life is more than living forever. It's a place where the hidden gifts will be seen. Where all the myriad great acts of generosity that were never named and never honored will be shown.

heaven. I like what C.S. Lewis said about heaven. He said, the only books we will have in heaven are those that we loaned to friends and didn't get back.

And all the marginal notes and the scribbles that someone put in our favorite books and all the underlining will be transformed into glorious calligraphy. Isn't that a little picture of what heaven will be like?

[26 : 52] It will be a place where all the hidden things become real. So Paul calls us to invest, to sow in the Spirit, to invest in this kingdom.

He calls us to be active members of the fellowship of believers wherever that may be. The option of being a solitary Christian is not one that Paul offers. We are called to be members of a fellowship. We are called to know one another's names. We are called to care for each other. We are called to pray for each other and we are called to give generously. To put our time, energy, and finances into the ministry of the church.

To give sacrificially without any guarantee of return in our lifespan. Have we recently done an inventory of our spiritual stocks and bonds?

we in the West are very aware of the importance of preparing. What is our heavenly investment portfolio?

[27 : 58] Is it a generous one? Have we been sowing generously? Have we been sowing to bring blessing to others in our fellowship in the wider community?

May the Lord who has given us so generously blessed us with all good things and given us a hope and a future now give us grace to be generous with one another in his kingdom to bless because we have been blessed and to give because we have received.

The one who sows to please the Spirit from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Only in the Spirit will reap me for this is the purpose is well to the earth to earth to good till especially it and it is our another choice is