

We Don't Grow Alone

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. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load. – Galatians 6:1-5 ESV

The two extremes of legalism and license both tend to encourage lifestyles of self-centeredness and selfishness. Law-keeping becomes a competition, where we compare our “spirituality” with others. The measure of our worthiness becomes a somewhat subjective determination based on our success compared to that of others. A lifestyle of license is inherently self-absorbed, where the individual's wants and desires come first, and others become tools or pawns to get what you want. Legalism and license are both flesh-based and produce harmful and hateful outcomes.

Yet Paul wants his readers to know that a life based on the power of the indwelling Spirit of God is something different altogether. It produces fruit that is beneficial to all those around us. It is anything but self-centered and self-absorbed. An apple tree does not produce fruit for itself. It is for the benefit of others. And in the same way, the Christian's life is to be lived selflessly, focused on meeting the needs of those around them, including other believers as well as the lost. And Paul provides a practical, everyday life example. He describes a situation where a fellow believer is overcome by some sin. The word Paul used to describe this individual's situation refers to someone being overtaken or surprised by sin. It would be like a slower runner suddenly being overtaken or caught by a much faster runner. The idea is of a believer's sin suddenly catching up with him. He didn't see it coming. Rather than being premeditated and planned, it caught him completely by surprise. This is not describing someone dealing with an ongoing, unrepentant sin issue, but an individual who suddenly and unexpectedly sins. In a case like that, we are to “restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” There is a humility and tenderness that must accompany our confrontation. Pride has no place in a situation like this. Exposing the other believer's failure should produce no joy or create any sense of self-satisfaction in us. We are not the holier Christian confronting the less-spiritual brother in Christ. When Paul says, “you who are spiritual,” he is simply referring to someone who has the Spirit living within them. The Greek word he uses is πνευματικός (*pneumatikos*) and it refers to “one who is filled with and governed by the Spirit of God” (“G4152 – *pneumatikos* – Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible).

Those who are living according to the Holy Spirit within them will naturally care about those around them. They will have a supernatural sensitivity to the spiritual condition of their fellow believers and a Spirit-led desire to get involved in their lives. If we see a fellow believer suddenly caught up in sin, we are to lovingly lead them back on to the right path. The confrontation is to be done lovingly and constructively. The goal is repentance and restoration.

But Paul warns us to be cautious and careful, “lest you too be tempted.” This is a reminder to not forget our own sin natures and susceptibility to falling into the same trap. It was John Bradford who said, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” That needs to be our approach when coming alongside a struggling brother or sister in Christ.

Paul tells us that if we share one another’s burdens, we are fulfilling the law of Christ. Paul most likely is referring to the words of Jesus when He described the greatest commandment as: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40 ESV). Christianity is not about a lengthy list of dos and don’ts. It is also not about a lifestyle of self-absorbed freedom to do what you want. It is about loving God and loving others. It is about living in the grace of God and extending that same grace to all those around you. We are fools if we think we are somehow better than someone else. Our right standing before God is due to His Son’s work on our behalf, not our own self-effort. We have no right to think ourselves better than another human being. If we do, we are self-deceived. Christianity is not about comparison or competition. It is not about how spiritual I am compared with another believer. I am not to compare my sin with anyone else. As a believer, I am called to examine my own life, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and allow Him to show me my sin. If I do so, I will find I have no reason to boast or be prideful. But if I look for others to compare myself with, I can always find someone who appears to be a worse sinner than I am, and that ultimately leads to pride. Each of us is responsible for our own sin. It is not a competition. But we have a God-given responsibility to come alongside one another and encourage godliness. Christianity is a community activity. It is a team sport. We don’t grow alone. Which is why Paul told the believers in Thessalonica, “So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11 NLT).

The Season for Fruit

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

For the apostle Paul, the body of Christ was to operate in a spirit of mutual love and reciprocity. There was no place for selfishness or a what's-in-it-for-me attitude. The model Christ had left us was one of selfless sacrifice and love for others. Paul has already talked about coming alongside a fellow believer who has been caught up in sin. He has encouraged they pursue restoration, rather than practice exclusion. No one was to see themselves as somehow better than anyone else. The Christian life was to be marked by a sense of interdependence and a desire to put the needs of others ahead of your own.

God has equipped the body of Christ to care for itself. In his letter to the Ephesian believers, Paul wrote, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13 ESV). There are roles and responsibilities within the church that are designed to provide for the well-being of those who make up that local fellowship. Paul says that those who received the word of God should be willing to share what they have with those have taught them. In that day and age, those who served as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, often did so without any form of financial remuneration. Some even became itinerant teachers, traveling from city to city, in order to minister the word of God to the local congregations located in those places. Paul, as one such individual, encouraged believers to provide for the needs of these people.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul elaborated on the common expectation among believers to care for those who taught them:

Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? – 1 Corinthians 9:4-7 ESV

Paul went on to ask them the question, “If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” (1 Corinthians 9:11 ESV). Even though Paul claimed to have never demanded this God-given right to provision from the churches he ministered to,

he said, “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14 ESV).

For Paul, this all seemed to boil down to unique, God-ordained nature of the body of Christ. There was to be no lack, no need unmet. God would provide teachers to proclaim the Word and bless the listeners so they could meet the needs of the teachers. But Paul also knew there was always the temptation to sow to the flesh, or to give in to the natural inclinations of our sin natures. It would have been easy for some to see the prophets, evangelists, and teachers as lazy, because they “refused” to work. Others could have taken the approach of what is mine, is mine. In some of these communities, people had a hard enough time just making ends meet. The thought of having to give away your money or food to someone else went against the grain. But Paul encouraged them to “not grow weary of doing good” (Galatians 6:9 ESV). Man’s sin nature will always encourage selfishness and self-centeredness. Isolation and independence are normal human inclinations. But Paul knew that the success of the church was dependent upon its members sowing to the Spirit. In other words, they were to invest their time, energy, and talents into those things the Spirit was directing them to do. If they did, they would reap the kind of fruit only the Spirit can produce: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Living according to the Spirit is unnatural. It is a supernatural, divine enablement that is in direct conflict with our old natures. There is a part of us that will not want to obey what the Spirit tells us to do. We won’t want to give. We won’t want to share with others. Our natural inclination is not to share or to the needs of others ahead of our own. But Paul tells us, “...as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10 ESV). As long as we live on this planet, we will have opportunities to do good. It is in the here and now that our generosity, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control are needed. There will be no need for patience in heaven. There will be no one who has unmet needs. There will be no sin, so it will be unnecessary for us to respond to hatred with love, harsh words with words of kindness, anger with gentleness, or temptation with self-control. But as long as the Lord delays His return and we remain in this life, we will have untold opportunities to live out our faith and display the fruit of the Spirit for the benefit of all those around us. Now is the season for fruit. Now is the time to live in the power of the Spirit. Today is the day to make a difference in the lives of others as we live in dependence upon God and in mutual reliance upon one another.

An Unpopular, Yet Unwavering Message

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen. – Galatians 6:11-18 ESV

The fear of man. It has always been a real-life, everyday problem for believers and non-believers alike. Everyone fears being rejected, disliked, misunderstood or mistreated for their views. Our deep-seated desire for attention and affection sometimes drives us to do and say things that go against what we believe. We don't want to be the odd man out. Peer pressure is a powerful force in every person's life, and Paul knew that. He was fully aware that following Christ put a target on the back of every believer. Bearing the cross of Christ was a costly endeavor that often brings His followers rejection and ridicule. Paul had experienced this first-hand. But as he closed out his letter to the Galatian believers, he pointed out that the party of the circumcision, those individuals who were demanding that all Gentile converts undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision in order to validate their salvation, were doing so out of fear of man. These Judaizers, Jews who confessed to be followers of Christ, were preaching their message out of fear of rejection by their fellow Jews. They also feared being persecuted and ridiculed for putting all their hope and faith in the cross of Christ alone. To do so would require them to reject their dependence upon the law and their reliance upon their own self-effort to justify themselves before God.

But Paul pointed out the absurdity of their logic. "Those who are trying to force you to be circumcised want to look good to others. They don't want to be persecuted for teaching that the cross of Christ alone can save. And even those who advocate circumcision don't keep the whole law themselves. They only want you to be circumcised so they can boast about it and claim you as their disciples." (Galatians 6:12-13 NLT). They cared more about what others thought of them than they did what God would think about their actions. This was man-pleasing at its ugliest. Paul knew that their message had a deadly side-effect to it that would lead people away from the saving knowledge of faith in Christ alone. For Paul, the message of salvation was found in Christ alone by faith alone. It had nothing to do with works or human effort. It could not be earned. It was a grace gift provided by God Almighty Himself. Which is why Paul appended to the end of his letter, in his own weak and scrawling hand, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14 ESV). Paul wasn't going to boast about his Hebrew heritage; his resume as a Pharisee; his education under Gamaliel, the great Hebrew rabbi; or even his missionary exploits. At one point he confessed,

“But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me – and not without results” (1 Corinthians 15:10 NLT). Paul had been transformed by the saving work of Jesus Christ. His efforts on behalf of the gospel were the result of the Spirit within him, not himself.

The primary issue threatening the Galatians believers was that of circumcision. But Paul said, “It doesn’t matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation by faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:15 NLT). This rule or principle, regarding the efficacy of the gospel, was one that would bring peace and mercy to all who lived by it. Giving in to the false message of the Judaizers would result in guilt, shame, and a never-ending attempt to win favor with God through self-effort. Paul found that choice appalling. He also wanted his readers to know that he was anything but a man-pleaser. He had suffered greatly in his effort to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world. He had the physical and emotional scars to prove it. He closed his letter with the words, “I bear on my body the scars that show I belong to Jesus” (Galatians 6:17 NLT).

The message of faith in Christ is a difficult one for people to understand and even harder to accept. It sounds absurd. The story of God taking on human flesh, dying on a cross and being raised from the dead sound crazy to most who hear it. Yet for Paul, it was the truth because he had seen it transform his life and the lives of thousands of others. The gospel was not just a message, but a powerful force for change in the world in which he lived. He believed in it wholeheartedly and preached it unapologetically. As he told the believers in Rome, living under the persecution of the Roman government, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16 ESV). Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because he believed in the power of the gospel. He was willing to suffer ridicule and rejection at the hands of men because he had placed his hope and trust in the promises of God. And he wanted every believer in Christ to know the joy of living with their faith placed firmly in the saving work of Jesus Christ and the future redemption promised to them by God. Their hope was never to waver from the simple message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.