

The Burden of Grace

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[0 : 01] We're on page 180 in the New Testament section of your Pew Bible on Galatians chapter 5 verse 26.

And it would be good for you to have that open this morning. We're on our final descent in this series on Galatians.

And Paul the Apostle gives us in these few verses a very practical view of what walking by the Spirit means. And I want to say a couple of things by way of introduction.

First of all, a reminder of what we have learned in the last part of chapter 5. That the Christian life is a life lived in and by the Holy Spirit.

We are to be led by and actively follow the Spirit rather than follow the sinful nature or the flesh. Two weeks ago, David Short identified the Spirit-led life as one of transformation, which means a new life within us, versus reformation, which is the slavish keeping of external codes and laws.

[1 : 20] Living by the Spirit means law is not needed as a deterrent or a spur. As we actively allow the Spirit control over us, our very desires get reshaped.

So that what we desire is more and more the fruits of the Spirit and less and less the desires of the flesh. It's like training for the sun run.

You're energized by the goal, the promise of finishing in under an hour, so you can make it to the 11 o'clock service. And in your training, you come to desire that more than you desire to sleep in every morning.

So Paul sees the Christian life as driven by the Spirit of the risen and reigning Christ. The Christian life is one in which we are to be overtaken by kindness for one another, which is a reflection of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

If you think about it, if we understand the magnitude of our forgiveness and God's dying for us, then it makes serving other people an understandable thing, something that we can do in the Spirit.

[2 : 46] The second thing is that Paul sees the Christian life as a life lived in community. The word brethren begins and ends chapter 6.

It's all about relationship. And three times we have the word translated one another, showing up in the short passage that we're looking at this morning.

As well as the words, us, brethren, and the spiritual ones, which reveal Paul's focus here on life together.

Turn back the page and look at chapter 5, verse 13 for a moment. And Paul writes, For you were called to freedom, brethren, Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.

Freedom isn't an academic concept for Paul. The end goal of the freedom we have in Christ is service to one another. It's sharing our lives together.

[4 : 02] It's interdependence. There's no room here in Paul's thinking for utopian withdrawal. The front page article in our local Richmond newspaper two days ago was about Gino Vanelli, an 80s pop star.

Yes, I did listen to some of his music. And he went on a spiritual quest. I don't know why this was on the front page. But he went on this quest. The article mentions that he spent three weeks, 14 hours a day, in an isolation tank, confronted with nothing but his own thoughts.

And the article says later that he found no answers. Our instinct, especially when we have friction with people in the church, is to go it alone and to submerge the life of faith into the private sphere.

But Paul deliberately lays out the importance of love exercised in costly, day-to-day, rubber-meets-the-road relationships of community life.

So how do we fulfill the law of Christ? What does Paul say about living in a community led by the Spirit? He gives us two ways of approaching this.

[5 : 27] He tells us first what not to do, and then second, what we ought to do. So if you turn back to 5 verse 26, the last verse in chapter 5, Paul writes, Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another.

Paul goes right for the jugular. He aims directly at arrogant self-importance because it is the one thing that will most easily destroy the community that Christ is building.

Notice that our conduct towards others is determined by our opinion of ourselves. Provoking and envy are the consequence of self-conceit.

It's as if we don't see ourselves as God sees us or even as others see us. As sinful humans, we have an endless capacity to create and cultivate an illusion about ourselves, a myth based on vanity and selfish pride, and which results in boasting, like the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not like other men.

So pervasive and insidious is this inbred conceit that we even take pride at how humble we are. C.S. Lewis' devil, Screwtape, is communicating to his trainee, Wormwood, on the art of snaring a new Christian.

[7 : 11] Screwtape says, Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, By Jove, I'm being humble.

Self-conceit expresses itself in two ways. An attitude of superiority, which provokes. The word there literally means initiating a challenge with the aim of proving how great you really are.

I'm better than you and I'm going to prove it. Now, I, like you, am clever enough not to say that, but if you were to spend some time dwelling on this tendency, you might come to see that your motivations have been exposed.

Self-conceit is also expressed in inferiority or envy or resentment. You're better than me and I don't like it. It's wounded pride.

So, what does Paul do with this? Like any good hockey coach, he tells it like it is. He destroys every pretense that would assert itself against the Lord of the universe.

[8 : 29] It's no accident that 5 verse 26 is at the beginning of this passage. Because to try to build the church on the backs of self-conceited people is a non-starter.

You can't do it. Something will be built, but it won't be a community centered on the cross of Christ and fulfilling the law of Christ.

And that's why this verse is here. A few years ago, I did a bathroom renovation and had the disturbing sense as I dug down through the layers of tile and stuff in the bathroom.

I kept finding more and more dry rot in the walls, in the floor. And Paul is sort of encountering the same dry rot which would destroy the church.

And so in verses 3 to 5 of chapter 6, he carries on the same tack. In verse 3, Paul says, If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

[9 : 37] Paul's basic assumption is that we are nothing. And what he means by that is that left to our own devices, we are under the wrath of God and his just judgment.

In ourselves, we've got nothing to stand on. To rely on status, power, influence, or accomplishment is fantasy in the eyes of God.

We have nothing in ourselves that we can boast in. And I deceive myself if I think otherwise. That's what Paul's getting at here.

One author gives this lovely illustration of a woman who put an ad in the personal section of New York Magazine. This woman who wanted to meet a man as remarkable as herself.

And the ad goes, Strikingly beautiful. Ivy League graduate, playful, passionate, perceptive, elegant, bright, articulate, original in mind, unique in spirit.

[10 : 45] I possess a rare balance of beauty and depth, sophistication and earthiness, seriousness and a love of fun. Professionally successful, perfectly capable of being self-sufficient and independent, but I won't be truly content until we find each other.

Please reply with a substantial letter describing your background and who you are, photo essential. The thing is that she was utterly serious.

She was deceiving herself. That's exactly what the word means here. There are two truths about a Christian. On the one hand, in Christ Jesus, we are all sons and daughters of God through faith.

But we're also sinners and don't merit or earn salvation on the basis of who we are. And Paul reinforces this point in verse 4.

Let each one test his own work and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. This verse is about building ourselves up by eagerly looking for fault in others.

[12 : 07] And the church can be a great incubator for conceit. We're surrounded by all sorts of people that we know and his weaknesses that we see.

But Paul reminds us that our value as Christian believers in community cannot come from comparison to the weaknesses of others.

Paul tells us we are to look only at our own work. That is, the evidence of our submission to the Lord Jesus. which is why Paul has written the next sentence, verse 5.

For each man will have to bear his own load. This word for load is a different word in the original than the word in verse 2.

It's a different burden. And it's an appropriate kind of burden that a person holds or carries. And I think Paul is talking about our responsibility before God.

[13 : 11] In other words, nobody can live the Christian life for you. The transaction we make with God in Christ is ours alone. The community of faith is essential in helping us along the way.

But faith in Christ is ultimately a personal response. So having annihilated conceit, envy, and boasting as the way we relate to one another, Paul tells us what we ought to do to live out the law of Christ, which is the law of love for one another.

In 6, verse 2, he writes, bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. Now, burdens here refers to a weight or a heavy load which isn't meant to be carried alone.

It includes all kinds of weakness, suffering, and pain, and failures. And we're presented with two temptations, wanting to carry our heavy burden ourselves and refusing to help carry other people's burdens.

love. My wife says to me sometimes, don't be a martyr. And by that, she means, let other people help you. You see, in my conceit, I think I don't need help, and even if I do, I will appear that much more heroic if I do it all myself.

[14 : 53] love. But if we've received Christ, we have to come to a place of needing help and asking for it. Humility is so important in this.

It's the same thing when it comes to allowing someone to help carry my burdens. The second error is not to lift a finger to help someone under a burden.

We say, well, why should I get involved? I think sometimes we get frightened by the needs that we see in other people's lives. But Paul's directive is for us to enable other people in our community to stand up under the burdens that they have, to encourage them forward.

I'm going to give a couple of examples here. One is that we pray for one another. Two weeks ago, on a Saturday, we had a prayer day at St.

John's, and several dozen people came in the church on a Saturday, throughout the day, and prayed for all of the events that were happening around Easter, not just events, but people and situations in the parish.

[16 : 04] And it was a wonderful opportunity to rest our burdens in the hands of our loving Father. And if you think about it, the battle that we fight as a congregation is not with flesh and blood, but with spiritual wickedness.

And so the greatest burden that we can bear is to pray well for one another. One example of this prayer was this week when Bev Greenwood gave her lectures on Jesus and the Da Vinci Code.

And I asked her on Wednesday, before she spoke here at St. John's, how she was doing. praying, and she knew that a whole bunch of people were praying for her.

And she said that she had a tangible sense of peace. That's the power of prayer. The other way that I've seen prayer at work is watching people step out in leadership who know that people are praying for them.

And it gives them a tremendous sense of encouragement. encouragement. Another example is that the way that we bear burdens is by communicating the word of God.

[17 : 24] As we apply the word of God to people and to situations, what we do is we replace myth with truth. And if you think about it, ourselves and people in the world around us, labor under all sorts of mythologies that have nothing to do with the Bible and nothing to do with the Christian faith.

And so to be able to teach one another and to encourage one another with the word of God is a wonderful way to share burdens. You're lifting burdens of the mind from people.

I'm going to give another example in a minute, but first let's read 6 verse 1. And this is an example that Paul gives us. He says, Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

But look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Humility is not timidity. humility. The case is given of a brother or sister who has been caught in sin by surprise.

Sin has surprised them. And so gentleness and humility is required in restoring them. And Paul says we should restore them.

[18 : 48] We should interact with a brother or sister that has inadvertently been caught in sin. But the way we are to do it is in humility.

Our response is not to say, that serves you right, or to gossip about their failures. But it's with gentleness and meekness and great humility to come alongside of them and to listen to them and to help them to understand the sin that has overtaken them.

And all along we're to remember our own weakness, Paul says. We're to be aware of our own weakness because we too are ripe for the same kinds of falling under temptation as anybody else.

We're all equal in that way. Paul says that the people who are supposed to do this are those who are living by the Spirit. That's what he means by you who are spiritual.

He doesn't mean super spiritual. He means any Christian because to be a Christian means to live in the Spirit, to have the Spirit of Christ in you, compelling you to obey Christ and to seek Christ and to love Christ.

[20 : 08] And what is the purpose of this? What does he give us the purpose? You see here right in the middle of verse 1, you should restore. And the word for restore is the same word from which we get the word artidzo.

And the meaning of artidzo is actually to equip or mend or rearrange or restore to operating condition.

And it's always in the context of repentance. We equip one another through the word of God to repent and in repentance to receive the wholeness that Christ offers.

It's very hard to say this to somebody. There's a lot of cultural pressure in the church, let alone outside of it, to confront somebody in this way.

And it's even harder, I think, to receive it. But this is the direction that Paul wants us to move in with humility. The final example I want to give before I conclude is the example of the kinds of pastoral care that go on at St.

[21 : 24] John's. For instance, living waters or Stephen ministry or grief and divorce care. As people come into the church from the world around us, they bring huge burdens, huge burdens that come out of past experiences.

And as we get to know people in the congregation, we begin to realize how deep and how much they struggle with these burdens. There's a lot of brokenness there. And so part of bearing one another's burden isn't just the sort of the one-time conversation or praying for a person consistently, but it's also helping them to get involved in programs where they can receive the kind of long-term help that is necessary to restore somebody.

So in conclusion, Paul shows us this picture of the life of the church as being a life of bearing burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ.

And may God help us to lovingly and with humility encourage, assist, and restore one another as we come under the influence of his spirit.

Amen.