

“BEAR ONE ANOTHER’S BURDENS”

As we continue our study of the ethical section of Galatians, the section in which Paul discusses the Christian life, we come tonight to a passage that focuses upon the corporate aspect of the life of faith. Paul told us in chapter 5 that the Christian life is a life in which the Spirit is at war with the flesh. We have been made alive by the Spirit, but now we need to keep in step with the Spirit. We have been set free from the law’s works-principle, but we are not to use our freedom to give an opportunity to the flesh. We must turn away from the works of the flesh and cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. This is what life in the Spirit looks like. But there is another aspect to life in the Spirit that we must never forget, and this is the fact that it is a life that is lived with others. The life to which we are called as followers of Jesus Christ is a life that is lived in community. And for this reason, the opposition that we experience between the flesh and the Spirit is not something that we are expected to handle on our own. The Lord surrounds us with fellow believers so that we may bear one another’s burdens. This is Paul’s focus in the text we are studying tonight.

Our passage begins with Paul referring to situations in which someone within the covenant community is “caught in any transgression.” This is a reality in the life of the church. Christians sin, and they are sometimes discovered in their sin. This reminds us of the threat that the flesh still poses to us, even as believers. Sin is not to be toyed with. If we are not careful, we can be overtaken by sin. This is why Paul warned us in the previous chapter not to give an opportunity to the flesh.

It should be pointed out that Paul is not talking about scandalous sins here, the kinds of sins that are public and that have the potential to bring the church and the gospel into disrepute. Paul discusses how to deal with sins of that nature in 1 Corinthians 5. In situations like that, formal discipline and church censures are necessary in order to vindicate the honor of Christ and deter others from committing the same kinds of offenses. But here in our passage, Paul's tone is very different. Here those who are caught in sin are not to be cast out or publicly shamed. Instead, they are to be restored.

Still, we are not to ignore these situations, even though it is always difficult to deal with people's sin. We are not to say that it is none of our business. It is our business. That is what Paul is saying here. There is a sense in which we are our brother's keeper. We are to hold one another accountable for our profession of faith in Christ. It would be irresponsible and unloving for us to fail to do so. The verb translated as "restore" in verse 1 is the same verb that is used in the Gospels to describe the disciples mending the tears in their fishing nets. And it is used in other contexts to describe setting a broken bone straight. This is what we need to do when fellow believers are ensnared by sin. We need to do what we can to mend that which has been broken. We need to confront our fallen brethren and help them repent and find forgiveness in Christ.

Paul tells us something about the character of the people who are to do this restorative work. It is work that is to be done by those "who are spiritual." By this Paul means those who are walking by the Spirit, those who are spiritually mature and spiritually-minded. And it is not very difficult to see why a person needs to be spiritually mature if he is

going to try to restore someone who has been caught in a transgression. An immature believer, a person who is not bearing the kind of fruit that Paul talked about back in chapter 5, such a person will not have success in restoring sinners. In fact, he will probably do more harm than good, both to himself and to the offender. Just as the setting of a broken bone needs to be done with extreme gentleness, so also does the restoring of a sinner.

Think about what this says about your pursuit of holiness. It tells you that your growth in sanctification is not only for your personal benefit. It is also for the benefit of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Spiritual maturity is a gift that is given to some for the benefit of the weaker and less mature members of the body. You should pursue spiritual maturity so that you can be a better help to other believers. As J. Gresham Machen observes:

“In order to love in the Christian sense, a man must be not only benevolent, but also strong and good; he must love his fellow-man enough to build up his own strength in order to use it for their benefit.” [*What Is Faith?*, 211]

One of the ways in which we are to love our fellow believers is by growing stronger in our faith for their benefit.

Paul tells us two things about the manner in which we are to go about seeking to restore our fallen brethren. First, we are to do it in a spirit of gentleness. We are not to

be harsh or unkind. We are not to be arrogant or think of ourselves as better than those we are confronting. Rather we are to cultivate the mindset that Jesus described in his Sermon on the Mount:

“[H]ow can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” [Matthew 7:4-5]

If you try to restore an offending believer with an arrogant mindset, you will not be able to help them. The log in your own eye will blind you and make you incapable of providing the help that is needed.

The second thing that Paul says about the manner in which we are to restore fallen believers is that we need to proceed with caution. He says, “Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” We need to realize that confronting others about their sin can easily become an occasion in which we are tempted to sin. And this is especially true for those who would consider themselves to be “spiritual” enough to go ahead and try to restore those who have been caught in a sin.

In verse 2, Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” We are to help our fellow Christians when life is oppressive and burdensome for them. We are not to grow frustrated with them for not measuring up to our standards. The term

“burden” typically refers to something that is too heavy for one person to reasonably carry on their own. It is a different term than the word translated as “load” in verse 5, as we will note again in a few moments. Paul is telling us that one of the ways that we show our love for our fellow believers is by helping them deal with the things in their lives that they find to be too difficult to handle on their own.

What does Paul mean by “the law of Christ”? Well, the context certainly suggests that it is the same law that Paul referred to back in chapter 5: the command to love your neighbor as yourself. It is the summary of everything that the law requires of us in terms of our relationships with others. The reason why Paul refers to this law as the law of Christ is due to the fact that it is not a law that we need to keep in order to obtain a right standing with God. Paul has made it very clear in this letter that the law can never be the means by which we find acceptance with God. Therefore, the law of Christ is the law that we keep as those who have already been justified by faith in Christ. It is not something that we do in order to seek our justification. Listen to how this is explained by Thomas Boston:

“By the Law of Christ, is meant the same law of the Ten Commandments, as a rule of life, in the hand of a Mediator, to believers already justified, and not any one command of the law only...but the whole Law.” [*The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 48]

The law of Christ is in substance the same thing as the law of Moses. But the thing that makes the law of Christ different from the law of Moses is that the law of Christ is given as a light and easy yoke to those who have been justified by faith in Christ. Boston continues to explain this by saying,

“What this distinction amounts to is, that thereby a difference is constituted betwixt the Ten Commandments as coming from an absolute God out of Christ into sinners, and the same Ten Commandments as coming from God in Christ unto them... All men by nature are under the law of works; but taking the benefit of the law of faith, by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, they are set free from the law of works, and brought under the law of Christ.” [*The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 49, 50]

We have been set free from the law as a covenant of works, but we have not been set free so that we can live selfish lives. We are to use our freedom to help our fellow saints with the burdens that they have to bear. And as we do so, we fulfill the law of Christ.

In the remainder of the passage, Paul addresses one of the temptations that we face in matter of bearing one another's burdens. He warns us in verse 3 that we should not allow ourselves to think that we are too important or too spiritual to help our brothers and sisters with the things that they struggle with. It is inconvenient to bear other people's burdens. Needy people demand our time. The kinds of things that less mature Christians

struggle with might try our patience. We might wonder why they can't just get over it, especially when it is something with which we do not struggle. But Paul tells us that it is very dangerous for us to think such thoughts. If we think we are something, we are really nothing. We are only deceiving ourselves.

Paul develops this further in verse 4 by cautioning us against the temptation to compare ourselves against our weaker brethren. When we see the sins and shortcomings of other believers, it is easy for us to start thinking that we are better than them. But Paul tells us that we need to keep our focus on our own conduct. Do not look for something to boast about by comparing yourself to others. Look at your own life. Evaluate it on its own merits, not by comparing it to the lives of others. Consider the work that God has brought about in your life. Paul even says that you can boast in such things, provided, of course, that you understand that they are the work of the Lord.

The statement in the last verse of our passage, "each will have to bear his own load," might seem to contradict what Paul said just a few verses before about bearing one another's burdens. But as I noted earlier, the Greek word translated as "load" in verse 5 is a different word than the word "burden" in verse 2. While "burden" refers to something that is overwhelming and oppressive, "load" is often used to describe a traveler's pack. (By the way, the term "load" is the same Greek word that Jesus uses when he says "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Even though it is translated as "burden," it is the same word that Paul uses here in verse 5. This tells us that Jesus is not talking about an oppressive burden that we cannot bear, but about the work to which the

Lord calls us in our life of discipleship.) Here in Galatians, the load that we each have to bear is the task that has been assigned to us, the situation in which the Lord has placed us in life. Bear the load that God has given you. Don't compare your load to the loads that have been given to others. Doing that is like comparing apples to oranges. You cannot evaluate yourself by comparing your situation to that of someone else. It is impossible for you to know how you would respond if you had experienced all of the things that that other person has experienced in their life. The life that you will have to give an account for is the life that has been granted to you to live. And you will not be able to account for it by comparing it to somebody else's life.

Here, then, is the message of these five verses: help your brothers and sisters with the burdensome things that they experience in life; but do not fall into the trap of thinking that you are somehow better than they are because you do not have the same struggles. Let us bear one another's burdens, but let us at the same time take responsibility for the load that God has given us.