

“You Reap What You Sow”

Is Not About Karma

“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.” Galatians 6:8 (NASB)

Introduction

"You reap what you sow" is often cited as a statement of karma. Paul wrote two verses. The popular phrase quotes only one of them, and the second names what the first cannot. In Galatians 6, the Greek beneath the most famous proverb in Christianity opens into a second verse almost nobody quotes. Paul names two soils. He names them as ongoing destinations, not as a single ledger handed down from outside. The popular karma reading erases the second sentence and treats "what you sow, so shall you reap" as a universal cause-and-effect, leaving the verse pointing forward to a future verdict rather than sideways to what is already growing inside the listener. The original construction is a present diagnosis, not a moral law. After reading this article, "you reap what you sow" no longer sounds like a transaction across time, but rather a description of the field you have already been cultivating this week.

Summary

Paul does not use σπείρω (speirō), the standard verb for sowing seed, in the past tense. He uses σπείρων (speirōn), the present active participle. This form denotes someone who is currently and continuously sowing—not a person who scattered seed once and walked away to wait for the harvest. He then attaches εἰς (eis), a small directional preposition meaning "into" or "toward" a destination. The phrase “sows to his own flesh” is σπείρων εἰς τὴν σάρκα (speirōn eis tēn sarka), meaning the one continuously sowing into the field of flesh. Paul repeats the construction with πνεῦμα (pneuma), the Greek word for spirit and breath, in the same verse. Notice that there are two named fields, both active and receiving deposits simultaneously. “Karma” is a past act with future consequences, that is, a transaction across time.

Paul’s statement reflects a present orientation in which the deposit and the field-forming are the same event viewed from two angles. The harvest words follow the same logic. φθορά (phthora, translated as reap) does not mean punishment—it means “decay” or “rot,” the organic ruin into which a flesh-sown field naturally grows. Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 15:42 to refer to the body’s physical decay. The flesh vs. spirit binary in Galatians [5:16](#) is the diagnostic frame on which Paul builds the rest of the letter. Hosea 8:7 used the same structure eight centuries earlier, in which ruach (the Hebrew word for wind, breath, and Spirit) was sown as an

empty religious form and reaped as a whirlwind. The harvest is not coming. The harvest is the field you have already been depositing into, in every conversation and in every direction your attention has reached this week, both fields responding at the same time.

An Examination of the Text

There is a phrase that passes between people more than any other verse in the Bible. Most who quote it have never opened the book it came from. It surfaces at someone's downfall, someone's reckoning—the Bible's version of karma: “You reap what you sow.” But we need to realize that Paul did not write it with that meaning. The phrase circulates as a universal cause-and-effect, a moral law that operates without anyone reading any particular Bible. The universe keeps the books, and the harvest comes back around. This quote appears in songs, films, and on bumper stickers, usually without a scripture reference. People who would not call themselves religious quote it without flinching because it does not need a Bible to support the concept.

That is the version that traveled. Paul wrote two verses, but the popular phrase quotes only the first. The second names two fields, both of which are growing in the reader's mind right now. The question you should ask is “Which one am I feeding?” The phrase passed among people for centuries was never a freestanding moral law. It was the opening clause of a longer statement about something already happening—a present condition, not a future verdict.

Tyndale rendered the verse this way. King James kept it, so every modern translation carries this same false phrasing forward. Unfortunately, the phrase is sturdy enough to survive being torn from its verse. But the verse it came from has a second half, and it does something the first half cannot do on its own: It names where the sowing lands, and where it lands changes what the whole sentence is doing. The question is not whether the phrase is true. Paul wrote both verses on purpose, and the second one names two soils that are growing in the listener at this exact moment. So, once the second verse sits back beside the first, what is Paul actually saying about what is happening right now?

The first half of Galatians 6:7–8 is what everyone knows, “Be not deceived, God is not mocked. For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” That is the verse on the Christian fridge magnet, the one pastors quote when they want a moral law without too much theology around it. That is the verse that escaped the Bible and became a saying. However, verse eight is the elaborating clause, so it must not be ignored.

Paul wrote a sentence that turns on its own second half. The King James gives it like this, “For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption. But he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.” Verse seven says you reap what you sow. Verse eight expands this, saying there are two places to sow. The result is two destinations and two harvests. The Greek names them:

- The first destination is σάρξ (sarx). Sarx means flesh, but not flesh as in the body. Rather, it is flesh as in the orientation toward self, the animal pull, the appetite that does not look up.
- The second destination is πνεῦμα (pneuma), which means Spirit. Not spirit as in mood, but Spirit as the breath that moves through a person when they stop running on flesh alone.

Two named fields: Sarx and Pneuma. This is the flesh vs. spirit binary on which Paul builds the rest of the letter. Both can be sewn into, both can be deposited toward, and both will yield what they yield. Karma does not have two destinations; instead, it has one ledger, one law, and one outcome that varies in proportion to what was planted.

But notice that Paul built his sentence with a fork in it. However, the phrase only makes sense as karma if the fork is deleted. The popular phrase deletes this fork. Our investigation is not whether sowing has consequences, of course it does. It is “what kind of investigation is this, to what destination, and by what mechanism the English translators have been quietly diminishing it for four centuries?”

So, how does a sentence with two destinations become a karma proverb with one ledger? Not through a manuscript crime. There is no forger here; no fourth-century bishop crossed out verse eight; no medieval council voted it off. Every Bible edition in every century has kept verse eight intact. What happened is slower than a crime and harder to catch. The first verse migrated; it made sense without context. By the time it had crossed three or four centuries, most who quoted it had no idea there was a second verse at all.

The phrase has entered movies, song lyrics, and motivational speeches, and even made its way onto bumper stickers. It became secular wisdom that did not require any particular God to enforce it, because the universe would. People who had never read Paul said it to people who had never read Paul. They were quoting only verse seven, without verse eight—a sentence without its second half. The second half of the phrase named the soils. Without the soils, the principle reads as karma; with the soils, it reads as a diagnosis. This pattern is older than Paul. The prophet Hosea wrote it first, eight centuries before Galatians, in a different language and for a different audience.

Hosea 8:7, “For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.” The Hebrew word for wind is ruach, which means “wind” or “breath.” It is the same Hebrew word the Old Testament uses elsewhere for the Spirit of God. Hosea watched Israel sow ruach—sow the empty form of religious life—and told them what that field would yield: not a moral lesson, not a future punishment, but the amplified return of what they had been planting all along.

Paul knew Hosea. The pattern Paul applies to sarx and pneuma is Hosea's pattern, applied inward. Israel sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind. The individual sows into the flesh and reaps decay, or sows into the Spirit and reaps eternal life. This has the same shape, logic, and diagnostic structure. The sentence Paul wrote in Galatians is not a new principle; it is an old

principle, named with two new soils. The popular karma reading lacks both of those soils. Which is why it cannot diagnose anything; it can only warn.

The next question is: what did Paul do with the verb? It is not the soils alone that change the meaning. It is something beneath the verb itself. In Galatians 6:8, the verb Paul uses for sowing is σπείρω (speirō), the standard verb for scattering seed. It appears whenever someone is sowing—in the parable of the sower, in the parable of the wheat and tares, and in the metaphors for teaching, giving, and planting.

But in Galatians eight, Paul does not write speirō by itself. He writes σπείρων (speirōn), the participle form, which makes the verb describe an ongoing action rather than a single event. This is the hinge of the whole sentence, and it is the part that English cannot accurately convey. In English, when someone sows something, the action is complete. The seed is planted, then the wait for the harvest—this is past tense, indicating it was a single event. This is the logic of karma.

In Greek, the present active participle functions differently. Speirōn means the one who is currently, continuously, and repeatedly sowing. It is not a person who sowed once; it is a person whose life right now is sowing. “What you sow, so shall you reap.” In Greek, this is not a future consequence of a past act. It is a present orientation describing itself. The action is not in the past. The action is the present orientation: every choice of where you allow your attention to focus, every direction you lean, every place the heart reaches toward instead of where it should. That is the sowing; it is happening, and it does not stop.

Paul attaches a preposition to this present-tense verb. The preposition is εἰς (eis). Eis is one of the smallest words in the Greek New Testament and one of the most directional. It does not just mean “to”; it means “into,” “toward a destination,” and “the point reached or entered.” So, when Paul writes speirōn eis tēn sarka, he is not saying the man sowed something to his flesh just once. He is saying the one who is currently and continuously sowing into the field of flesh, right now, which also applies to this week and even this discussion.

Twice the construction speirōn eis tēn repeats,

- Speirōn eis tēn sarka, the one continuously sowing into the flesh.
- Speirōn eis to pneuma, the one continuously sowing into the Spirit.

Both verbs are present participles, both prepositions are directional, and both fields are active. But karma is a past act with a future consequence; it is a transaction across time. For Paul, this is not a transaction; it is a present orientation. The sowing and growing happen simultaneously. The deposit and the field formation are not separated by a time gap. They are the same thing seen from two different angles. The harvest is not coming; the harvest is the field you have been planting into all along.

Now compare what karma promises with what Paul actually wrote. Karma says the bad receipt comes from somewhere outside the act—sent, returned, or owed. Paul says nothing of the kind.

In his sentence, the harvest is what the field grows by its own nature, because of what it is. No outside hand delivers it. The field has already decayed within its own soil. That is the difference between a moral law and a diagnostic reading.

Look at verse eight one more time, “He that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption. But he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.” The English word “corruption” is doing quiet work. But the Greek word φθορά (phthora) does not mean punishment. It is not a verdict handed down from outside. Phthora means decay, organic ruin, and the natural deterioration of something whose nature is to deteriorate.

The same word appears in First Corinthians 15:42—Paul's chapter on the resurrection, where he writes that the body is sown in phthora and raised in incorruption. He is referring to physical decay, the body coming apart over time. Phthora is what decaying things naturally do.

Paul uses that word in Galatians to refer to the harvest of sarx. Not because God is sending decay as a punishment for sowing into the flesh, but because the flesh is the kind of field that grows decay. That is what flesh-sown seed produces; that is its nature. The other side is the same logic in reverse. The Spirit-sown seed produces life of the age, which Paul calls eternal life. It's not a reward bolted onto the field; it is the natural growth of what Spirit-soil produces.

This is what karma never gets to because it is a moral mechanism, whereas phthora is an organic one. Karma says that if someone does something bad, something bad will happen. But phthora says the field is doing what its nature does. The decay is not coming. The decay is the harvest of what the flesh grows. It is already happening to whatever has been planted there.

Now read the verse with everything restored: Be not deceived; God is not mocked. The one currently and continuously sowing into the field of flesh will reap from that field the organic decay it produces. The one currently and continuously sowing into the field of Spirit will reap from that field the life of the age it produces. There are two fields, two ongoing deposits, and two organic outcomes.

The whole flesh vs. spirit binary functions as a present diagnosis. There was no gap between sowing and growing, and no tally was kept by an outside force. The fields themselves are doing what fields do. The popular phrase has none of this. It has a single ledger and a future consequence. Paul wrote a present diagnostic with two destinations.

Speirōn does not say whether you ever sow; it says the one who is currently sowing. The one who is, right now, planting seed into one field or the other. Not as an accusation, but as a description. Nobody has been waiting around for the harvest of a past decision. Seeds have been falling in every conversation, every search, and every direction one's attention has been focused on this week. The seeds have been landing in two fields, and both fields have been responding. The growing has not been awaiting some future verdict. The growing has been happening the entire time.

The question is not what you will reap eventually. The question is, “What is already growing?” The translators were not villains. The English does not lie. It simply lost the present-tense edge somewhere along the transition from Greek to Latin to English, and the popular phrase lost its second verse along the same road. Unfortunately, the pastors who taught it as karma were teaching what they had been taught. The tradition handed down something real, even if it was only half-quoted. The phrase has been sturdy enough to survive its own truncation.

The original sentence points sideways, to the field already growing as the words are still being heard. That is what scripture says in the original language: not a moral threat, nor a future verdict kept on a ledger somewhere else. Conversely, it is a name for what daily attention does; a name for the two fields that are already growing within the reader. A way to look at the present moment and know where the seed just went. The harvest has been here the whole time; the hand has not stopped sowing; the field has not stopped growing.

The verse Paul wrote was always a description of what was already happening—not a warning about what would happen later. You do not need to start sowing because you have already been sowing. What scripture grants is the eyes to see which field has grown. Now look at your field.