

How many here enjoy gardening. You've done enough to know that there are a few important things that will make your efforts either successful or unsuccessful? Okay, gardeners, I'm going to ask you some questions. You can just call out the answers and we'll take it from there.

Does it matter when you plant? Is this a good time to plant corn? It's a better time to plant garlic, isn't it? What about dahlia bulbs?

Does it matter what you plant? Can you cut corn off the cob and dry it out over the winter and plant it in the spring? What if you cooked the corn first to make it easier to get off the cob? Can you plant leaves? How does that work out?

Does it matter what soil you use? Is Maple Ridge clay just as good as potting soil or composted soil? Why?

Does it matter where you plant? Can you grow great vegetables under the shade of a big maple tree? How do marigolds do in the basement?

Can you just throw the seeds in the soil or the seedlings in the planters on your deck and just leave them for the rest of the summer? What happens?

I could ask you about fertilizer and I could ask you about getting the right "ph" balance in your soil and your pruning techniques and how often you pinch back the spreading tomato plants or sweet peas . . . but you get the idea. The garden that "just happens" usually looks more like weeds gone wild than it looks like a garden and what that garden produces is . . . well, not much if anything at all.

When the early settlers ... not explorers, but settlers, arrived in New England in the early 1600's, many of them were running away from severe persecution in their homelands. People in England were being arrested for belonging to an independent church rather than the church of England. I know it's crazy, but that's what happens when people, even religious people, get too much power and then make it their mission to protect their position, their place. Anyway, after 150 years of immigration, mostly from Europe, America was made up of two kinds of people: religious refugees and entrepreneurs, both of whom wanted one thing above all others: freedom. The ability to choose their way of worship and to live in community together under God's law and the freedom to use the opportunities that this new land provided to make a good living, maybe even become wealthy. Those were the seeds that were sown in the settlement of the colonies called America and those seeds flowered in the fight for independence from Britain that took place in the 1770's.

This mindset was so ingrained in the psyche of the American colonies that a man could stand up in the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1775 and say this:

*Should I keep back my opinions at such a time,
through fear of giving offense, I should consider*

myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty to the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly things (and later) ... Gentlemen may cry, "Peace, peace" -- but there is no peace. The war is actually begun. The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.

The words of the patriot Patrick Henry.

Of course, Patrick Henry's famous speech has become a part of the national identity of the United States and people there see themselves as lovers of freedom at the same time as they are rapidly giving their freedoms away to their massively powerful government. But those seeds that were planted by the early settlers and which were restated in their Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights had a great deal to do with making America a powerful force in the world.

What about Canada? As a country we had no battle with Britain for independence. It was all done by negotiations after long trips across the Atlantic by ship. Our founders were called the "Fathers of Confederation", one of whom was a widower named Samuel Leonard Tilley, who was raising 8 children as a single dad -- and had been since his wife's death 5 years earlier -- and he found time to teach Sunday School in his church in St. John, New Brunswick. He has been widely credited with helping to decide the issue of naming our country with the title "The Dominion of Canada". John A. Macdonald preferred the title "Kingdom of Canada" -- maybe he saw himself as the king -- but in his devotions one morning during the debate over this issue, Tilley read Psalm 72:8, which says, "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth." Like the United States to the south of us, Canada was formed as a nation under God's dominion and our coat of arms still bears the inscription, "From sea to sea". How that actually happened is another story from another day, but the brief version is that "from sea to sea" was first engraved on the head of the mace for the Legislature in Saskatchewan when that province joined Canada in 1906.

But seeds were planted from the beginning and these two neighbouring countries had, as part of their national identities a humble recognition that God is our real ruler. Over the past 100 years or so, other seeds have been planted -- the weeds in among the wheat, as Jesus described it in one of His parables. And, just as the seeds that were planted in the early years bore the fruit of freedom

and prosperity, so the seeds that have been planted, especially since World War II, have changed the nature of our countries, especially of the United States. In both our nations, religious faith is in decline and people trust money rather than God and look to government rather than the church for help in time of need. And, as those seeds continue to grow, our nations become less free, deeper in debt, more vulnerable and morally poor.

The point of all this is my hope that we can be inspired to become excellent gardeners, patiently, lovingly and diligently cultivating the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I especially want to focus on the planting and nurturing aspects of our gardening as the Lord has already chosen the soil -- our hearts -- and the location -- right here in the middle of the mission field that's known as the Lower Mainland of B.C.

So, what are the seeds that you are planting in the soil that God has chosen? What will those seeds grow into if they are not either eliminated (the weeds) or cared for (the fruit of the Spirit)? And how do we nurture what God has planted in us? The Scriptures tell us.

Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So, don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time.

That's from Paul's letter to the Galatians, in chapter 6 and just after Paul has talked about the fruit of the Spirit. Let's read the end of chapter five and then we'll take a look at his teaching as a whole:

The old sinful nature loves to do evil, which is just opposite from what the Holy Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are opposite from what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, and your choices are never free from this conflict.

Okay, now he describes these conflicting values:

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce these evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group, envy, drunkenness, wild parties and other kinds of sin. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone

living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, He will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

So, this is the picture, and we've all experienced it on a regular basis. Our lives are marked by an inner turmoil that is only resolved in one of two ways: we either choose to hear and obey the voice of the Holy Spirit or we choose to listen to the seductive voice of the evil that reigns all around us in the world. We either yield ourselves to the promptings of the Spirit or we allow our passions, our sinful nature to shout a bit louder so that we can't hear the Spirit anymore and we yield to temptation. Is there anyone here today who has never experienced anything remotely like what I just described? We know it from Scripture and from experience.

The heart of the issue we're talking about today is that the choice you make has consequences. The choices are between nurturing the Spirit's presence, encouraging His voice, fostering that relationship . . . or drowning it out, letting it dry up and wither away until we can hardly hear Him anymore. And Paul says that the ultimate fruit of those continual choices is the harvest of decay and death.

What kinds of choices lead us in that direction? What are the choices that might lead someone into sexual immorality? The choice to stay too long in the company of someone you have no business being with. The choice to fantasize about where that relationship could take you. The choice to pick up the phone and make the call that leads you into a deeper involvement with the person.

What are the choices that lead a person into idolatry? That person could have been raised hearing a little phrase like, "My country right or wrong" from one or both of her parents. It becomes an unquestioned part of her thinking and it's idolatry -- putting country ahead of God and ahead of God's desire for justice. Or, a more subtle form of idolatry is worship of the self. I hear this once in awhile in conversations I have with people, "I need some happiness, to get away from the difficulties I face at home or just to get a break from doing what other people expect of me." Very often I've found that what the person is trying to tell me is that they need an excuse for doing something wrong and their pursuit of pleasure, however perverse, they describe as a pursuit of happiness ... but when it's happiness outside of God's ways, it's idolatry.

What are the choices that lead a person into divisions? It will usually start with the proud choice to think I'm right and everyone else is wrong and then is followed by a series of choices whereby I go out to prove that everyone else is wrong, regardless of the cost in relationships.

What about outbursts of anger? I mean, nobody plans that. "That guy just makes me so mad that I explode and that's not my choice." But who makes the choice as to how you will react to the aggravation that is coming your way? Is it more important that you justify yourself or let someone know what you think of them or get your blood pressure up, ... or is it more important to make peace? How will your outburst bring honour to the name of Jesus or even improve the relationship with the person you've blown up at?

All day long, every day of the week, we plant seeds. We say things, we do things, we let our minds rest on things that may be good or may be not so helpful. We listen for the Spirit's leading or we try to drown out His voice with our will to sin. It seems like a battle because it is -- it's spiritual warfare, as we've just read about: "These two forces are constantly fighting each other, and your choices are never free from this conflict."

The seriousness of it all is from the first passage I read today from Galatians 6 which contrasts the results, the fruit, of the choices we make. On the one hand there is a harvest of blessing coming for those who listen to the Spirit and obey His voice. On the other hand there are those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires and their harvest is described by Paul as decay and death.

What about all the in-betweens? What about people like us who seem to sow good things for a season and then start cultivating weeds instead? Well, Paul doesn't answer that question, but if he did, I think he would ask us how much death and decay we want in our spiritual lives and why do we want those things? What kind of spiritual fragrance do we want to exude from our lives -- the life-giving perfume he talks about in 2 Corinthians 2:16 or the smell of death? As he asked in Romans 6:2, "Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?"

If we are truly believers, we want our lives to bring glory to God, to show people His goodness and the blessings that come to the person who walks in His ways. We're not immune to temptation, of course, and that's where we have the opportunity to make good choices, to do the right thing, the thing that pleases the Lord and that produces that beautiful fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives!

How do we do that? No one said it would be easy, but neither did any honest person say it's easy to nurture a beautiful garden. If you want beautiful flowers, you'll weed and water and trim and move plants around and put in fertilizer or do what needs to be done. If you want fresh vegetables for your dinner table, you turn over the soil, you plant and water and weed, all season long.

There was a time this summer when I just didn't bother watering the flowers that were growing along the fence at the back of our property. And because of that one of my beautiful little trees dried up. It's dead. And so are a few other plants right along that back wall. I lost them, simply through neglect.

So, what do we do? We discipline ourselves to listen to the Holy Spirit. We ask Him to speak to us, even when we don't think we're going to like what He has to say to us. We spend time in the Scriptures, meditating on God's word, AND asking the Spirit to speak to us as we read. We are careful not to ignore the promptings we receive from the Spirit within us because we don't want to put out the Spirit's fire. We nurture the life in the Spirit because it gives us confidence in our faith, victory over Satan and his temptations and fruitfulness in our lives. We resist the old nature and its pull towards selfishness, towards old habits, towards doing things that we can only do when we are ignoring the Spirit's voice. And we thank God daily that He has saved us, is saving us, and will save us from the powers of evil and destruction in this world.