

“Bearing Each Other’s Burdens”

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Galatians 6:1–10 (ESV)

¹ *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. ⁵ For each will have to bear his own load.*

⁶ *Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ 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. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*¹

What’s more important, an individual person or the society a person lives in? Individual or community? That has been debated for quite some time. In ancient Greece, different schools of philosophy came to different conclusions. Aristotle (384-382 BC) thought that the state was more important than the individual.² Epicurus (341-270 BC), on the other hand, thought that independence was more important. Individual happiness was the greatest end.³ This may not seem like a very important debate today, but it is, because it helps us think about how to live. Is it more important to sacrifice individual happiness and goals for the sake of society? Or is it better to emphasize individual happiness even if it’s to the detriment of society?

I would imagine that for most human history, society has been more important. In many cultures throughout history, the family, the tribe, and the nation are more important than the individual. That’s still true in different places in the world. In certain cultures, as an individual you wouldn’t have a voice or a choice. In medieval Europe, you were born into a family and if you were a male, you did what your father did. In India, you were born into a caste, that that was

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² *Politics*. For example, he writes in Book 8: “[W]e ought not to think that any of the citizens belongs to himself, but that all belong to the state, for each is a part of the state, and it is natural for the superintendence of the several parts to have regard to the superintendence of the whole.”²

³ These observations are made by Peter Watson, *Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention from Fire to Freud* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 146.

that. In these types of cultures, you wouldn't say, "I have a dream." If you did, other people would say, "That's nice. Now shut up and get back to work."

In our own culture, we've gone very far in the other direction. We stress individualism at the cost of the good of family or nation. Instead of thinking about what is good for the family or the nation, people are encouraged to follow their dreams and desires.

If the society—whether it's the whole nation or an institution—is the only thing that matters, then individuals can be ignored, marginalized, or even sacrificed for the common good. Human rights can be thrown out the window. There's no need to treat every single individual with dignity and respect. But if individualism is all that matters, then the good of society is ignored. We see this today. Individuals value their own desires and happiness more than what's good for their family, or their church, or their country. There's no sense of restraint, and no sacrifice. Selfishness is rampant.

Christianity strikes a balance between these extremes. It teaches the importance of the individual: Each one of us is made in God's image. Each one of us is responsible for our actions. Each one of us will appear before God on the day of judgment. We must come to God individually to be reconciled to him, or we will be cast out of his presence forever. Christianity also teaches the importance of community: We all belong to families. We should obey civil authorities. We have an obligation to love God and our neighbors, whoever they may be. Christians, though they are declared righteous as individuals, belong to the church, which is the temple of God and the body of Christ. Therefore, we are part of something that is greater than ourselves.

In the passage that we're looking at this morning, Galatians 6:1-10, we see that Paul stresses the importance of the individual and the community. Christians must care for one another. We should be concerned about each other's welfare. We are our brothers' keepers. But we must realize that each one of us is individually responsible to God. Each one of us will reap what we sow.

I have to admit that it's hard to figure out the theme of this passage. Paul makes a lot of short statements that seem disconnected. It looks like he's cleaning out the junk drawer of his mind. But I think these statements all belong to the theme that though we are justified—declared innocent and righteous by God—as individuals, Christianity is lived out in community. Though we come to Christ as individuals, when we come to Christ, we are part of his body.

So let's begin. Let's first look at Galatians 6:1-2:

¹ Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Part of the good news of Christianity is that everyone who trusts in Jesus for their salvation has all their sins paid for. They were punished on the cross (Col. 2:13-14). But that doesn't mean that sin isn't a big deal still. If people who claim to be Christians keep on sinning, it could be that they never really were Christians in the first place. Real Christians do still sin, but their lives aren't marked by repeated sin. And when real Christians get caught up in sin, it keeps them from being as productive as they can be. Sin keeps Christians from keeping in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Disobeying God keeps people from experiencing fellowship with him.

Paul imagines a situation in which a Christian is transgressing—or breaking—God's moral law. If we see a brother or sister who is falling into sin, we should help them out. That means we should tell them about the sin, and we should urge them to repent and follow God's ways. Paul says this is the responsibility of those “who are spiritual.” He doesn't mean there's a special, elite class of “spiritual” Christians. He means, “If you have the Spirit, help your brother out.” We should help restore our brothers and sisters. Restore means to bring to wholeness, to fix what is broken. And we should do this gently. Gentleness is part of the fruit of the Spirit. This means we should be humble, knowing that we are sinners and that we could just as easily sin.

In fact, that's probably what Paul means when he says we should keep a watch on ourselves. We could be tempted by the sin that the other person was caught in. But Paul probably means that we should be careful not to be tempted by pride. We shouldn't think, “How can that person do such a thing? I would never do that!”

I think this shows that we need each other. We can help each other grow as Christians. We can see each other's blind spots. We see each other's flaws. Sometimes, we can't see where we are going wrong. I might not be aware that I'm speaking to people in an unloving way. I may not see how I have a proud attitude. But you can see it, and if you see it, you can humbly tell me about it so I can make sure I don't keep acting that way. And if you're humble, aware that you are a sinner and susceptible to the same kinds of things that I am, I will be more likely to listen to you. If you were to come to me with a condescending attitude, I would probably tune you out.

Paul says we should bear each other's burdens. Earlier, in chapter 5, verses 13 and 14, he said that we should serve one another and love our neighbors as ourselves. We should try to help each other when we have problems. But I think he means more specifically that we should help each other with our sin issues. Doug Moo says, "Bringing back into the fellowship of Christ a brother or sister who has strayed will often mean entering into their lives with empathy and a concern to take on ourselves whatever of their own sorrows and difficulties that we can."⁴

When we do this, we are fulfilling the law of Christ. What does this mean? As Christians, we are members of the new covenant. We are not bound by the old covenant law, the one given to Israel at Mount Sinai. But we are obligated to do the law of Christ. In Galatians 5:14, Paul writes, "the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" The law of Christ is love. Now, in the New Testament, we do find many commandments. But often these commandments are broad principles. They are certainly not limited to Jesus' words in the Gospels. When Paul gives commands, it is Jesus teaching us through Paul. Paul was commissioned by Jesus to be his apostle, his "sent one." The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sent, guided Paul to write what he did. So the law of Christ is the body of commandments and principles we find in the New Testament, and they are summed up by one word: love.

The law of Christ probably refers to the way that Jesus loves us. Jesus loves us with a love that is sacrificial. He gave himself for our sins when he died on the cross. He was the one who truly carried our burdens. And Jesus loves us with a holy love. He wants to make us righteous, to clean us up from our sin. That's why he died for us. That's why he taught his disciples and corrected them when they were wrong. We should love each other in that way. No, I can't die for your sins, and you can't die for mine. But we can give of ourselves when we help each other struggle with temptations and sins. We can enter into each other's worlds and be compassionate. We can gently warn each other when we're going astray. Jesus gave his life for us. The least that we could do is give our time, energy, and love to one another.

Pointing out each other's sin actually is a loving thing to do. We must do it humbly, knowing we all struggle with sin. But real love is trying to give each other what is best. Sin is not what is best for us. If we love each other, we will help each other with our sin.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 376.

Though we're supposed to help each other fight against sin, Paul wants us not to get proud about our own standing. We should never think that we're "holier than thou." That's what he means in verses 3-5:

³For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. ⁵For each will have to bear his own load.

We shouldn't think we're something when we're not. If we know the message of Christianity, we'll remember that we are sinners who deserve condemnation. We will be aware that it is only by God's grace that we are rescued from our sin. Therefore, we can't look down on others, and we can't get all puffed up with pride. Paul doesn't want us to be deceived about who we are. We're sinners saved by God's generosity and love, not by our good works.

We should also test our own work. We should examine ourselves. We should care about the sins of others, but we shouldn't go around examining everyone else to see if they're sinning. We shouldn't spend all our time looking at others and being judgmental. We shouldn't compare ourselves to each other. As Paul says in chapter 5, verse 26, we shouldn't provoke one another or envy one another. Instead, we should take a hard look at ourselves. We should be more concerned with comparing ourselves with ourselves. What do I mean? Only we can truly know if we're following Jesus as well as we should be. We shouldn't measure ourselves against each other. Instead, we should measure ourselves against God's Word and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We should have a sense of whether or not we're becoming more like Jesus or less like him. And when we see ourselves becoming more like Jesus—when we see the fruit of the Spirit growing in us—we should be content. But we can't even take credit for that. We must remember that it is God who is doing that work in us.

When Paul says, "then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor," he is probably referring the future judgment. On that day, each Christian will be responsible for what he or she has done. We can't take responsibility for what someone else has done. We also can't blame others. And that's what he means in verse 5: "For each will have to bear his own load." Paul means that during this life, we must help each other with our temptations and struggles. But at the end of life, we will stand before God alone, each one of us. I can't stand before God and point out other people's sins, or blame others. I can't stand before

God and take credit for what others have done. I can't say, "Well, my brother did a lot of good things," or, "My parents had great faith," or, "My children are following you, Jesus."

How does carrying one's own load relate to bearing each other's burdens? According to Doug Moo, "When Paul urges the Galatians to 'bear one another's burdens,' he intends for them to enter empathetically into the problems and cares of fellow believers. When he now warns that 'each will bear their own burden,' he reminds them that it is the total conduct of their own lives alone that will be evaluated by God on the day of judgment."⁵ Whatever good works we do in this life don't save us, but they are evidence that we're saved. Christians should produce good fruit. And we'll be judged by our own fruit, not the fruit of others.

Let's continue by looking at verse 6: "Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches." This verse seems to come out of nowhere. Paul says that people who are taught the gospel, or the Word of God, should share good things with the one who teaches. He means that Christians should financially support those who teach them, such as pastors. This is something Paul writes about elsewhere. In 1 Timothy 5:17-18, he writes,

¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

Elders, or pastors (the titles refer to the same office) should be paid. Why does Paul write this here? On a very basic level, Paul wanted the Galatians to love each other and take care of each other. Certainly, taking care of people who devote themselves to full-time ministry is one way of showing love. But there's more to it than that, I think. I think this verse is connected to verse 1: Pastors help their congregations become aware of possible sin issues. Pastors look out after the souls of the people in their congregations (Heb. 13:17). Pastors help keep people in their churches from becoming deceived. Teaching and learning is a vital part of Christianity. In verse 6, Paul uses two forms of a Greek verb, *κατηχέω*. It's where we get the word "catechism" from. We need to know what is true, or else we will become deceived.

And that's what Paul talks about next. Let's look at verses 7-10:

⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption,

⁵ Ibid., 381.

but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

God will not be mocked. There will be a day of judgment, a day of reckoning. Everyone will be judged based on what they have sown. Those who have done bad things will reap bad fruit when they are judged. Proverbs 22:8 says,

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of his fury will fail.

Those who have done good works will be rewarded. The who does works of the flesh will reap “corruption.” We talked about the works of the flesh last week, which you can find in Galatians 5:19-21. The one who “sows to the Spirit,” who does works that are in step with the Spirit and reflect the fruit of the Spirit, will reap eternal life.

We find a parallel to this idea in Romans 6:20-23:

²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.
²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If our lives are marked by the works of the flesh—by sinful things like we find in Galatians 5:19-21—then we’ll reap some bad fruit. It will be proof that we were never Christians in the first place. The end of all that is death—eternal death. But if we are truly Christians—if we have the Holy Spirit and if we’re following Christ—we’ll do things that God wants us to do and we’ll reap eternal life.

This may seem like Paul is suddenly teaching that we are saved by our works. He’s really not. He’s saying we’re saved by God’s works. When God saves someone, he transforms that person. He gives that person the Holy Spirit. That person becomes a new creation. He or she is born again. They don’t continue to do everything they used to do. They start to produce good fruit. And when their lives are over, there should be evidence that they were transformed by God.

If we are to stick with the agricultural metaphor, God is the one who planted the seed, God was the one who watered it and gave it sunlight, God was the one who caused good fruit to

grow, and God is the one who will harvest that fruit. The fact that there's fruit shows that the tree or the bush was healthy. We expect an apple tree to produce apples. We expect a blueberry bush to produce blueberries. But a thorn bush won't produce watermelons.

Jesus said as much in Luke 6:43-45:

⁴³“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit,
⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from
thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ The good person out
of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil
treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

That's why we should be concerned when we see someone who claims to be a Christian yet whose life shows no fruit. That person may never have been a Christian at all. Anyone can say they're a Christian, but it's the fruit that shows whether or not someone is a new creation.

That's why we shouldn't grow weary in doing good. Someday, we'll reap eternal life if we continue to persevere in the faith. If we see the worth of our inheritance in Christ, we won't grow weary of doing good. If we see the worth of other people, we won't grow weary in loving them and helping them. If we see the value of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and if we consider how much Jesus loves us and how much he gave for us, then we will love each other in the church. When we have opportunities to help each other, we should.

If we really love each other, we'll help each other fight against sin. And if we really love other people, we'll tell them the gospel. We need to tell people there is a solution to all that results from our sin problem. There's a solution to being alienated from God. There's a solution to depression and despair and hopelessness. There's a solution to death. If we so the seeds of the gospel, then God will reap good fruit at the harvest at the end of this age (Rev. 14:14-16).

Individuals and community are both important. We come to Christ as individuals and one day we'll stand before him as individuals. But we belong to God and to each other. We're members of the same body. We have an obligation to love and serve each other. And we need each other's help to fight against our burden of sin.