



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

YOU ARE WHAT YOU DO

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ DECEMBER 31, 2023

I don't know what you got for Christmas this year, but I got a new pair of socks from my sister-in-law, and I'm pretty excited about them. The pair show alligators in sunglasses with their thumbs up...alligators and their opposable thumbs, you know. You might have noticed I have fun socks on pretty much every week. Depending on the Sunday, I have socks with bacon and eggs, slices of pizza, or rubber ducks on my feet. The reason for this is simple: I don't own any normal socks. I have a few pairs of athletic socks for running and one or two pairs of black socks for very formal situations, but outside of that, I only own fun socks.

I didn't grow up wearing fun socks. It all began the year I started graduate school when I was at the clearance rack at a store with a friend and saw a pair of socks with capes on them. They made me laugh and I picked them up. A few weeks later, we had a fun event at the seminary, so I decided to wear the cape socks. I got a couple of comments, so I thought, "I think I'll wear these every Friday to celebrate the weekend." Wearing fun socks became a habit. Soon, a few new friends discovered that I wore cape socks every Friday, and they thought it was hilarious. We bonded over it, and they bought me some new fun socks. Soon, I had taco dinosaur socks for Mondays, Mona Lisa socks for Wednesdays, and cape socks for Fridays. You can imagine how this developed. The more people saw me wear fun socks, the more fun socks they got for me, and the more fun socks I owned, the more fun socks I wore. Now it's gotten completely out of control!

I have not purchased a pair of socks in about five years. Every

year, I host Steve's Silly Sock Bracket on my Facebook page for my friends to vote on the best socks I was given for the year. People stop by my office and before they even say hello, they ask me what socks I'm wearing. Now wearing fun socks isn't just a habit. It has somehow become part of who I am. "Let me tell you about Steve – he always wears silly socks."

The thing is this type of progression doesn't only happen with silly socks. It happens with bigger things, too, like our spiritual formation. By "spiritual formation" I mean the way we are *formed* into the kind of people we become. Things start as decisions, become habits, and then become character qualities. You go for a run once. You find a friend who becomes a running buddy, and it becomes a habit. Before you know it, you are a "runner." On the other hand, most people don't decide to become an alcoholic. It starts with a glass of wine every night. It becomes two glasses of wine every night. Then it becomes, "I need a glass of wine to fall asleep, to calm down, or just to be okay." Something starts as a decision, becomes a habit, then becomes our character.

One reason this is important is that if we're honest for most of us there is a gap between the people we are and the people we want to be. We wish you could look like that runner who lives in our neighborhood. We wish we could be as funny as Uncle Jimbo, or as kind as Aunt Sally, or patient as Grandma Rosie. It might even be said that most of us have a gap between the people we are and the people we know we *should* be. We know this about ourselves, and we try to fix it, but our strategies don't work. Tonight, when the clock strikes midnight, you might be beginning your next New Year's resolution. You might also know the statistics: *Time Magazine* cites a study that 80% of New Year's resolutions fail by February and 92% of them don't last for the year. We *try* to start going to the gym, but we don't stick with it. We don't really *want* to lose our temper. We don't really *want* to be so busy that we don't have time for our family. We don't really *want* to be struggling with addiction or unforgiveness or some other sin. It's just the way we are and we don't know a better way.

But what is there a different way than New Year's resolutions and elbow grease? What if there is a way to become the people we long to be? What if there is a way to become the people God longs for us to be? Let's read Galatians 6:7-10 (ESV).

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for **whatever one sows, that will he also reap.** ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

"Whatever one sows, that he will also reap." If you've never had a garden, this is what it means: if you sow cucumber seeds in the ground, what will you get? Cucumbers. If you sow green bean seeds, what will you get? Green beans. You don't sow green bean seeds and end up with watermelons. It's the way the universe works. It's a law of nature, like gravity or thermodynamics. You harvest what you plant. You reap what you sow.

Paul applies this law of nature to our actions, to our lifestyle, and to our character. Here's the main idea we'll be working with today: what you do today shapes who you become tomorrow. Every one of your actions today is shaping the person you are going to be later. We can break this concept down into two parts: first, how what we do today shapes who we become; and second, what we do today so we can become the person we want to be. Let's start with that first idea: how what we do today shapes who we become.

In verse 8, Paul writes, *"The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, and the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."* What does Paul mean by flesh and Spirit? We're starting in the middle of this letter, so we need some context.

Paul has been writing about the flesh and Spirit for a while. In chapter 5, he wrote,

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to one another, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal 5:16-17).

The word *flesh* is used often in the Bible and has multiple meanings. Sometimes flesh just describes the human body—as in John 1:14, where we read that Jesus *became flesh*. That is not bad. Paul’s not saying that the human body is bad—that desires like hunger or sleep are somehow bad. But there is another meaning for flesh in the Bible described as desires that satisfy our physical urges or sensual urges even when we know they aren’t good for us. These are the desires, Paul says, that keep us from doing the things we want to do.

You know how this goes. You plan to keep your New Year’s diet for real this year. Then someone brings Oreos to the New Year’s Eve party. You want to keep your diet but you love Oreos. You know if you start munching on one Oreo, it will become two Oreos, then four, then six. Yet there’s a little voice in your head that says, “But I love Oreos.” When Paul uses the word *flesh*, he’s referring to that little voice in your head, that part of you that says, “I know what’s good for me, but I *want* that. I know I should go the gym, but the couch is so comfy. I know I should stop watching these shows or looking at these websites, but it feels so good. I know I should not snap at my spouse, but I want to.” That voice, that urge, is what Paul calls our flesh: the powerful surface-level desires that often override our deeper desires. When we choose to say, “I’m snacking anyway; I’m going for another Oreo; I’m not forgiving that person for hurting me” in Paul’s words, we are sowing to our flesh.

To counter that, Paul says, we can sow to the Spirit. Paul defined the Spirit in chapter 5, too, when he said, “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*” (Gal 5:22-23). “Spirit” is capitalized because it refers to

the Spirit of Jesus, also known as the Holy Spirit. According to Paul's theology, if you're a believer in Jesus, you are filled with Jesus' Spirit. Believing in Jesus' death on the cross accomplishes two things in Christian theology: first, He takes away the penalty of your sin since He took on your punishment; and second, He gives you power over sin since He fills you with His Spirit. It is His Spirit that enables you to be the type of person in Galatians 5: loving, joyful, and peaceful person instead of "fleshy" and characterized by doing what you want when you want. When you choose to forgive, you're sowing to the Spirit; when you choose to be gentle instead of harsh, you're sowing to the Spirit.

What happens when we sow to either the flesh or the Spirit? According to Paul in verse 8, when you sow "flesh seeds," they become what he calls "corruption." When you sow "Spirit seeds," they become what he calls "eternal life." Eternal life does refer to heaven, to eternity with God, but throughout the Bible, eternal life does not begin when you die: it begins when you start to follow Jesus. What you sow affects not just your final destiny in eternity, but your character destiny on earth. The things you sow right now shape the person you will become.

Pastor John Mark Comer has profoundly shaped my thinking on this idea. In his book **Live No Lies**, he writes about this "law" of sowing and reaping. Here's how he describes it: "Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap another action. Sow some actions, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny." C.S. Lewis describes in **Mere Christianity**:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your whole life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature.

Paul is making this argument about our spiritual life. Every

decision we make, no matter how small, we are sowing to either the flesh or the Spirit. Depending on whether we are sowing to the flesh or to the Spirit, we are moving a little closer to being a “fleshy” person or a “Spirit” person. If we plant the habit of keeping our promises, we gradually become a more trustworthy person. If we plant the habit of breaking our promises, we reap the reward of becoming the type of person people don’t trust. If we sow seeds of anger, frustration, and irritability, over time we will become angry, frustrated, and irritable. What we do today shapes who we become tomorrow.

The best depiction I can think of for this idea comes from J.R.R. Tolkien’s **Lord of the Rings**, in the character of Gollum. Originally, before he discovered the elusive, powerful, corrupting One Ring, Gollum was a creature named Smeagol. When Smeagol saw the ring, blind with lust for its power, he made a choice and killed his friend. Over years and years and years, Smeagol continued to make more and more choices based on his insatiable longing and desire to keep the ring until over time he wasn’t Smeagol anymore. He morphed into the creature Gollum driven by his longing and desire for the One Ring. He started as a creature with free will who made the wrong choice; he became a creature enslaved to his poor decisions. John Mark Comer phrased it this way: “We make our decisions, and then our decisions make us.” We become the person our decisions and habits make us into until every additional thing that happens just entrenches us more. The habits and decisions you make right now shape the person you will be in 5 or 10 years. Think about your current habits and your day-to-day decisions. If you apply the law of sowing and reaping what are you sowing right now? Who will you become in a few years?

Before you panic, here is the good news. In Jesus Christ none of you are going to become Gollum. A different trajectory has been set for you. The corrupting power of the ring – which is a good picture of sin – has been broken. If you’ve accepted Jesus as your Lord, you cannot finally and irreversibly be turned into a Gollum no matter how many times you goof up on earth. A different ring lives in you through Jesus’ Spirit, that constantly pulls you toward His goodness

and which ultimately will win. But the reality is that each of us have a Smeagol and a Gollum inside. The Smeagol wants goodness, love, and justice. The Gollum wants another Oreo.

The question, then, is how do we make the right decisions? Paul pointed out that none of us want to be fleshy people. We want to be people of love, joy, peace, and patience. How do we become those people? Where do we find the power? And how do we know for sure that it works? After all, some of us have tried for a lifetime to sow to the Spirit and to do good but it just comes back to bite us. We chose the ethical business practice and fell behind in the market. We chose to forgive a friend and they took advantage of us. How are we supposed to sow to the Spirit? This is where our second idea shows up: what can we do today to become the people we want to be? Paul continues in verses 9 and 10:

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 to everyone, and especially to those who are of the family of the faith.

In addition to fun socks, I also discovered fun stocks in seminary. My roommate introduced me to an app called Robinhood where with a few simple taps of your thumb you can buy and sell on the stock market. This was before the days of the GameStop short squeeze when Robinhood hit newswires. I had thought it was so much fun—like grown-up Chuck E. Cheese. I could buy a share of Facebook stock, wait a few days for it to go up, then sell it—and poof! I'd have two more magical dollars! Free money!

But most of you who have retired to Southwest Florida were able to do so because you know that is not the way you should use the stock market. If you use it for day trading—buying and selling on whims to get immediate returns—you are running a major risk and might end up losing money when you guess wrong. Snapchat's stock let me down big time. The most effective way to use the stock market is to buy and hold. Trust the market and wait a long time. Let your stock investment sit in the market while the ups and downs run

their course. Then when you check on it in 30 years, magically there is more money in your account. If you try to get day-to-day gains or expect immediate returns, you'll be disappointed. But if you invest even a small fraction in the right stock, one day you will see a reward.

It's the same way in our spiritual lives. Eugene Peterson called it "A long obedience in the same direction." Paul says, "*in due season we will reap*" (verse 9). We might not see the rewards of our actions right away. If we go to the gym and flex in the mirror the next day we won't see a big difference, but if we go to the gym every day for 3 years and then flex, we might. If we go home today inspired by this sermon and try to start the new habit of not losing our temper or spending more time with Jesus, we won't see immediate gains. It takes time. The word Paul uses for "*in due season*" is the Greek word *Kairos*. Unlike the Greek word *chronos*, which refers to linear time like chronology or chronological, *Kairos* refers to a *season, a moment—winter or harvest season*. We won't see the fruit of our action right away but we will see it—whether in this life or the next—if we don't give up. Every small action we take to sow to the Spirit God sees even if we see or feel no difference.

My brother-in-law has been getting into woodworking, and he wanted to plant a black walnut tree because it's one of the best timbers for woodworking. The problem he discovered was that when you plant a black walnut tree you can harvest the timber in 75 years. It's not exactly a get rich quick scheme. But, if he were to plant it, someone would reap it. It might not be him, it might not be immediately, but if you sow good into God's economy, the returns do come. It might not be in your own life, or even in your lifetime, but when you sow good it's not lost. Why? Because it's not dependent on the whims of the market. It's not like Steve investing in Snapchat back in seminary. As Paul says in verse 7, "*God is not mocked*"! He sees every little thing you do; every little kind word you share, every bit of resources you give, every bitterness you hold in your heart, every person you forgive that then takes advantage of you. The returns might not come, but 20 years later when that person's heart is

changed and they look back at the way you forgave them even though you took the hit, you will reap. Knowing all that is true, how do we find the power to do it?

You probably know deep down that everything I've said today is true. You know that your habits and decisions make you who you become. You know that good deeds don't go unnoticed. The problem is that you still want the Oreos. Your flesh is still strong and you still want what you want! How do you find the power to sow the things of the Spirit? How can you become a person of love, joy, peace, and patience? How do you sow seeds so you can bear fruit?

The answer comes from a different part of the Bible. In John 15 Jesus is speaking with His disciples on the night He is preparing to die. It's a few short weeks before His Spirit will move in and take up residence in their hearts. Here's what He tells them: *"I am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). There's that same word: fruit. How do you bear the fruit of Jesus' Spirit? You must sow to Jesus' Spirit. How do you sow to Jesus? You must spend time with Jesus. You must become like Jesus. You must imitate the practices of Jesus by the power of Jesus.

Our decisions and our habits shape us as do the people with whom we spend time. The longer I've been here, the more people I have noticed who also wear fun socks. You might have fun socks on today that you would not have had without me in your life. You're welcome, by the way. Elsewhere Paul quotes a Greek poet who says, "Bad company corrupts good morals." You become like the people with whom you spend your time.

We have this goofy misconception in our minds sometimes that it would be good to become *like* Jesus but we don't spend time *with* Jesus. We read about Jesus, hear about Jesus, and uphold the principles of Jesus, but we don't spend time with Jesus. The Bible's answer to our quandary is simple. If we want to bear the fruit of Jesus' Spirit, we must sow to Jesus' Spirit. To sow to Jesus' Spirit we must spend time with Jesus—become like Jesus.

Jesus had some habits and practices that were countercultural in his time, too. Think of the way Jesus spent most of His time. I love the way Pastor Zack Eswine describes an average day in the life of Jesus: wake up and go off on your own to be with God. Spend most of the day in obscure places with obscure people. Open a bottle of wine and hang out with your closest friends. To which I might add, take a nap on a boat.

In Galatians 2:20, Paul explained it this way.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The good news of the Bible is that Jesus died so we no longer are enslaved to our flesh. We don't have to do the things we don't want to do anymore. Through our faith He gives us the power to become a new person in Him. It's through being with Him, through His practice of time alone with God in a busy world and time with friends of faith in a world of many voices, that we begin to become people of the Spirit. In the eyes of God, because of what Jesus has done for us, we have the status of a Spirit-filled people.

If you're a believer in Jesus, your heavenly destiny doesn't hinge on how many good decisions you make today, but the type of person you become on earth does. He has given you the *status* of His Spirit. It's up to you to cultivate the *likeness* of His Spirit. How does this affect our day-to-day lives? Here are a few tangible ideas:

1. **Do an audit of your time and resources.** It might be interesting to record the way you spend your time for a week. Journalize it. Reflect on where are you sowing to the flesh, and where are you sowing to the Spirit?
2. **Find a friend who will hold you to your audit and your habits.** Do you have a spiritual friend who will be honest with you? Is there someone you can tell of a new habit you want to initiate? Who can you ask to check in next week to

see how it's going?

3. **Start a habit in the power of Jesus.** What's really missing in your New Year's Resolution isn't your gumption. The power of Jesus' Spirit living in you helps your habits stick. Maybe this year, if you long to bear fruit for Jesus, it might be worth asking how your habits reflect Jesus. What habit of Jesus you can start to imitate? Time alone with God in a busy world? Time with close friends? Keeping a weekly day of rest?

Here is one more good line from John Mark Comer which he attributes to an ancient spiritual teacher. The teacher said to his students, "There are two dogs fighting inside my home. One dog is evil, angry, greedy, and jealous. The other dog is good, loving, kind, and loyal. They are constantly fighting and trying to tear each other apart." One student, after a moment's thought, would ask, "Which dog will win?" The teacher's response: "Whichever dog I feed the most." If you are a believer in Jesus, He has died for you. His Spirit lives in you. It's broken the power of the One Ring. But while you struggle on earth, you have two natures living in you: the nature of your sin and flesh, and the nature of Jesus' Spirit. Which one you feed shapes the person you become. Which nature will you feed the most? ■



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