

***“Bear One Another’s Burdens”*** (Galatians 6:1-2)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. In the life of God’s children – like you and me – there are no random events; everything has purpose under the Lord’s guiding hand which is always working out good for His children. Thanks be to God! Without getting into all of the details, my recent experience with Bell’s palsy was a time of great spiritual blessing. The Lord has granted me recovery, but I must remain humble about it, because now that it is in my system, it could return. We are all called to take heed to the Word of God: *“Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12).”*

I mention this personal event, because like everything else in our lives as disciples of Jesus – again – everything has purpose; everything has meaning. Through contemplation, prayer, study of the Word, the witness of friends and family, I believe that my season of illness contained a message: slow down, de-stress, be a better steward of your gift, and live in the moment...stop getting ahead of yourself so much [which is reflective of an effort to control instead of trusting the Lord who directs all things]. A sister in Christ said to me recently, “It must be hard as a pastor [and I am sure many of you can relate in *your* respective vocations as well] that as you care for so many, that you must constantly be thinking about the *next thing* you need to do.” She spoke wisdom. It’s true.

The colossal problem with that – as much as it may seem necessary for the sake of organization and discipline – is that such thinking when it goes too far breaks us away from the moment; from the *present*...and *that* is all we have. At this very moment, the fact is that the past is gone (the sands of time have already slipped between our fingers) and the future, well, we have no say about that. People talk about “absolute certainty,” but what is *that*? *It doesn’t even exist in science...we may speak intelligibly of probability...but not absolute certainty.* We aren’t even absolutely certain that the sun will rise tomorrow. So Jesus says, “Don’t worry about tomorrow (Matt. 6:34)!”

Why mention this? For this reason: if your flesh, the sinful distractions in this world and the attacks upon you by the devil are anything, then they are aimed to take you out of the present. What is in the present? What is in the present is your ***neighbor***. Who is your neighbor? Anyone: friend or enemy. Your child, your spouse, your co-worker, the person ahead of you in line at the grocery store, the guys you play softball with, the gals you meet at lunch, the homeless person on the corner in front of you, the woman who took your ticket stub at the movie theatre, even the salesperson whose phone call just interrupted what you were doing,

the Jehovah's Witness who comes knocking at your door [imagine: God brought them to you so that they would meet a true disciple of the Lord Jesus and perhaps for the first time hear the pure Gospel!] and most certainly your neighbors are the people sitting around you right now.

What is most important in life is to live in the moment and to live for the person in front of you. Let me defer to Luther:

*"Therefore [the Christian] should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor...This is what makes caring for the body a Christian work, to acquire, and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need, that in this way the strong member may serve the weaker, and we may be sons of God, each caring for and working for the other, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ [Gal. 6:2]. This is a truly Christian life. Here faith is truly active through love [Gal. 5:6]...[when] a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith (Luther's Works, Vol. 31, 365)."*

To live in the present, and to live for the neighbor – and remember: nothing is random; the Lord controls all things – is to be called to serve that person and to love that person. But be warned, because in that split second of opportunity to live in faith and love, your flesh will complain and resist, the world will try so hard to rip your attention away and the devil will try his best to disrupt any expression of faith and love.

Your flesh will do what it always does and will say to you: "You don't have time. Just think about how busy you are. If you take the time to give this person attention, you are going to miss your deadlines. You can only do so much. You can't be all things to all men. And furthermore, you have your own problems; you have your own projects; and you have your own needs. What about your resources? They are limited. There is only so much you can do. If you're not careful, you will run yourself down and if you do that, you won't be of any use to anyone. You can't serve this person."

How often has this tape run through your head? I am not saying that what I just described doesn't contain elements of truth (even in our Galatians' text today God says at Galatians 6:1: **"Keep watch on yourself, lest you to be tempted."**). But consider this: this is the way the devil works...he loves to mix the truth with his deception. That is what He does. When he tempted the Lord in the wilderness, the devil was quoting Scripture for heaven's sake (Luke 4:9-11)!

My point is this: at the end of the day, the goal of your flesh, the world, and the devil is to keep you from loving and serving others. That way, you will always have a “good excuse” to keep you from being your brother’s keeper, because it’s just so darn inconvenient! We don’t want to be our brother’s keeper. We want to be like Cain who rejected the notion (Genesis 3:9) and who murdered his brother instead. We would rather in our flesh use our neighbor for what we want, instead of serving our neighbor according to what they need.

To confront us, however, God is good. He doesn’t mince anything: we either serve God with faith acting in love which serves the neighbor; or we serve ourselves (which is to serve the devil...he’s all about self...he wants you to be about “me, myself, I,”...the devil doesn’t so much care about tendonitis or colitis or bronchitis, than he does about you having a lethal case of “I”-itis [thanks to Rev. Matthew Richardt, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Escondido for this descriptor of sin]. That way, because you’re so wrapped up in yourself, you will never have time or love or service for anyone else, because you’ll always be busy taking care of yourself. But God makes it clear that we are not here for ourselves. He makes it clear – as clear as day – in Galatians 6:1-2.

We are immediately taught in the opening to this magnificent chapter of God’s Word (Galatians chapter 6) that sometimes Christians – your most important neighbors who share fellowship in the Lord with you – can get trapped in sin. This is a humbling thing to consider, because it can happen to you and it can happen to me. The word here in the ESV is “caught,” and the word conveys a slip or a lapse (and yes it can be long-term as well). This is different than the warning about deliberate rebellion against God which intends a life-style of sin against God (Galatians 5:19-21). The situation here in Galatians 6 is different and we need to know about it.

Chrysostom describes this situation that could happen to you or me as being “overtaken,” a falling to temptation that occurs because we are caught off guard (Ancient Christian Commentary, New Testament, VIII, 92). Augustine explains that this can happen either because we did not see the sin as sin at the time – we were in the state of genuinely being unaware that what we were doing was wrong – or we see it, but in weakness, we were overcome. That is, we must be careful about reducing the concept of “intentionality” to simply “being aware.” Remember parents: If we boil punishment down to whether or not our children **knew that it was wrong** then we’re probably being hypocrites. It is possible to be fully aware that something is sinful, but because of “limitations of infirmity” -- as Augustine put it -- still commit the sin (ibid, 92).

We don’t need Chrysostom and Augustine to verify this (though it certainly helps), because this is what the apostle Paul was describing in Romans 7. In Romans 7 (verse 19) Paul knew the evil that he did, and admits that in his soul he did not *want* to do it, but he did it anyway. Welcome to the infirmities of humanity.

But let's not drift too much from today's focus. The point is that when fellow Christians slip and lapse into sin, we have a call to serve them...not to beat them up, not to slap them upside the head, not to pontificate about how they should have known better while we insinuate - - in terrible pride -- that we would never have done such a stupid thing...no, no, no. Our call to serve that hurting neighbor in front of us is to restore them in a spirit of gentleness. We are in other words to serve that person God puts in front of us who in despairing weakness may even be crying out loud, "How could I have done such a thing?!" with meekness which is the opposite of arrogance and harshness.

How does the Lord lead us to such meekness? By causing us to realize that we are the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:16) and Luther points out that Augustine said, "There is no sin, that one man committed that another man could not commit," and then Luther reports of that man speaking rightly in *The Lives of the Fathers* when the report was brought to him that one of the brothers had fallen into fornication: "Yesterday it was he," he said, "and today it could be I." (Luther's Works, Vol. 27, 112)

Instead of arrogance and judgment we are called to take the time as those who are "spiritual" -- which simply means that you have faith toward God and love toward your neighbor (a definition of a true Christian) -- should serve that person who is despairing in their weakness with great compassion and kindness so as to restore (like mending something, or putting something back into alignment like a broken bone so that it can heal properly) the person's hope and their confidence that they are forgiven in Christ. The ministry that we are called to dear Christians is to emulate Jesus who said, "***Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).***"

Christians who know this kind of compassion and restoring gentleness are motivated to make the most of every moment when God sends another neighbor to stand before them. Galatians 6:2 broadens the scope of this application and it does so in an exciting way. St. Paul writes, "***Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.***" The word for "bearing" (present active imperative) is the word used of Jesus bearing his Cross in John 19:17: "*and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.*" Jesus was bearing His cross in order to shed His blood to cover your sins and to restore you back to eternal life. There was no higher service ever rendered. But that's why Jesus came. He did not come for Himself. He did not come to be served. He came to serve you. That's why Jesus lived and that's why Jesus died.

***Matthew 20:28: "even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."***

This is our motivation and power to live out Galatians 6:2 by the Holy Spirit who has united us to Christ. Christ bore for us, we bear for others. Christ is gentle to us, we are gentle to others. Christ reconciled us to God even when we were yet enemies with God (Romans 5:10), so now Christians love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44).

Do you see the connection between the Gospel and your life? You serve your neighbor on account of Christ who served (and still serves) you; you love your neighbor on account of Christ who loved and still loves you. But if your heart has turned cold toward your neighbor, then what is faith? How can we reject our neighbor and claim to know God? The Word of God puts it very simply, ***“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:20).”***

What are we bearing like a cross? Answer: our neighbor’s burdens. Those “burdens” are whatever causes our neighbor to suffer, to be weak, to be in need. Oftentimes, it represents the needs of our neighbor’s body (food, shelter, and clothing); sometimes our neighbor is cast down with grief or anxiety. When this happens, we are called to love, we are called to serve them and to help relieve them.

This section of Scripture will not allow us to reduce love to an abstract feeling. No. Love extends service. It often gets messy. It is costly. It gets under the burden of our neighbor and very often causes us to suffer as well. In other words, it does what Christ did. Such bearing also leads you to be a lot kinder; overlooking many things that would otherwise be the occasion for us to get on our high horse. Luther writes:

*“The Law of Christ is the law of love. After redeeming and regenerating us and constituting us as His church, Christ did not give us any new law except the law of mutual love (John 13:34)...to love does not mean...to wish someone else well, but to bear someone else’s burdens, that is, to bear what is burdensome to you and what you would rather not bear. Therefore a Christian must have broad shoulders and husky bones to carry the flesh, that is, the weakness of the brethren; for Paul says that they have burdens and troubles. Love is sweet, kind, and patient – not in receiving but in performing; for it is obliged to overlook many things and to bear with them. (Luther’s Works, Vol. 27, 113)*

Where in this universe can we poor sinners possibly get such a love to share? Certainly not from ourselves, but there is one place: it is from Jesus who loved us in this same way...and that is why we are here. It is here at this altar that the true body and blood of Jesus is given and poured out for you -- sacrificed in the greatest service to you the world has ever known -- serving you so that you are now forgiven all your sins; serving you so that you are now filled with life eternal. Through this Holy Meal, the Greatest Servant who is Christ still serves you. And

in His service you are equipped to serve, because this Sacrament has God saying to you Christian: "I love you...see it in my service!" So that you can go forth from here to live in the moment, see the one God puts in your path and love...not just in words, but in deeds...bear their burdens, be what the word "Christian" means: "Christ's" ...be that little Christ...love, serve, bear...and do it because it will be Jesus doing it through you. This Holy Sacrament you are about to receive is your guarantee that you are no longer stuck with the words, "I can't," but now you are                   gifted                   with                   the                   words                   of Christ, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13)."

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:15: ***"and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."*** And if that is what you are doing – living for Christ – then you are living for your neighbor, so serve and serve in joy. It will never just be you bearing those burdens, Jesus will be right there with you and He will make you His extension of love and Christ will be seen...in you!