

Carry One Another's Burdens

Galatians 6:1-10, 14-16

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

July 17, 2004 – Seventh Sunday After Pentecost



Grace to you and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In this morning's Epistle, St. Paul closes, saying: "Carry one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Also he says: "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those of the household of faith." This letter – like so many of Paul's letters – ends with a mixture of Apostolic advice, exhortation, and some suggestions – practical nuts and bolts stuff concerning the freedom we have in Christ – how we are no longer under Law but Grace – how Christ has freed us from the Law of sin and death by His death – and how our freedom is made fruitful by the Spirit to bring forth love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul's words are intended to guard that freedom we have in Christ, so that no kind of legalism will ever restrict it – and so that no worldly thing will ever be added by us to what Jesus' death has accomplished.

But Paul isn't just giving us an Apostolic "to do" list so that we can get on God's "good side." Indeed, that would undo all he had just written. But neither is Paul living with his head in the clouds. Paul knows how hard it is for you to connect the cross of Jesus to everyday life so that it affects not only your time here in Church, but also at home, the office, and in the community where you live. You see, it isn't so difficult to "get it right" when you're "here." It's "out there" in the world, where it gets all screwed up. It's relatively easy to be a Christian amidst all this order, where we're surrounded by people who believe as we do. Here all you have to do is pay a reasonable amount of attention to the sermon, look like you're not bored to tears, stay on the right page, squeak out a few stanzas of a hymn, and bide your time until you can get out of here and go do what you really want to do.

I have *exactly* the same problem. I know *exactly* what I'm supposed to be doing here on Sunday morning – preaching, presiding, and teaching. I know precisely where to stand, what to say, and where I'm supposed to go. Sunday is the most ordered, structured, disciplined day of my week. And I love it for that reason. I don't have to sit and wonder, "What am I going to do now?" I know exactly what I'm going to do next – it's laid out in the liturgy. It's the rest of the week that presents me with all the problems. That's the Improv Theater we all live in – that place where we have no idea what the script is, or even what the next line is going to be. I have an Android Smart Phone to add structure to my life, but the truth is I rarely know what to expect next – and I don't handle sur-

prises terribly well. Life out there in the world is all Improv street theater. It's making it up as you go. And it's there – in our messy, ambiguous, disordered world – that being a Christian – a priest to God in the priesthood of Jesus – is an extremely difficult, hard-to-grasp task.

And so when Paul lays out for the Galatians – and for you and me – these exhortations and expectations, we think we have the freedom to simply write them off as law-we-can't-keep-anyway-so-why-bother-trying. Rather we welcome Paul's admonitions, because it's here where the Apostle is putting flesh and bones to our theology – where he's teaching us how to live as free men and women in Christ, and how to reflect that freedom in Christ to the world. Remember, the world *is* watching to see what we Baptized believers are all about. As Jesus once queried, "Who lights a lamp and hides it under a basket? Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

God intends the Spirit's fruit to be seen in your life. To be sure, it certainly won't save you – nor will it justify you before God. And you dare not use it to try and justify yourself. Good works are to be done in Christian freedom – as free children who recognize that you are *already* justified and glorified in Jesus. The good works you do are done for your neighbor, *not* for yourself. You do them the way apple trees do apples and pear trees do pears. You do them because it's your nature in Christ to do them.

Paul says that if someone is ensnared in a sin, those who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. But the term, "spiritual," – at least in Holy Scripture – seldom means what people usually mean when they say "spiritual" today. I hear people all the time referring to others as "very spiritual." But what does that mean? "Spiritual" in the world's vocabulary often means "religious." To say someone is spiritual means they do religious things – like burn incense, take yoga classes, or meditate in the middle of the living room floor – you know, vague, God-talk-religious-stuff – "spiritual" stuff which often has nothing in common with the Christian faith.

But "spiritual" for St. Paul means "of the Holy Spirit." Those who are spiritual are led by the Holy Spirit to recognize that in themselves they are dead to sin and alive to God *only* in Christ Jesus. They recognize God's mode of operation isn't rehabilitation of the living, but resurrection of those who are dead in their trespasses and sins.

They know that the power of God lies hidden under weakness, and that their most potent weapons come to them only under the homely guise of Baptismal water, Eucharistic bread and wine, and humble words of forgiveness spoken by a mere man. Those are the “spiritual” types Paul is talking about.

When you dive into rushing water to rescue someone, you first have to be tied to a lifeline, or you’re going to be swept away along with the person you’re trying to rescue. Unless you’re anchored to the Rock, to Christ, you’ll never be able to free anyone else. You first have deal with the 2x4 in your own eye before you can have the clarity of vision to help a fellow sinner with the speck in his eye. You are to deal with others sinner to sinner – and because of that you deal with them in a spirit of gentleness. You’re proclaiming freedom to captives, opening prison doors, and helping others into a freedom they aren’t accustomed to. And because some prefer prison to true freedom, they aren’t necessarily going take it kindly when you try to be Nathan to their David. They may not want to be rescued from their prison of drugs, alcohol, sex, self-righteousness, or women’s “rights” – since we’re observing today as “life Sunday,” and since women’s “rights” often include the “right” to abort, or more properly, kill, their unborn children. And when you try to set such people free with the Gospel, you may well take the brunt of it for interfering.

Freedom in Jesus is too good to let someone waste it. So Paul says: “Bear one another’s burdens. Help each other, and so fulfill that law of Christ.” Dear Christian, Jesus loved you to death on the cross. He bore the burden of your sin and shame. And this He did not only to save you, but also that you might now reflect and make Him visible to the world as you love and carry one another’s burdens. When you see someone struggling, take it as a divine call to bear their burden. And before long we’ll have a community of sinner-saints supporting one another as Christ supports them. We’ll have a body whose parts are working together in harmony.

Don’t think more highly of yourself than you ought. All of us from time to time try justify what we do or don’t do by comparing ourselves to others. Instead, test your work against the gold standard of the Law to see if you have anything to boast about. And when you do that, you’ll find you have nothing to boast about save the cross of Jesus – which is where the focus belongs anyway – not on your works, but on Jesus and His cross.

In the end, it’s true, your works will be judged. Everyone will carry his own load on that Day. There’ll be no blame to pass around – no comparisons, and no excuses. Everyone will appear before God to give an account for the works done in the body. The Good News, however, is that although your works will be judged, you won’t be judged by your works – but by the work of Jesus. That’s

the freedom Christ has given you to do good in the first place. You can’t lose. You can only win. A man reaps what he sows. So, if you sow corn, you reap corn. If you sow soybeans, you reap soybeans. If you sow to the flesh, you reap death and corruption, because that’s where the flesh is headed. Sin is never a lifestyle, no matter what the political rhetoric of the day might be or try to tell you. Sin is a death style, and the works of the flesh, our sinful nature, are destined to die. It’s like putting money and sweat into a condemned house awaiting destruction. But the good works which flow from the Spirit last forever. The one who sows to the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life – that’s God’s promise to you in the Person of His Son!

And that’s wonderfully Good News, isn’t it? The good in your life – the good you’ve done, or better, the good God’s worked through you – is never forgotten. You may not receive recognition or a prize in this life. You may not get your name in the paper or be given the key to the city. Most of the good that happens, happens anonymously – day to day, without any recognition. It’s easy to become discouraged, to grow weary, disillusioned, or even cynical. You may not think it makes much difference that a helping hand has been extended to someone considering an abortion, that a bag of food is taken to someone who’s hungry, or someone reaches out to assist a beaten man lying in the ditch. That’s because holiness tends to be earthy and ordinary. It has dirt under its fingernails and a bead of sweat on its brow. And while there’s nothing flashy about it, the fact of the matter is that seeds are still being planted and a harvest is coming. Don’t ever give up, because God’s promise is that the harvest is just around the corner. Even though you may not be given the recognition you feel you deserve, continue to look for opportunities to do good, especially for fellow believers, family members of the household of faith.

Truth be known, St. Paul could have boasted about many of the things he accomplished, yet the only thing he ever boasted in was Christ and His cross – for ultimately what matters isn’t commandment keeping or conformity with the rules, but only the new creation created in Jesus – for all who are in Christ, are part of that new creation. The old has gone, and the new has come. Your Baptism indicates that you are a new creation in Christ – a free child of God – dead to yourself and alive to God in Christ Jesus – set free from the Law to serve others as you have been served – set free to be an icon of Christ to the world – free to serve Christ by serving others. That’s what St. Paul was saying throughout this letter. It may not seem like highbrow theology or be wildly inspirational. But it surely is of Jesus. And in Jesus, that grace of our God and Lord will be with your spirit to keep and sustain you unto life eternal. Amen.