

The Practice of Community

Part 3 – Shoulder to Shoulder

Galatians 6:1-3

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 18, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ²Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.
(Galatians 6:1-3, NRSV)

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Simeon the Stylite was an odd bird in church history. He was one of the so-called Desert Fathers, a group of early Christian hermits and monastics who retreated to the wilderness in protest of the compromise they saw happening in the church after Christianity was made the official state religion of the Roman Empire. In the year 423, Simeon constructed a short pillar with a platform on top on the edge of the Syrian desert, climbed into his perch, and lived there for the next 36 years. Many people came out to see this strange sight, often to see if Simeon was out of his mind. Simeon assured them that he was not crazy, but that he simply wanted to be alone with God, free from worldly and communal distractions. One modern writer, a young parent, reflected on Simeon's suggested pattern of spirituality and asked, "Is there childcare in the desert?"¹

This version of Christian spirituality may be extreme, but the thinking is quite common, even today. Many people in our time want spirituality without religion, connection to Jesus without the church. This kind of spirituality is attractive because it is private and spontaneous, instead of public and rigid. We want our faith to be curated to whatever form we want to make of it. The problem, of course, is that the Christian faith is rooted in a relationship with a God who reveals himself to us through his spoken and eternal word. Remember the images of cornerstone and foundation from last week. And so we don't just to build our faith according to our own preferences. The Lord defines these matters. And as I've tried to make clear the last few weeks, the Lord has defined our faith as inherently public and communal.² As other Desert Fathers much

wiser than Simeon once declared, "One Christian is no Christian." Our spiritual formation is not an individualistic quest for self-fulfillment. Instead, we are being shaped and matured in Christ as a stone built into a larger structure of many stones, together being built up for God's glory and for the sake of one another. Writer Robert Mulholland puts it succinctly: "Spiritual formation is a process of being formed in the image of Christ *for the sake of others*."³

As I've said many times before, Christianity is always personal, never private. Yes, you can connect to the Lord in a very personal way, directly and intimately. But your faith never becomes just you and Jesus. The biblical writers would have found such solitary faith unrecognizable, even un-Christian. For one, the journey of the Christian life is far too difficult to travel alone. If I had to follow Jesus in this world all by myself, I would have given up following Jesus a long time ago. Truth is, I probably never would have started in the first place. Let me name just a few of the burdens we have to carry in this life: sorrow, worry, doubt, failure, material poverty, loneliness, illness, broken relationships, disability, discouragement, and depression. Any of those burdens sound familiar? If not, give it time.

In this passage from Galatians, Paul speaks directly to the weight of such burdens, and begins by naming one of the heaviest, the tendency in each of us to get tripped up by sin. What he teaches us here about facing this particular burden easily applies to how we face all those other burdens, and a key to it all is facing them alongside others.

He writes in verse 1, **"My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted."**⁴ To be clear, the person described here is not a person who is willfully determined to live in deliberate, habitual rebellion towards God. Such people, in fact, don't even see their sin as a burden, but something they invite and embrace. No, this is the

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Reformed Expository Commentary: Galatians* (P&R Publishing, 2005), 242.

² Ryken helped inform these ideas.

³ Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey* (InterVarsity Press, 1993), 16. Emphasis mine.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

person who is sincerely pursuing a journey of walking with Christ, but who has been tripped up along the way by some temptation. It's an experience that every Christian knows. An obvious example might be a man who is battling some addiction, and who sincerely wants to live a clean and sober life, but who has just faced some difficult circumstances which overcame him and suddenly he found himself using again. The desire to live differently is there, but actually doing so feels like a burden. Can you relate?

Paul says that the goal with such a person is restoration. The word he uses here is a medical term, often used to describe a broken bone that needed to be reset so that it could heal to its former condition. This is key, because that is often not our goal when we see people tripped up by sin in the church. Instead, too often we either ignore the sin or condemn it. Denial is not just a river in Egypt, as they say. In our day, for all sorts of reasons, we love to deny the sin in our lives and the lives of others. It's uncomfortable to confront people who are messing up. Who are we to point out the sin in others when we ourselves have our own issues? People often just want us to mind our own business. And when we do confront or acknowledge the sin in others, it can easily take on the tone of self-righteous condemnation, often times in the form of gossip behind the back of the one who has stumbled.

But love requires that we neither deny nor condemn the sin we see in others who are struggling and wanting to live a different way. If my arm is broken, I don't need people around me to pretend that it's okay. Nor do I need people criticizing me because I was clumsy and fell and caused the break. What I need is for people to help me fix my arm. Same when I stumble and sin. It is critical that I have some brothers and sisters in my life who love me enough to speak the truth to me in love, even when initially I may not want to hear what it is they have to say.⁵ Initially, I might not want you to touch my broken arm either, because the healing process is painful. But as long as you are gentle, I need you to do so anyway.

As we do this, Paul warns us that care must be taken to protect ourselves. Perhaps the greatest danger in helping our brother or sister who has been tripped up, is that in doing so our own pride will trip us up. Paul writes elsewhere in 1st Corinthians 10:12, **"So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."** We must never forget that we are just as susceptible to sin as others. Such awareness helps

guard us against self-righteousness and carelessness, which can then trip us up. Husbands who never considered adultery cheat on their wives. Women who appear to have inextinguishable joy have grown bitter. Business leaders who at one time followed a strict moral code end up cheating on their taxes. You and I have the same capacity for sin as anybody else.⁶

Even though we all are susceptible here, if we remain humble and careful, then *all of us* in the church can help others bear this burden. Paul's only criteria is that you are somebody who has "received the Spirit," something which is true of every Christian. Burden-bearing is not the exclusive work of some super-spiritual group of elite Christians, whoever they might be, but the work of ordinary Christians like you and me. Because again, if you are a Christian, you are in Christ and Christ is in you. You are a part of Christ's body on this earth, the Temple where heaven and earth meet. And as we talked about last week, that means that perhaps the best place for others to meet Christ in this life is in you, and us. Think about it. What's the best place to meet me in this life? You can encounter me in the descriptions others may give of me, or in my writing, or on the phone, or through texts and email. But the best place to encounter me is in the flesh. So where do we meet Jesus in the flesh these days? In his body, which is the church! You!

You see, if I have been tripped up by sin in my life, I can pray and read the Bible and in that experience I can be both convicted of my sin and also reminded that Christ's grace is sufficient. It's right there in black and white. But if a brother comes to me in love and humbly confronts me in my sin, that confrontation rises to another level. Christ is calling me to repentance through that brother and, in some ways, it's harder to ignore the truth when he is standing there in front of me waiting for a response. And then if that same brother then assures me of Christ's grace, the same thing happens. I can read that I am forgiven in scripture, which I need to do. But when a brother, who knows the extent of my sin, nonetheless assures me that I am truly forgiven, the burden becomes even lighter. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way, "When I go to my brother or sister to confess, I am going to God."⁷ Is he right? If we are what scripture tells us we are, the body of Christ, then he is absolutely right.

When it comes to the burden of our sin and the need for grace, of course it is Christ who shoulders most of the burden for us, specifically on the cross. Ultimately, it is

⁵ Martin Luther once wrote, in reference to what we should do when we encounter such a brother and sister tripped up by sin, "Run into him, and reaching out your hand, raise him up again, comfort him with sweet words, and embrace him with motherly arms." Cited by Ryken, 247.

⁶ I'm indebted here to Gerald L. Sittser, *Love One Another* (InterVarsity Press, 2008), 140. This is a fantastic book exploring the various "one another" commands given to the church in the New Testament.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954), 112. Bonhoeffer's last chapter in this book on confession is remarkable. It's my favorite chapter a book full of remarkable chapters.

always God who carries our heaviest burdens. But in our day to day lives of trying to follow Jesus as his disciples, one of the main ways Christ helps shoulder our burdens is through his body on earth, the church, one another. And this isn't true of just the burden of sin and temptation, but also true of all the other burdens we face. Paul uses sin as an example here, but since he understands that we carry many other heavy burdens, he commands us in verse 2, **"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."**

This is our high calling. In the previous chapter Paul summed it up this way: **"For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"**⁸ Don't misread this. Paul is not saying that our salvation in Christ depends on us loving one another. That would be a contradiction of everything he writes and teaches, a contradiction of the gospel itself. No, we are saved by grace, by the love of God through Christ which we did not deserve. That grace and love, however, which make us beloved though we are no such thing, must eventually transform us *so that we become people who love in response*. That's why Jesus said that the entire law of God can be summed up with two laws.⁹ Love God with all heart, soul, and mind. And love the people around you as much as you love yourself. Do this, Jesus said, and you've kept the entire law of God. Once you come to know the love of God, that fact will be evidenced in the way you begin to love those around you, in the way you help them bear the burdens which are crushing them. This is the law of Christ not only because he gave it, but because he modeled it, and because he, by grace, will enable us to keep it.¹⁰

With this in mind, let me highlight five aspects of this burden-bearing which are essential for us to keep in mind. And again, I'm not just thinking of the burdens of sin and temptation, but burdens like grief, doubt, poverty, discouragement, and so on, the heavy things which are too heavy for you to carry by yourself.

First, our responsibility to bear burdens begins with our brothers and sisters in the church. "Friends" in verse 1 is a bad translation. The word actually means "brothers," and really includes "brothers and sisters."¹¹ This doesn't mean that we don't bear the burdens of non-believers in the world. Of course we do. But our

first priority is always family. Later in this very chapter Paul commands, **"So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith."**¹² What would you think of a person who looked out for all his neighbors but neglected his own family? It's not either-or, but the order is important. Your brothers and sisters in the church come first.¹³

Second, though we are called to help bear the burdens of others, we aren't called to take those burdens completely on ourselves. In his book, *Love One Another*, Jerry Sittser points out how modern psychology has created a whole class of victims in our day who can describe their burdens in detail but who never want to take responsibility for carrying them.¹⁴ Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs get this right. You can't become sober alone; community is essential, along with what they call a "higher Power." But many of the 12 steps make clear that you have to participate in the process. Others aren't going to drag you along towards sobriety. When Paul, a few verses later, declares, **"For all must carry their own loads."**¹⁵ he's not contradicting what he says in verse 2. Carrying the whole load is often too much. But you carry what you can, and then others will come alongside and help bear the rest of the weight.

Third, burden-bearing is nearly always inconvenient and disruptive. In other words, it's going to cost you something when you come alongside another to help carry a heavy load. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a perfect example of this.¹⁶ The man dying on the side of the road was being crushed under a heavy burden. There may have been lots of reasons why the first two religious men walked by on the other side and refused to help bear his burden, but all those reasons fell into the same category. They knew it would cost them too much: time, ritual purity, effort, money. The Samaritan who stopped, however, was willing to have his life inconvenienced and disrupted for the sake of his brother. And so he is the one Jesus says actually fulfilled the law of Christ.

You know, it's love which makes us willing to be inconvenienced. Think how quickly you will drop nearly everything else in your life when somebody you love – your kid, your spouse, your parent, your best friend – is in trouble. You don't even think twice.

⁸ Galatians 5:14

⁹ Matthew 22:36-39 - "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

¹⁰ Timothy Keller was helpful on this point in *Galatians for You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 167.

¹¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/80.htm>

¹² Galatians 6:10. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Even beyond this, in the church our own family units come first. 1st Timothy 5:8 declares, **"And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."**

¹⁴ Sittser, 132-133

¹⁵ Galatians 6:5

¹⁶ See Luke 10:25-37

Why? Because you love that person, and so sharing their burden is not a hassle, but a joy!

Fourth, burden-bearing requires proximity. Have you ever had to carry a heavy piece of furniture that requires many people to lift together? Once in while there's that one guy who determines he's more useful in a supervisory role. You know the guy I'm talking about? He stands back giving instructions to the others while they strain their backs. I don't like that guy. You want to help carry the load? Get in close and help carry the load!

When we talk about bearing burdens we will sometimes say we are helping somebody to "shoulder the load." That imagery gets at the need for proximity. To help somebody with a burden in their life you almost have to stand in their shoes, right next to them with your shoulders together, so that you can distribute the weight. That's one reason why I think Life Groups, or other similar small communities in the church where we know one another and are known by one another, are the best place for us to bear each other's burdens. Sometimes churches make the mistake of expecting a few trained professionals to be the primary burden-bearers in the church - pastors, counselors, deacons, and so on. In some congregations, for example, people who are sick in the hospital might feel cheated if anybody besides the pastor came to visit. But do you see the problem with this? Even in a medium-sized congregation like Faith, how in the world can a few staff and deacons be the ones expected to help shoulder the burdens of everybody else. To help bear your burden, I have to be close to you, and no one can be close to 400 people!

And so, I love it when I see our Life Groups become this for one another. There are some groups here who are so close to one another that when a heavy burden comes to one member, the other members are already right there to help shoulder the load. It's not that others like pastors and deacons can't also provide support, but it's usually just icing on the cake. We will best bear one another's burdens when the loads are shared by all of us. And to do that we have to all be in places where we are known well enough by others so that they can identify those burdens when they show up. Proximity is key.

Lastly, burden-bearing is never meant to be a one way street. Remember that story of the men who carry the stretcher of their paralyzed friend to Jesus to be healed? A friend of mine used to reference that story often, pointing out that sometimes you are needed as a stretcher bearer, and sometimes you have to be the one

on the stretcher.¹⁷ Again, Paul tells us to bear *one another's* burdens, implying that nobody in this life is burden-free for long. There is a warning here for each of us. Some of you are people who always imagine yourself on the stretcher. Your tendency is to take, take, take, often because you may feel you have nothing to offer others. Others of you, however, never want to imagine yourself in such a needy place. So all you do is give, give, give, sometimes to the point of exhaustion or resentment.

Both are mistakes. For the first type, everybody here has something unique to offer the community which can be a support to others. One person has wisdom, another has the ability to listen, another an acumen with figuring out financial solutions, and another the ability to encourage. So don't imagine that the Lord hasn't given you some unique way to help bear the burdens of others around you, even when others are helping you bear your burdens. He has.

And to speak to the second type who never want to be on the stretcher, one of the biggest problems in the church is that many of us are very reluctant to let others help us when we need help, or even to let on that we need help in the first place. Almost always that's a matter of pride. It's also selfish. Think of the joy you experience when you are able to come alongside a brother and sister and help them carry a burden. Do you not think that your brothers and sisters would experience similar joy when they come alongside you? Of course they will! So why do you deny them that joy? Let us humble ourselves and ask for help when we need it. As Paul puts it here in verse 3, **"For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves."** You are not nothing, but don't think you can be something apart from others.

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When I pray for this congregation, one of my consistent prayers over the years has been that there would not be one single person here, myself included, who is left to carry a heavy burden alone. Yes, of course, Christ is the one who ultimately helps us carry our heaviest burdens. But one of the main ways he wants to help us shoulder the heavy burdens which come from simply trying to follow him in this life, is through one another.

At the end of Acts 2, that chapter describing the birth of the church at Pentecost, Luke gives us a detailed picture of the very early church. That church wasn't perfect, but it had some beautiful elements which I believe were meant to be patterns for the days and years to come.

¹⁷ Read this story in Mark 2:1-12.

One part of that passage describe the church as a community where, **“All who believed were together and had all things in common.”**¹⁸ Luke goes on to specify that the church in those early days made sure to share their material possessions so that nobody went without the basics. But I think it was more than that. I think the vision here is of a church which not only makes sure everybody is fed and clothed, but which also makes sure nobody carries any heavy burden, material or otherwise, alone.

We have ministries and resources here at Faith set up to see this realized in our context. When you need practical help, things like meals during an illness, or rides when you can't drive, or help around the house when you can't manage, our Heart to Heart ministry is ready to respond immediately, somebody who will help you bear that specific burden. If you get to place where you just don't know how the money is going to stretch to the end of the month, you need to talk to Brett or me. We have a healthy fund set up to help bridge that sort of gap. When you need a visit because you are sick or feeling alone, there are deacons and staff members and a prayer team who would love to come alongside and sit with you and pray with you. When you have doubts and questions which challenge or even threaten your faith, there are others here who, though they don't have all the answers themselves, can help explain the scriptures in ways that often lead to enlightening and strengthened faith.

But my prayer is that beyond those more formal ministries and resources, the majority of the mutual burden-bearing in this congregation will come in smaller groups and one-on-one relationships where we are really getting to know one another well enough to see how we can share the load. In those places we really do become the body of Christ for one another. Again, nobody lives this life of following Jesus alone, at least for long. The burden is too great.

That stunning chapter of Isaiah 53 which points us forward to the coming Messiah, reminds us that Christ, if nothing else, is one who bears our burdens: **“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering.”**¹⁹ Perhaps it is in bearing one another's burdens that we most reflect the one who first bore our burdens. All glory to him who will one day lift every burden from us which we have ever known. In the meantime, may nobody here carry such burdens alone.

Amen.

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Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being, we humbly confess that we have not loved You with our hearts, souls and minds, and we have not loved our neighbors as Christ loved us. We have all too often lived by our own selfish impulses rather than by the life of sacrificial love as revealed by Christ. We often give in order to receive. We love our friends and hate our enemies. We go the first mile but dare not travel the second. We forgive but dare not forget.

And so as we look within ourselves, we are confronted with the appalling fact that the history of our lives is the history of an eternal revolt against you. But You, O God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know your will. Give us the courage to do your will. Give us the devotion to love your will.

Lord God, we thank you for the life and witness of Jesus. Grant that by his grace within us we will learn to love you with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. And we ask you, God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of our own nation and the world around us are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawn.

We thank you for your church, united by Christ our Cornerstone, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work for justice – racial justice, economic justice, political justice, all things set right in this world. And help us do this work in this world as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you, though we know it ultimately does depend upon you. Help us to realize that humanity was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace. Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the reign of our Lord and of our God.

*All this we pray in the name of our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*²⁰

¹⁸ Acts 2:44

¹⁹ Isaiah 53:4 (NIV)

²⁰ Today's Prayers of the People is inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, whose birthday we celebrate this weekend, and the justice of God for which he gave his life.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Galatians 6:1-3 again. Pay attention to what stands out here to you. What do you notice?
2. Paul urges the church to help one another when we stumble into sin. Do we do this well here in our congregation? Specifically, are you willing to help your brothers and sisters who get tripped up in this way?
3. And do you have people in your life who have the courage to speak the truth in love to you when you have fallen short? If so, how did those relationships come about? If not, how might you cultivate them in your life?
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this in regard to us dealing with our own sin: "When I go to my brother or sister to confess, I am going to God." At another point he said, "He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone." What do you think he means by this? Do you agree? Are we really Christ to one another to this extent?
5. Paul says that as we bear one another's burdens we "fulfill the law of Christ." What do you think he means by this?
6. Can you tell about a time when you needed to carry a burden in your life that was too heavy for you to carry and the church around you helped you bear that burden? Or maybe a time when the church failed to help you bear the burden?
7. Bearing one another's burdens is often inconvenient and disruptive. What is it that threatens to keep you from doing more to bear the burdens of others around you in the church?
8. If you are discussing this as a Life Group, talk about how your group can do a better job of bearing one another's burdens. Be as specific as you can.

Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.



What in this life of following Jesus is to 'heavy' for us to carry by ourselves? Where do we need help from one another in the church?