

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

There was a garden tour here in Lake City this month. It makes me wonder how many people in our town love looking at or growing flowers. If you currently have a garden, or if you used to have a garden, or if you have ever “just put in a few tomatoes,” or if you ever helped on a farm, give me a smile or a little wave. I’m glad to see how many of you have some experience with flowers, vegetables, and grain.

But have you ever thought of yourself as a garden? You are, in fact, God’s garden or field, but none of us were at first. When God found us, we were a weed patch. We were producing lots of stuff, but the Lord didn’t want to purchase our produce. Then the Father said, “Son, let’s buy that weed patch and turn it into a garden.” So Jesus died on the cross and bought you with his blood. Then the Holy Spirit went to work. It wasn’t pleasant, but he found each weed and pulled it (Isaiah 1:10-17, Isaiah 28:21, Jonah 3:1-4). He tilled in some mulch and dung to make you fertile ground (Acts 16:16-27, Luke 7:1-3, Acts 10:1-33). He watered your soil in the baptismal font (1 Peter 3:21), and planted the seeds of God’s Word right into the soil of your heart (Matthew 13:11). Guess what? It worked! Now that you have been made alive through the gospel, your faith is producing all kinds of fruit (Colossians 1:6).

Now imagine how the Holy Gardener feels when his garden starts boasting: “Look what luscious fruits *I* have produced!” That must be irritating. If a gardener doesn’t prepare

the ground, plant the seeds, irrigate the soil, and pull the weeds, the plants will produce poorly. So it is with us, God’s gardens. Instead of boasting in our abilities, let’s boast in how well our Lord has cared for us, how well our Lord has saved us from destruction. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 6: <sup>14</sup>*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.* In other words, when your sinful flesh brags, “Look what I did,” that’s a good time for you to respond: “Rather look at what my Lord did. He gets the credit. He gets the glory.”

Now that THE LORD has turned us into his dearly loved gardens, he IS LOOKING FOR AN ABUNDANT HARVEST OF FRUIT from us. But gardens, like people, have this unrelenting tendency to produce weeds. Some gardens even trick themselves into thinking that the Holy Gardener isn’t looking. “Quick, now’s the time to sow some dandelions or morning glories or wild oats.” But the Holy Gardener instructs us, his dearly loved gardens: <sup>7</sup>*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.* <sup>8</sup>*The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; [but] the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.* In other words, now that God has turned us into his gardens, he gives us a say about what kinds of seeds are planted in our soil. Shall we plant self-centeredness, stubbornness, crankiness, worry, pornography, drunkenness, or

gluttony to please our sinful flesh? Those seeds can grow up and ruin God's garden—ruin you. How much better it is to plant the seeds of love, cooperation, patience, generosity, kindness and faithfulness. These seeds please the Holy Spirit who already gave us eternal life through the gospel.

Many of you have been planting the gospel in your heart and cultivating all the godly attitudes. You know what happens. Our almighty Lord so wants you to grow and produce fruit that he blesses your efforts with an abundant harvest of fruit for him.

You've probably experienced this too: you were enjoying such blessings from putting God's Word into your heart that Satan took notice of you. He has always hated you, but he's not about to sit idly by while you grow in faith. Of course, he's not nearly as powerful as the almighty Lord, his Creator. And he knows he can't separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). But until you land safely on heaven's shore, he's going to keep trying to make you miserable (1 Peter 5:8), especially if you try to grow spiritually by studying God's Word daily and attending worship weekly. Satan wants you to find a reason not to study the Bible. He knows that putting God's Word in the soil of your heart will produce an abundant harvest of fruit for the Lord—just like what we heard last Sunday happened in Nineveh when reluctant Jonah preached repentance in

that cruel city. So you should expect Satan to try ruining your every effort to grow in grace. He might distract you with trouble at home like an insensitive family member, or Satan's old favorites, rivalry and competition: "I'm not letting you get the better of me. Who do you think you are?!" \* Satan will use anything, even good things like hobbies. Learning is good. Keep exploring *whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.* (Philippians 4:8). But then watch for Satan to use your love of learning to distract you. Developing a new interest will squeeze your schedule and tempt you to cut out God's Word. Developing a new interest may also connect you with new friends, which could be great, of course, because then you can also share your appreciation for how God rescued you from sin through Jesus. But what if your new friends don't love Jesus as Savior? What if they pressure you to love him less, or to let your God-pleasing fruit not show in front of them? What good thing in your life will Satan use to trick you into distancing yourself from God? Several years ago one of my Bible Discovery Class students innocently started visiting her boss in the hospital because he had cancer. We prayed for this gentleman after some of our lessons. This was good. But then she had an affair with him and left her family. It sounds shocking. But if you set your heart on producing the fruits of faith that

God is looking for, please expect attacks from Satan.

But don't say, "Well then I'm not even going to try"—Satan would be so pleased if you gave up without a fight. No, listen to the apostle Paul: *<sup>9</sup>Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* Expect trouble, and then remember: plant God's Word into your heart repeatedly, and the Holy Spirit will produce in you abundant harvests of joy, satisfying contentment, and spiritual victories.

Some people take out their Bible, they read one chapter, and they expect all their problems to go away. But just as gardening takes patience, God's Word does its work slowly. If you watch a plant, you can't see it growing—well maybe corn on a hot, humid day. But go away from a living plant and come back after enough time, and you can see that it has grown. The same will happen to your faith as you read God's Word faithfully and frequently. The fruits of faith come. Sometimes the Lord even sends fruit quickly.

Paul writes: *<sup>10</sup>Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.* Doing good can be little things like holding a door open, or picking up something that someone dropped, or helping a senior load a big bag of dogfood into her trunk. As many as 8%

of you donate blood. Many of you contribute to the food shelf. Isn't it a blast, a sacred blast, when lots of people help a little and it turns out to be a big sum? Our little church body has sent hundreds of thousands of dollars to our sister church body in Ukraine so they can help alleviate the war pains of people in their country, besides all the mission work we continue to do all over the world. But love also happens locally: I hear about only a fraction of the little things you do for each other. There's all these little networks of caring friends in our church. Paul writes, *<sup>2</sup>Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ* ("Love one another").

Garden plants often produce branches in the wrong places. But plants can be made more productive or more beautiful with pruning—the right kind of pruning. When you prune, you want to cut out only certain parts. You don't use a chain saw to prune a tomato plant. Ah, but do you ever prune people with the chain saw of your tongue? Fellow believers, *<sup>1</sup>if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted*—tempted to prune a fellow sinner harshly, tempted to think: "I would never fall into that temptation (so I must be better than the one I'm correcting)." There's a right way to restore your sister or brother in the faith. You who live by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16), you who are led by the Spirit (5:18), you who keep in step with the Spirit (5:25): the Holy Spirit

has made you spiritual through God's Word. When you read from your Bible more days than not, you may find it difficult to keep yourself from reaching out to restore others. At first you just a build a bridge by actually caring about them. Listening to them may open their heart to listen to you. You are gentle. When you speak the law, God's bad news, you let it condemn you first. Then you roll out God's good news. You figured out that you can use the Creed as your outline: "God created me; he preserves me richly and daily and blesses me with a full life; he redeemed me through Jesus' holy precious blood; he adopted me into his family; the Holy Christian Church; and someday he will raise me from the dead."

When you keep in step with the Holy Spirit through Bible study, the Holy Spirit gives you greater forethought, tact, and love, all of which are needed to gently restore someone who is caught in a sin. Expect the person who is caught in a sin to resist being freed from it. But keep at it, lovingly and persistently. People caught in any sin are in great danger of losing heaven if they remain not sorry. They may think they are still God's garden, but in reality 'not being sorry' has turned them into a haven for weeds. 'Not being sorry for a sin' is like telling God, "Don't you take me to heaven!"

Since this can happen to any of us, Paul writes: <sup>3</sup>*If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.* Don't wait for someone spiritual to come

and restore you gently. Instead, take a step back from yourself and see if you are doing what the Lord wants. Paul writes, <sup>4</sup>*Each one should test his own actions.* This doesn't mean compare yourself to others. Comparing produces two losers: the one who is worse, and the one who is conceited about being better. <sup>4</sup>*Each one should test his own actions* for wrongdoing. This doesn't mean compare yourself to your own standard of right and wrong. Our sinful flesh constantly tries to re-write the 10 Commandments to fit our current behavior. Our flesh does not like to hear that wrong is wrong because God has standards. So <sup>4</sup>*each one should also test his own actions* for any failure to do right. Are you using the abilities God has given you? Are you doing what you can to advance God's kingdom through your church? If not, it's time to repent, be washed clean in Jesus, and become part of the solution by taking on a responsibility that is appropriate to your schedule and talents.

As soon as you are doing what God wants, *then [you] can take pride in [your]self, without comparing [your]self to somebody else, <sup>5</sup>for each one should carry his own load.* In other words, there is a holy kind of pride, like when you get a sense of satisfaction from a job well done. This good pride turns to God and says, "Thank you, Lord. You turned me into your garden. You produced an abundant harvest of fruit in my life. To you alone be the glory!"