

8-18-19 SERMON CCI Galatians 5: 25- 6: 5 Bearing Burdens

Anyone ever been in a church during a church argument or conflict? Church conflicts are devastating. People take sides against one another, relationships are damaged or even ruined. Angry words are spoken that can never be retrieved, ugly letters are written, name calling clouds the issues. It's **us vs them**. Imagine the reputation of the church in the video after that news story. Would you want to visit there? Sometimes a conflict divides the church so deeply that it splits in two. Isn't there a better way to be the church?

Today's scripture reading comes at the end of a letter by Apostle Paul to the churches in Galatia, an area we call Turkey today. It follows Paul's description of what a person who walks by the Spirit looks like in Galatians 5: 22-23: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Some people think that Spirit-filled Christians do extra-ordinary things like heal, speak in tongues, or miracles. But Paul's description of walking by the Spirit is a list of pretty ordinary character qualities. Paul calls all of us to walk by the Spirit- to live lives that are characterized by these "fruit." The fruit of the Spirit never leave scratch marks on someone else's neck or black eyes, or embarrassing news reports.

But listen to how Paul describes the opposite: "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." It only takes one family who thinks their ideas are more-deserving than others and bulldoze their way over people, or one person who tends to provoke arguments by the way they talk, or gets their feelings hurt all the time, or one jealous couple to tear a church apart.

Thankfully, Paul gives us some specific ways to guard against this by walking by the Spirit.

First, Paul addressed something most church struggle to deal with. *If someone is caught in a sin, gently help them up.* The word translated "caught" was used to describe a bird or an animal whose leg is caught in a trap. The bone is usually broken and the bird or animal is trapped. Here it describes a believer who has been trapped and overcome by a temptation. An example is Peter who, after bragging that he would never desert Jesus, denied him three times to save his own skin. Trapped. We've all been there. Trapped by anger to say things way beyond what we actually think, trapped by fear to deny something we believe, trapped by the temptation to just check out a raunchy movie, trapped by the temptation of drinking or drugs to ease our minds, trapped by a temptation we give in to in the heat of the moment.

There are several ways we often respond when we see a fellow Christian caught in a sin trap. We can look the other way, "It's none of my business," or "Let's just keep the peace." Or we can look closely and not help, and gossip and make sure others know all about it - "Did you hear what so-and-so did or said? Isn't that terrible? How can they call themselves a Christian?" Sometimes even prayer requests can be filled with juicy details of someone's weakness that actually is righteous gossip. Or we can become angry or disgusted by their behavior and decide to do something about it, confront the person, let them know in no uncertain terms how their behavior is unbecoming to a Christian. None of these responses are the Spirit-led response.

“If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.”

Trapped people need the help of people who are guided by the Spirit. People who are into loving restoration, not righteous condemnation or into sweeping a problem under the rug to keep peace. The word “restore” was used to describe setting a broken bone, or repairing a fishing net to its original condition. Paul says that restoration is gentle work. Gentleness has the idea of doing something quickly, quietly, and with kindness. When our daughter Laura was about 12 years old, she fell while roller skating and broke her wrist. The injury separated her epiphysis, the part of the bone that grows new bone as children grow. She didn’t need surgery, but the ER doctor had her sit with her elbow on the table, I held the upper part of her arm while the doctor gently but quickly snapped her wrist to slip the epiphysis back into place. Laura screamed when he did it, but only for a second, because then the bone was reset and the pain was gone. I remember that experience whenever I read Paul’s words about restoring a person gently. Restoring her bone didn’t need a hammer; it needed gentle quick action. The same is true for those trapped in a sin. Restore them with the spiritual fruit of gentleness.

It is important to understand, that Paul was writing here about how to address a fellow believer who is trapped in a sin, not a person who is choosing to flagrantly sin. Paul addressed flagrant sin in I Corinthians 5 where a man in the Corinth church was having a sexual affair with his father’s wife and everyone knew about it – even outside the church. The people outside the church would never have tolerated such a thing, but the church was doing nothing but gossiping. Paul did **not** tell the Corinth church to gently restore the man; he told them to excommunicate the man to force him to his senses- because they cared about his soul. He wasn’t suddenly trapped by a sexual temptation; he was wallowing in it. Making plans for their next rendezvous together. Flagrant sin calls for a different response from the church.

Unfortunately, the church today continues to struggle to respond to flagrant sin. Think of the church in the video. How long had the two women been scrapping and fighting, disrupting choir practice and worship and potlucks with their spiteful words while others stood by not knowing what to do? Sweeping things under the rug to keep peace or to avoid “hurting the church.” Ignoring that the church was already hurt. When the sins are sexual, it’s even harder. What if the offender is a popular pastor? What if he/she denies any wrongdoing and claims the so-called victims are all lying? A well known pastor of a megachurch in the Chicago area who I greatly appreciated was recently accused by multiple women of sexual misbehavior and the church board only took their complaints seriously after it was leaked to the Chicago paper and could no longer be swept under the rug. Only then did the church board act, the pastor resigned, and healing could begin for the victims and the rest of the hurting church.

Dealing with sin is tough stuff that requires prayerful action by humble people who walk by the Spirit- not by fear, disgust, or the desire to protect the church from hurt. The church is already hurt. Paul reminds us that we can all succumb to the trap of sin; none of us is immune to temptation. When we come alongside someone caught in sin, it must be as a fellow Christian who is aware that we are able to fall ourselves. Fall into the same sin or another one. “There, but by the grace of God, go I,” is still as true as ever. The person most in danger of falling is the one who denies they can be tempted. Dealing with sin takes spiritual people.

Paul then points us to something we can all do: carry one another's burdens. The word translated burden refers to an overwhelming load, an impossibly huge boulder weighing you down. The boulder can be any number of things: sickness, financial difficulty, a failed marriage, family problems, a poor choice, the death of a loved one. They don't need judgment, they need help. Instead of judging people, or merely telling them what to do better, or saying, "I'll pray for you," Paul says we are to **help carry** their burden. Sometimes it will mean sharing resources- time, money, food. Other times what people need is someone to listen to their struggle and care. Nothing may change as we listen, but the shared load is lighter.

And that brings us to the crucial principle. *"In this way you will fulfill the law of Christ"* (Galatians 6:2b). What is the "law of Christ?" It probably refers to Jesus' call to love God supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). Or to the new command Jesus gave his disciples at the last supper, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John 13: 33-35) Either way, Jesus' law is about loving others as Jesus loves us. Bearing one another's burdens is one important way to love.

Knowing how to help though can be a challenge. We used to ask, "What would Jesus do?" But Jesus didn't face all the modern problems of today. So how do we know what Jesus would do? You look at what Jesus did. In almost every instance, the answer is not, "He just kept on walking by." Almost every time, the answer is, "Jesus made a difference in the situation." He was present, he met people's needs by feeding and healing and teaching and touching, he risked rejection to stand up for people. He actively demonstrated the love and grace and mercy of God. Paul calls us to do the same. Love one another. Love enough to carry one another's burdens, love enough to restore one another, and love enough to confront flagrant sin, because real love is tough love.

Finally, the Christian life is not a competition so stop comparing yourselves. Comparing just leads to conceit (if we're better) or envy (if we're not). Everyone in this room is better than others at some things and worse at other things. The church doesn't need super stars; it needs servants. So let's stop comparing and use the gifts we're given. Carry the load we're given. The word translated load is not the boulder Paul talked about before. A load describes a soldier's backpack that was small and fairly light that anyone could carry. Carry your own load faithfully. Have we accepted responsibility at work, in the family, the community, or the church? Then carry the load faithfully, don't expect others to do what we said we would do. We all need to carry our own backpacks and also help carry the boulders of each other. It's how Jesus calls us to live each day, it's how we walk by the Spirit.