

Bearing Burdens *Galatians 6:1-5*

There will be times when you and I notice sin in the life of other believers. Even when we're not looking for it, there will be times when we notice ways that others dishonor God by what they think, say, and do. It might be anger or immorality or gossip or greed. My question is this: What are we going to do with this knowledge of others' sins (especially when it's another believer that we know rather well)? Just to be clear, this isn't a hypothetical question; it's not a matter of *if* we notice others' sin but a matter of *when* we notice others' sin.

At ***one extreme***, you never say anything to this person. "After all," the logic goes, "until I'm perfect, I don't have any business getting involved. Plus the last thing I want to be is judgmental." So on one extreme you do nothing. On ***the other extreme*** you come down hard on that person's sin. "The problem with the church is that we've become 'soft on sin.' The solution is to call sin 'sin' and expect people to live differently."

I think you'd agree with me that neither of these extremes is very helpful. One approach avoids being judgmental and the other avoids being "soft on sin." But neither approach actually brings help to the person who's struggling with sin.

The solution is ***not*** to split the difference. The goal isn't to be 50% grace and 50% truth. The biblical pattern is to become like Jesus who was "full of grace and truth." Jesus was 100% grace and 100% truth (John 1:14). You see this clearly in the way He dealt with people's sin. For example, when the scribes and Pharisees brought adulterous woman to Him to see what He would do (John 8), Jesus was full of grace and full of truth. He told her, "I do not condemn you [that's grace] . . . From now on sin no more [that's truth]." If we're like Jesus, we'll be full of grace and truth toward each other all the time. But this pattern is especially important when sin surfaces in our lives.

Our passage today is Galatians 6:1-5. In this passage Paul describes a scenario in which someone within the church is trapped in some type of sin; the sin is such that the person needs to be brought back to a place of close fellowship with God. In his scenario Paul doesn't talk about what the sinning person needs to do; he talks about how others in the church need to respond. Paul describes the need to be full of grace and truth. What we're talking about today will apply to garden-variety sins that we commonly notice as well as to more extreme, life-dominating sins.

Bearing one another's burdens: "restoring" a person who is trapped in some sin. (vv. 1-2)

1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

Paul either means that the person “**got** caught” in some sin (like a thief that got caught trying to steal something) that the person “**is** caught” in some sin (in the sense of being entrapped in it). Either understanding is possible, but the later seems more probable. Paul seems to be addressing the scenario in which someone is “overtaken” by or entrapped in some sin.

Paul says that when it comes to light that someone is trapped in some trespass, “you who are spiritual” should respond. “Spiritual” means a lot of different things in our culture. Sometimes you’ll hear a sportscaster say, “He’s the ‘spiritual leader’ of the team.” He’s not saying that he leads Bible studies; he’s saying that he’s an inspirational person. When Paul calls someone “spiritual” he is talking about someone who is led by the Spirit, someone who keeps in step with the Spirit, someone who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. Only a “Spirit-led person” is helpful in this type of situation.

Paul says “restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” The goal is always restoration; the goal is never punishment. The term “restore” was a medical term that was used of setting a broken bone; you restore the bone to its original condition. The term was used in Mark 1:19 of James and John “mending” their fishing nets; they restored them to a condition of usefulness. And so the goal of addressing sin in someone else’s life is to bring that person back to a condition of wholeness and usefulness. The goal is not to shame the other person or to prove that the church is serious about sin. The goal is to bring the person back to a place of wholeness and usefulness.

Therefore, it makes perfect sense that Paul writes that those who are spiritual should restore such a one “***in a spirit of gentleness.***” We saw last week that gentleness is one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. Those who are “spiritual” allow the Holy Spirit to exhibit gentleness when dealing with others. Harshness will only harden the person entrapped in sin and will often drive him/her farther away from God and from other believers. But when we are gentle, we imitate Jesus who invited weary, burdened people to come to Him because He was “gentle and humble in heart.”

Paul also mentions, “*each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” Paul probably isn’t warning against being tempted to commit the same sin as the person being restored; he is probably warning against the sins of pride and comparison - sins that he warns against in verses 3 through 5. Helping restore another person should be a very humbling experience.

Paul hasn’t changed subjects when he writes verse 2:

2 Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

We can bear one another’s burdens in many different ways: talking with others, praying for others, serving others (mowing their grass, watching their kids, taking them food, etc.) But helping restore someone overtaken by some sin is a core way that we as believers “bear one another’s burdens.” In this metaphor, sin is a burden that the person doesn’t have the strength to carry alone. If you’ve ever been involved in helping

someone else deal with his/her sin, you know that it can be burdensome; your load would be lighter if you didn't get involved. But you care too much to keep your distance and just hope things work out okay.

Back in 5:14 Paul wrote that if you love your neighbor as yourself you've fulfilled the OT Law. Here he says that if you bear others' burdens you've fulfilled "the law of Christ" - which is elsewhere called "the law of love." When we love each other by being willing to help each other with sin, we're actually fulfilling the intent of Jesus' teachings.

Jim Kallam is now an E-Free pastor in Charlotte, NC. I've gotten to know Jim through a pastor's meeting I attend each year. In his book *Risking Church* he describes a time in his life when he needed others to restore him to a place of wholeness and usefulness. Jim he had a good job (a businessman who travelled a lot), a beautiful wife, and three wonderful children; people referred to them as an all-American family. But after eighteen years of marriage he began to pull away from his wife and his circle of close friends. Due to his own selfishness, he walked away from everything. In his words, "I betrayed my wife, my family, my friends, and most important, my God."

Jim writes that some individuals responded with a truth-only approach: they pointed out his sin (of which he was already painfully aware) and then refused to associate with him when he didn't quickly respond. Others didn't know what to say or do, so they stayed away (no contact at all). A third group of people entered into the situation with grace and truth.

Fortunately for me, some in my community displayed God's love and made a choice to stay involved. To each of them I remain eternally grateful. I was encouraged by their kind words and loving deeds. While I continued to remain attached to the world and its pleasures, this community prayed for me - for my restoration with God, my wife, and my family. They also came alongside and took care of my family - something I'm ashamed to admit I had refused to do. . .

Their support for my wife and family was incredible. Several of our closest friends stepped in and loved my family in tangible ways. They stayed close to them, providing support in every way, even financially when needed. They played with my children and took them places that I should have been taking them. Close friends provided the core Christian values and role modeling for them. Their encouragement helped my wife stay strong in the Lord and to seek Him even in the darkest of times. This community stepped in and became Christ to my family.

While I was clearly out of God's will and not very lovable, they continued to pray for me and love me. I didn't realize just how unrelenting my community was. Several men continued to reach out to me. They didn't condone my actions but in love pursued me, keeping the doors open for restoration and fellowship. (pp. 136-138)

After eighteen months, God began answering the prayers of this faithful community. Divorce proceedings were moving forward when God softened Jim's heart and moved

him to humble himself before God and his family. His wife extended forgiveness and they began the slow, difficult work of rebuilding their life together. Through this faithful community Jim was restored to a place of wholeness and usefulness to God.

Not all marriages are restored, and not everyone responds with humble repentance. But such things can happen when we're a community of people that's full of grace and truth.

Two hindrances to “bearing others’ burdens”: pride and comparison (vv. 3-5)

3 For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

It may be that Paul has in mind the person who is so prideful that s/he writes other people off and refuses to get involved. Or he may have in mind the person who gets involved but becomes prideful in the process. This was the sin of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable in Luke 18. The Pharisee told God, “I thank You that I'm not like other people . . . swindlers . . . adulterers. . . or that tax collector over there.”

In either case Paul describes this person as someone who “***thinks*** he is something” when in reality “he ***is*** nothing.” There's a huge gap between what the person thinks and what the person is. Paul says that that person deceives himself; he is living in a make-believe world. In Romans 12:3 Paul warned against this type of pride when he wrote: “. . . I say to everyone . . . not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think. . .” Even though some people are more obedient than others, we all stand on level ground before the cross.

In verses 4 and 5 Paul addresses the issue of comparison - which often leads pride.

4 But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have *reason for* boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. 5 For each one will bear his own load.

Instead of evaluating the work of others, Paul tells us to examine our own work. I realize that some people are overly introspective, but there is a good, healthy way of looking at our own “work” - the good deeds we do as an expression of our love for God. If I'm primarily concerned about how I'm doing, I'll avoid comparing myself to others and becoming preoccupied with how I'm doing in relation to them.

Verse 5 (“each one will bear his own load”) sounds like it contradicts verse 2 (“bear one another's burdens”). But as the translation suggests, Paul uses two different words. The term translated burdens in verse 2 refers to a heavy weight that is more than one person can carry. The term translated load in verse 5 was commonly used of a personal backpack. Normally when you're on a hike, you should carry your own backpack. And in the normal flow of life, each person needs to do his/her part in terms of doing God's will. If you're doing that, you'll be less likely to compare yourself to others and become prideful.

Application: Am I willing to allow others to bear my burdens (helping me with my sin)? I realize that some people are more private than others. Some people naturally have lots of Christian friends with whom they share deeply. Others find friendships to be very unnatural (and maybe even unnecessary). But it seems to me that everyone needs to be known by at least one or two other people.

If nobody knows you in normal times, if and when you are trapped in some sin, it will be very unnatural for you to let others help you. Here at Faith, one reason we have “life groups” is to provide the context whereby such relationships can develop naturally. When you meet with a group of people consistently over time, you’re naturally drawn into deeper friendships with some; those persons would naturally be the ones to help you deal with some sin.

We want to be the type of church where it’s safe to let others know you and help you. Wouldn’t it be strange if someone had a broken arm and didn’t feel safe going to the Emergency Room? Wouldn’t it be strange if people wrestling with sin didn’t feel safe getting help in the church? Using the imagery of verse 1, restoration is like setting a broken bone in order to bring the arm back to a place of wholeness and usefulness.

I like the way New Life Church in Queens, NY puts it; they say, “You can be yourself here because there’s nothing left to prove.” I hope you know that that’s true here at Faith as well. You have absolutely nothing to prove here. Jesus has done everything that needs to be done on the cross; He is our righteousness; all of our goodness comes from Him. When sin surfaces in your life you shouldn’t **have** to cover it up out of fear that people won’t accept you. You should be able to let at least one or two other people bear your burden and help you.

Consider giving this type of permission to someone you trust: “If you see anything in my life - big or small - that you think dishonors God, you have the green light to talk with me about it.”

Am I the type of person who can bear others’ burdens (helping others address their sin)? We’re obviously not talking about going out on sin patrol, trying to spot sin in others’ lives. We’re talking about being the type of person who has the capacity to help others if and when sin does surface. Such a person is full of grace and truth; such a person can see how God can bring healing and wholeness to someone whose life may be incredibly broken and chaotic; such a person exhibits the fruit of the Spirit, modeling the type of life God wants for that person.

I am very thankful to have friends who will bear my burdens - helping me deal with my sin. Sometimes they initiate the discussion about my sin and sometimes I do. I can remember being in a conversation with a friend who said something to the effect of, “I’m a little concerned by what I hear you saying. . .” He detected some harshness and anger toward another person in what I was saying and how I was saying it. Instead of merely empathizing with me (grace), he also challenged me to be kind and generous

(truth). We all need such people who love us enough to point out blind spots and to help us deal with attitudes that don't reflect the mind of Christ.

Therefore, we need to **be** the type of people who can fulfill this role in each others' lives. Are you willing to be that type of person in the lives of a few close, trusted friends? This isn't something we run out of the church office; helping each other deal with sin is something we naturally do in normal relationships. We become that type of person by keeping in step with the Spirit.