

THE POWER OF FELLOWSHIP

Part 3 - The Holy Work of Burden Bearing

GALATIANS 6.1-5 (ESV)



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UNIQUE

My senior year in college I wrestled with hearing clearly God's call on my life—teaching high school math or vocational ministry. I started to take a few steps, and was moving toward seminary and away from interviews, resumes, etc. In the midst of that, one conversation stands out to me: telling my advisor

that I would not be looking for a teaching job. He had been a great encouragement to me. He was a committed Christian and faithful churchman, so I knew he would understand. As we spoke he said something that has stuck with me: “As you pursue this, keep in mind that your people don't need you to be a good Rotarian. They need you to be a man of God.”

There is a temptation for us as human beings to forget that this task of fellowship—sharing our lives together as we live side-by-side—is one that is uniquely Christian. Of course, we much of this principle outside of the church—“live together, die alone” has been a theme of the TV show *Lost*. But a theme of this sermon series which comes to light as we consider Galatians 6 is the power of Christian fellowship extends beyond our natural needs to be together. Bearing one another's burdens is a place where fellowship exceeds being friendly and cooperative.

The book of Galatians is a statement about this uniqueness of a community of people that call themselves Christians. The recipients of this letter are shaping their lives around something other Jesus Christ—‘another gospel’, a distortion.^{Gal 1.6-9} In relaying one of his own experiences, Paul charges them with hypocrisy for their claim to be Christians when their clinging to traditions display otherwise.^{Gal 2.11-14; 3.1-6; 4.8-11} This distortion of the Gospel results in division among people who are called to be unified,^{Gal 2.11-14; 3.27-29} and through the un-dealt-with sin which only heightens the damage done to one another.^{Gal 5.19-21} The only appropriate and helpful response is to guide these believers once again through the accomplishment of Christ, to help them refocus on the cross and the freedom which He secured and to which He calls.

GALATIANS 6.1-5

¹Brothers, 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. ²Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 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.

BURDEN BEARING

The way these verses read, the key principle of the passage shows up in verse two: “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” The remaining 4 verses point to, build upon, and illustrate this call. Our task is to seek to understand what this call means, and to consider how to respond.

The command “Bear open another's burdens” on one level is as simple as it sounds. Enough of us have moved and helped others move that we have strong shared memories as to what it means to bear burdens. This is how some of you first got to know my wife and me over 6 years ago. Moving is a great picture of us of bearing one another's burdens. We haul ‘stuff’ that is loaded with stories and history and meaning. Burden bearing is carrying the significant weight that others are trying to shoulder by themselves. The burdens we try to bear alone always run the risk of keeping us from seeing clearly God's work in this world through His Son and His Spirit. They can be sins, they can be tragedy, and they can even be the joys of life.

In Galatians, burdens can be anything that draws us away from our experience of the freedom of the Gospel.^{cf. Gal 5.1} The writer of the book of Hebrews writes: “. . . let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”^{Heb. 12.1-2} For our consideration this morning, I offer this definition: **burden bearing is the holy, human work of loving others by shouldering what is significant for the purpose of seeing Jesus and running the race that is marked out before us.** Let's break down the definition in order to see our response.

HOLY, HUMAN, LOVING

Holy: The starting place for understanding what is it to bear one another's burdens is to know that this is not first our work. Early in Jesus' ministry the writer Matthew connects Jesus' healing work with that of the prophesied servant of Israel: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”^{Is 53.4-6; cf. Mt 8.17} The message of the book of Galatians (and all of the Bible) is that each of us bears a burden of rebellion against God and the lingering effects of that rebellion that only He can remove.

We shoulder what is significant often by sharing tears of grief, by confessing sin to each other, and even by sitting in silence together pondering the unknown. But we must know that Jesus

has borne not only our sorrow, but the very sins we have committed and the wounds that have been laid upon us.

Human: This is at the same time a very human task. The metaphor of carrying a significant load implies a this-life reality for us. The burdens that you all have borne for on another and for others include unemployment, divorce, sickness, infertility, uncertainty. Looking around the room I see the those of you who have even faced the impact of sin with others and shouldered great weight. The cost is very human: time, money, emotion, stress, anxiety, and inconvenience. Yet you have not been crushed by such a weight because of the One who bore it first. And you know the silencing joy that leads you to say afterward: “I would never have planned it this way, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Loving Others: Paul says that in doing this, we “*fulfill the law of Christ.*” Early in Galatians 5 Paul declares that the only thing that has value is “*faith working through love.*”^{Gal 5.6} A few verses later, he follows the teaching of Jesus and in fact the Old Testament that the summary of God’s law is to “*love your neighbor as yourself.*”^{Gal 5.13-14; cf. Mt 22.34-40; Rom 13.8-10; Lev 19.18} Love here speaks of our disposition to those around us, to “the willingness that arises from another person’s need” {Schlatter}. The starting place for us to bear one another’s burdens is to strive to know one another, and to allow ourselves to be known, so that we can see the very real needs around us.

IF ANYONE IS CAUGHT

Given this foundation, we need to ask how do we do this? My goal is to weave our application into our understanding of the direction Paul offers. Part of the application that Paul offers us is verse 1: the burden here is sin. There is an intentional vagueness by the use of the word ‘caught’ here – it conveys both the sense of being found out by others when we sin, but it also reminds us that sin is something in which we can find ourselves caught—as in a net—and unable to get out of on our own. Both sides of what it is to be ‘caught’ assume there are other people involved. And this is a mercy to us. To bear one another’s burdens includes confronting and naming sin, and not doing so alone.

Summarizing the rest of verse 1, burden-bearing involves working toward restoration to God and others, with both gentleness and watchfulness. While the work of burden bearing is inherently human, the goal is not. We don’t bear burdens simply to reduce pain. We don’t bear burdens to manipulate through guilt or to punish. The goal isn’t even for the one in need of help to finally ‘get it.’ The pursuit of burden-bearing is restoration, it is healing and it is eternal hope. It is helping one another **see Jesus and run the race that is marked out before us.** But Paul helpfully adds both gentleness and watchfulness. John Calvin writes: “. . . great harm is often done by unreasonable and excessive severity, which goes under the noble name of zeal but frequently springs from pride and from dislike and contempt of the brethren.” At the same time, we are to be watchful as we move forward alongside others. The underlying premise in this is that we would know one another well enough to name and face sin together.

EACH ONE

The other major point of application that flows from these verses runs through verses 3-5, and it is that burden-bearing is work to which all Christians are called. For some of us, though,

‘fellowship’ is a necessary evil. It’s like the episode of the old sit-com *Leave it To Beaver* in which a junior high-aged Wally is talked into going to a dance with a girl by her explaining that she doesn’t really ‘want’ to go either, but that it would be more bearable if they went together. Wally compares to having to take out the trash at camp with another guy for the same reason. We’ll fellowship if we have to, and maybe it won’t be all that bad as long as others have to do this too.

This tendency has some merit—we are people in need surrounded by people in need. Therefore, we bear one another’s burdens knowing that to refuse on the grounds that giving the time, money, and energy to someone in need because somehow they are not worthy of help is self-deception.^{Gal 6.3} Further, burden-bearing is not work undertaken to help us feel better about ourselves, as if to (indirectly) say “this is a good reminder to me that I’m not as bad off as he is.”^{Gal 6.4} Verse 5 stands in no way as a contradiction to verse 2; it is instead the grounding of our shouldering of other’s burdens in the responsibility each of us has to live honestly before God. Some of us will be quick to offer help to others, while others will be quick to ask for and receive help. Someone who willingly does both is at best a rarity. But this is for all of us.

BURDEN BEARING

On the other hand, however, the work of burden-bearing goes far beyond the frame of necessary evil, beyond the thought that ‘at least we’re in this together.’ If this is holy, human work of loving others in which we work together to see Jesus more clearly, the impact for us shows up in that whether we help or are helped, we are engaging with the God of the universe. Look back at verse 1: Paul directs his instruction specifically to those who are “spiritual.” In context, this means Christians, those who “walk according to the Spirit of God.” Burden-bearing is spiritual work. It is not one we do because we are strong, but because we are weak. It is not something we undertake because of our wisdom, but because of our foolishness. And in it we have the opportunity not simply to enjoy the fruit of relationships that have been tested with hardship, but to enjoy the beauty of seeing God at work in us and through us. In this, we see Him more clearly.

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