



GALATIANS: THE GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
**The Spirit-led Community in Action:
Burden-bearing, Part 1**

Galatians 6:1-5

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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.

Introduction

What does a Spirit-led community look like? When you see people who are truly led by the Spirit, what sorts of things do they do?

In this passage, we have a snapshot of a Spirit-led community in action. And what do we see? Paul captures the action of a Spirit-led community with a single phrase: burden-bearing. "Bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). The main point of this passage, a call to bear one another's burdens. This is the main thing a Spirit-led community does.

Certainly, this includes helping one another in various ways: providing a new mom with a meal, watching another's kids for the evening, letting someone borrow your car, loaning or giving someone some money to help get his car fixed.

But what Paul has specifically in mind is the burden of other people's sin. The main way we do this is through spiritual restoration: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (v. 1).

The church is a mess worth making. Part of the real heart-ache and challenge with this is that the mess almost always involves people. We are the mess-makers! And so the key is knowing how to work through the mess of the church, which means knowing how to work with people who make messes.

The Galatians needed to do this. That's what it means for them to serve one another through love (5:13) and follow the leading of the Spirit (5:18); they needed to do some spiritual restoration toward erring members.

But so too every Christian community needs to let spiritual restoration be a regular part of their life together. Every Christian and every church must know how lovingly to deal with those who fall into sin.

Regrettably, however, this is not something Christians do very often or very well. Too often we act like timid medical students, who see a patient with a bone fracture, but are too insecure or immature to say anything about it; the blood makes us squeamish.

Or worse, we're too vain and proud and preoccupied with ourselves to really care. We're annoyed the person did something so stupid to break his arm. And so we let the person go on in pain; and we go on taking note of the bone fracture, perhaps even chatting about it with others (i.e. gossip!); but not addressing it with the person in need in a straightforward and Christ-honoring way that helps to bring about that person's healing.¹

The main temptation and thus road-block is pride or conceit (5:26).

Spirit-led communities, and Spirit-led individuals, do spiritual restoration. But they only do it—or at least only do it well—when they're not tempted by their own vanity and pride and conceit. "Keep watch on yourself," Paul says, "lest you too be tempted" (v. 1).

Tempted in what way? Certainly, we may be tempted to stumble in the same way the erring person did. But, more to the point, we may be tempted—and almost certainly will be tempted—to gloat over others who are overtaken in sin. Not that we would want to or even intend to; but sin is just that subtle, and pride and vanity and conceit are just that powerful.

The proud, the conceited, are too exalted in their own hearts to bend low to carry other people's burdens. Inflated egos inhibit burden-bearing.² Because burden-bearing is, after all, a slave's task; it's a menial, messy and often thankless job. It's not for the one with an over-inflated ego.

Over-inflated egos, borne of conceit in the heart, leads to envying and provoking others (5:26), rather than serving them in love (cf. 5:13). The conceited heart envies others, what they have in comparison to what you have.

This is why we find a certain insidious satisfaction in the faults of others being found out. And this is why our news media and entertainment has an obsession with sensational problems of people (e.g., Jerry Springer, Jersey Shore).

That's why the proud and conceited person finds a sick satisfaction in the failings of others; rather than grieve over another's sin, this person revels in realizing he's got a leg-up on that person. We're all tempted to be like that Pharisee of Jesus' parable, who trusted in himself that he was more righteous than the tax collector and thus treated the tax collector with contempt: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11).

¹ I owe this analogy to Phil Ryken, *Galatians*, p. 245.

² Cf. Wilson, *Curse*, p. 112.

Yet that kind of attitude of the heart is fatal for burden-bearing. Paul understands this, and so in this passage helps us put to death conceit so that we can better bear one another's burdens.

Remember the Way of the Crucified Christ (6:2)

The first way we kill conceit is by remembering the way of the crucified Christ. The affirmation that by bearing burdens you fulfill the law of Christ points us to the person and work of Christ. This is in fact the best place to start: take a good, hard look at Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the great burden-bearer.

Bearing one another's burdens, this is the way of Christ, who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The Lord Jesus Christ "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . . he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. . . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4, 5, 6).

Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the supreme Burden-Bearer. And if we truly remember the crucified Christ—his humility, his sacrifice, his suffering, his love—we won't be able to entertain high thoughts of ourselves. We will quickly realize that there is no one righteous, no, not even one. Seeing Jesus Christ bearing our burdens on the cross has a way of killing conceit in our hearts.

Beware of the Subtlety of Self-Deception (6:3)

But there's a second antidote to conceit from this passage: beware of the subtlety of self-deception. "For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (6:3). How easy it is to think we're something that we're not. And how prone we all thus are to deceiving ourselves. How easy it is, for example, to congratulate yourself on your humility, or applaud yourself for being so kind.

Paul was in tune with what C. S. Lewis called "The Great Sin," the sin of Pride or Self-Conceit. Pride or Self-Conceit is, as Paul says, thinking you are something when in fact you're nothing (v. 3). "There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others."³ And, I would add, the more we have it ourselves, the less likely we are *even to see it in ourselves*.

Psalm 36 describes how this happens. There, David says, "Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated" (36:1-2). Sin speaks to us. Sin flatters us. Sin convinces us that we are something we're not: less vile, less vain, less self-centered; or more patient, more faithful, more gracious than we really are. "'Tis inexpressible, and almost

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 94.

inconceivable, how strong a self-righteous, self-exalting disposition is naturally in man; and what he will not do and suffer, to feed and gratify it.”⁴

And self-conceit is fatal for burden-bearing. Because it turns you into a judge, rather than a burden-bearer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us about the self-deception that leads to self-conceit, when it comes to judging others. “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3). Jesus knows we easily deceive ourselves into thinking we’re something we’re not; or failing to see what we truly are, especially when it comes to comparing ourselves with others, judging others.

The best antidote to self-deception, then, is confession; the one who acknowledges it before God is at least half-way toward rooting it out, or at least getting a better handle on it. “If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”⁵

It is always good, then, to have the closing line of Psalm 139 close at hand, ready to pray in any circumstance: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (vv. 23-24). Let this be a regular part of your walk with the Lord, and you will find not conceit, but humility growing in your heart. Which will in turn make you a better burden bearer.

Grade Your Own Work, Let Others Do the Same (6:4)

The third antidote for conceit is to grade your own work, and let others do the same.⁶ “But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor” (6:4).

In school, nobody liked the know-it-all who was always interested in giving a grade to everyone else’s work. But that’s what we do when pride or conceit has its way with us. You see, pride and conceit are competitive and comparative by nature. We’re not satisfied with how we’re doing; we’re preoccupied with how we’re doing *in relation to those around us*. Notice, that’s why the Apostle connects conceit or pride with “provoking one another, envying one another” (5:26).

But how do we test our own work? By what standard? The standard we use has already been mentioned: the law of Christ. This is the law of Moses, the law of God, as it has been embodied in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. That is, it is the law of love, as we see it expressed in Jesus’ own sacrificial self-giving life.

Grade yourself by that; not on a curve, but by the law of love, the law of Christ. Don’t worry about comparing yourself with others; instead, look to the law of Christ, the law of love, and let your life be measured by that. Follow the example of the Apostle Paul himself, who said this:

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Yale), p. 315.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 99.

⁶ Rightly captured by Fung, Galatians, p. 290: “It is on his own conduct and performance that each person should concentrate, not the conduct and performance of others; he is to engage in self-assessment, not in critical evaluation of another.”

“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” (1 Cor. 4:1-5).⁷

We ought to adopt this same attitude. It will not only free us from insecurity, but also from pride. We won’t feel the need to prop up our fragile ego with comparisons with others; we’ll wait patiently and confidently for God’s evaluation of us. Be content to let your praise come from God alone, not from man. And this, in turn, will free us up now to bear one another’s burdens.

Keep Your Eye on the Judgment (6:5)

This leads to the fifth and final antidote to conceit. If you want to kill conceit so that you can become a better burden-bearer, *then keep the horizon of judgment always in view*. “For each will have to bear his own load” (v. 5). Luther was right in saying that these words “are forceful enough to frighten us thoroughly, so that we do not yearn for vainglory.”⁸ This is the ultimate reason why we ought to bear one another’s burdens with gentleness and humility.

Keeping your eye on the final judgment, on that day when we will all stand before the omniscient Lord to give an account of everything we’ve done in this life; that has a remarkable way of clearing up our own self-deception and self-conceit. We can easily imagine ourselves to be something when we have our eyes fixed on everyone around us. But if we fix our eyes on the final judgment, and the face of the One to whom we must give an account, we will not be able to harbor grandiose ideas about ourselves.⁹

That may sound counterintuitive at first, but it’s entirely biblical. That Christians must stand before the judgment seat of Christ is not only taught in Scripture, but plainly and abundantly taught. It’s not a marginal or peripheral doctrine in the New Testament. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10).

But more than that, keeping your eye on the judgment is a great antidote to conceit, and thus a great help to bearing burdens, rather than judging one another. “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:8-12).

⁷ See similarly, Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, p. 121: “At the Last Judgment each man will have to bear his own load; therefore the praise of others will not do him any good there.”

⁸ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, p. 120.

⁹ Thus verse 5 is closely related to verse 3, as is rightly noted by Calvin, *Galatians*, p. 176.

In fact, we could summarize the entire burden of this passage as follows: Bear one another's burdens now, because you'll have to bear your own load later. Serve one another through love today, because one day—on the Last Day—you will be judged according to whether you've fulfilled the law of love, the law of Christ.

Practical Steps toward Better Burden-Bearing

Unless we kill conceit, we won't bear one another's burdens. But let me also here provide you with some practical steps toward better burden-bearing.

First, who should bear burdens? This text says, those who are spiritual; that is, Spirit-led people. It's tempting to treat this as a designation for a separate class of Christians, as though there were the 'spiritual' and the 'unspiritual'. But the New Testament doesn't know of two classes—only one. That's everyone, because every truly born-again Christian is to be a Spirit-led Christian.¹⁰ So this is a charge to everyone who is born-again by the Spirit of God. You are by definition spiritual, and so should engage in the work of spiritual restoration.

And yet the immature need to be cautious.¹¹ And the spiritually mature and strong need to take full responsibility and initiative: "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Rom. 15:1). Luther says this difficult work of burden-bearing requires that a Christian "have broad shoulders and husky bones" because the burdens (i.e. sins) of others aren't easy to carry.¹² It's not for the weak or half-heated, but for the spiritually strong and mature.

Secondly, when should you bear one another's burdens? Whenever anyone is overtaken in any trespass. The word 'trespass' has connotations of something really bad: sexual immorality, idolatry, apostasy, drunkenness. But we ought not to limit it to that; it includes any of the works of the flesh Paul mentions: enmity, strife, jealousy, divisive behavior; and works of the flesh mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament: bitterness, slander, harsh criticism, sloth.

How should you do it? You should do it, first of all, *with gentleness and humility*. (Eph. 4:1-3). If you're personally offended, you need time to cool down. Otherwise, you'll be tempted to respond the way James and John did when Jesus was rejected in a certain village in Samaria. "Lord," they asked, "do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" (Luke 9:54). Sounds like a couple of hot-headed junior-high boys who like to play with pyrotechnics. Jesus swiftly rebuked James and John, no doubt admonishing them that they have no idea what Jesus is really all about.

You should also do it personally, privately and as discreetly as possible; don't put an announcement in the church bulletin or post it on your Facebook page. This is often the first step in the restoration process Jesus describes in Matthew 18: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (Matt. 18:15).¹³

¹⁰ Rightly, Schreiner, p. 358.

¹¹ Rightly noted by Stott, *Message of Galatians*, p. 161, even if, exegetically speaking, Paul does not intend to limit this exhortation to the mature.

¹² Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, p. 113.

¹³ Rightly, Schreiner, p. 357.

And, if you are going to do spiritual restoration, *bathe everything in prayer and submit yourself to accountability*. If you believe you need to have this kind of conversation, let a close and trustworthy friend know so that the person can pray for you and hold you accountable to doing everything in a God-honoring way.

Spiritual restoration is—or ought to be—one of the main things our small groups do. If this never happens in your small group, then you need to ask questions about the depth of maturity of the members of the group and the depth of intimacy and commitment you have as a group.

Beyond these biblical instructions on how to do spiritual restoration, we need to conclude with a simple exhortation to get about doing spiritual restoration! This is what a Spirit-led Christian and a Spirit-led community does; they bear burdens by doing spiritual restoration.

Conclusion

When you see a Spirit-led community in action, what you see is a community marked by love for one another; not love of the sugary and sentimental kind. But love that's truly humble, gentle, and gracious, yet also strong, courageous, and full of biblical conviction. The aim in spiritual restoration is always, first, the glory of Jesus Christ, the good of the person being restored, and the unity of the Body of Christ.

This is why Paul instructs us in Ephesians with these words: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:1-3). In order to maintain the unity of the Body of Christ, a unity the Holy Spirit himself has created for us, we must walk by the Holy Spirit so that we bear the fruit of the Spirit: here, humility, gentleness, patience. For only as we walk in that way will we be able truly to bear with one another—bear one another's burdens.

Luther rightly understood that this passage, at root, is intended to attack what he called "the poisonous vice of vainglory."¹⁴ And we do well to heed his parting counsel: "No one is so strong that he does not need continual prayer to overcome this. For what believer does not enjoy being praised? The Holy Spirit alone is able to preserve us from being infected by this poison."¹⁵

And so we pray to you, our God and Father, that you would pour out your Holy Spirit in our hearts through faith, in such a way that we would delight in your presence more than in ourselves; that we would elevate you and the Lord Jesus Christ, bowing ourselves low before him, taking on his easy yoke, following in his footsteps, bearing one another's burdens, fulfilling the law of Christ—to your glory and for our eternal joy. Amen.

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¹⁴ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* 1535, p. 121.

¹⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* 1535, p. 121.