

What is in view

Although we do not want to put anyone on the spot, we do want to explore one reason why, at times, Christians do not develop good and healthy mutual spiritual friendships. Paul has called the Galatians (and us) to a Spirit-led, burden-bearing, shared life. And right in the midst of that call he highlights one reason that it sometimes doesn't happen: self-deception.

What is helpful to note

It is relatively easy, when attention is turned to the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23), to think of this fruit as what I personally experience in my own life. But as we have seen (in Galatians 5:25-6:5 so far), as Paul describes it keeping in step with the Spirit includes far more.

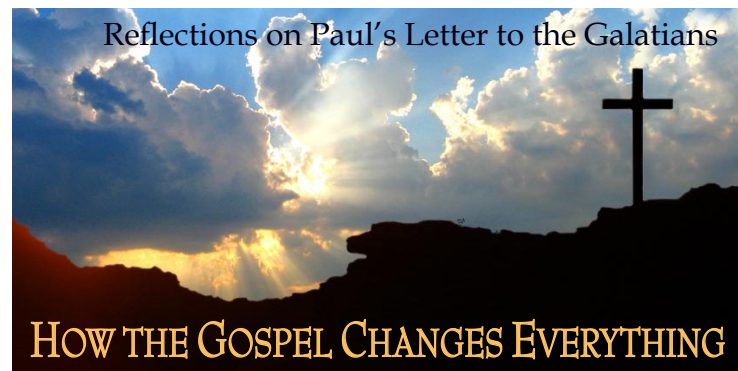
To keep in step with the Spirit results in such things as:
 Not provoking one another, not envying one another.
 Restoring one another, when anyone has stumbled in sin.
 Bearing burdens for one another.

In the middle of this discussion of mutual spiritual friendships, Paul highlights a possible obstacle: self-deception. Notice the flow of thought in verses 6:2-4.

In 6:2 Paul offers a general kind of guideline for life: Jesus intends for us to get under the load for and with one another. Whether aiding someone with an emotional weight, helping in tangible ways with some material need, or coming along side to address some spiritual problem, the really "spiritual" (that is, those in step with the Spirit) are "there for one another."

But notice that 6:3 begins with the word "for."¹ This shows us that 6:3 is logically connected to the idea of 6:2. The call in

"There is a great difference between introspection and self-examination. True self-examination is not merely taking one's spiritual pulse beat on a regular basis but rather submitting one's thoughts, attitudes and actions to the will of God and the mind of Christ revealed in the Scripture."
 Timothy George



6:2 is to bear one another's burdens and 6:3 tells us why this call is needed: because some don't step in and do this because they *think they are something when they are nothing*.

6:4 then starts with a word of contrast: "but."² In contrast to those who think wrongly about themselves, some "test their own work" and rather than compare themselves to others try and think rightly about who they are in Christ and what it is the Spirit is doing in them. As a result, they appropriately bear their own load (6:5) but also can get under the burden that others find too overwhelming.

What does Paul mean in speaking of those who think they are "something" when they are "nothing" (6:3)? Simply put, it seems that Paul is insisting that every Christian realize that all that he or she is is a result of Christ's work and the Spirit's presence. Given that, it would be wholly inappropriate to either look down one's nose at others (for example, those caught in a trespass; 6:1) and refuse to shoulder a burden, just as it would be wholly inappropriate to refuse to let others get under one's own load because of an unwillingness to be seen by others as needed.

It is only in the community of grace, where we all recognize that we have life because of Jesus and through the Spirit, that we can be genuine and real about our own shortcomings and needs and can get under the load of others without disdain and without being conceited or spiteful (see 5:26).

Talking to your group

As you talk with your group, although the opening questions lead into the subject by trying to uncover the reality that we all are wrong from time to time, the real issue is not about fallibility. Although it is true that we are all fallible, the real obstacle to healthy spiritual friendships is not an unwillingness to admit fallibility as much as an unwillingness to see myself (and, therefore, others) as products of the grace of God.

When I convince myself that I have, to some degree, "arrived" and that I am, to some degree, self-sufficient, I am self-deceived. And, being deceived, I will not be able to either experience or enjoy the rich and life-promoting spiritual friendship that the Lord desires for us all for our mutual growth in grace.

¹The "for" appears as the first word in most translations of 6:3; unfortunately, the NIV drops this word from the translation.

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 Philip Graham Ryken

Questions for Reflection and for Group Discussion

Thinking . . .

Everybody ends up being wrong about some things; no one always sees everything right all the time. Can you recall a time when you were mistaken and the results were funny (rather than tragic!)?

Why do we sometimes have trouble admitting when we are wrong? What holds us back from such honesty?

Reflecting . . .

As Paul challenges us to live in the Spirit in the midst of community, we have discussed what that kind of mutual "burden-bearing" life is like. Let's revisit that passage one more time for one more insight. Read Galatians 5:25-6:5.

What is the basic call being extended to those who are "spiritual"?

What is the connection between 6:2, 3, and 4? How do you understand the flow of thought?

Given what you see in this text, what is the relationship between effectively bearing the burdens of others in the Spirit and the problem of self-deception?

Responding . . .

Although other things might be hindering you from deep and meaningful spiritual friendships with others, what part do you think the way you choose to view yourself is having on developing such friendships?

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Reflections on Paul's Letter to the Galatians



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