

ONE ANOTHER

Cultivating Christ-Centered Community

LESSON EIGHT



THE FRUIT OF BEARING ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

- Journeying with others in transparent and authentic ways that lead deeply into the reality of being God's family
- Growing in love and concern for others, not just in word but in action
- Supporting others in need of healing, care, courage, and patience
- Sharing your journey and burdens with one another in prayer
- Understanding and supporting those you are quick to judge
- Confessing the truth to others who can encourage you and help you stay the course
- Listening with others in the presence of Jesus; seeking God for forgiveness and freedom in Christ

BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

"If all were perfect, what should we have to suffer from others for God's sake? But God has so ordained, that we may learn to bear with one another's burdens, for there is no man without fault, no man without burden, no man sufficient to himself nor wise enough. Hence we must support one another, console one another, mutually help, counsel, and advise, for the measure of every man's virtue is best revealed in time of adversity -- adversity that does not weaken a man but rather shows what he is."

— Thomas à Kempis (d. 1471), *The Imitation of Christ*

Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation.

— Psalm 68:19

Every day we walk among people carrying heavy burdens. We live in a moment when almost everyone feels weary and worn. Too much has come at us too fast. Some of these burdens have come from others, some are the result of external circumstances, and some are self-inflicted. But no matter how these burdens occurred, hurting people need to meet the compassion of Jesus.

We are weary and burdened, but to the weary and burdened, Jesus says, "Come to me. The world is harsh, but I am gentle; the age is arrogant but I am humble; the times are hard, but my yoke is easy. Come to me and I will give you rest." (see Matt 11:28-30)

Christ longs to touch this suffering world through the compassion of his church. As his apprentices, we must know how to look for pain in the eyes of others. We must find opportunities and means to comfort, encourage, and support those who are struggling and suffering. We must believe that love always has hands and feet.

Ultimately, it is our choices and priorities that reveal whether the church today becomes known as a people who carry and bear the burdens of one another or a place where people only look out for themselves.

May we be a community that lets others experience the fact that, beyond their burdens and anguish, there are human hands that hold them and show them God's faithful love.

BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Galatians 6:2

Read Galatians 5:22–6:10

The “fruit of the Spirit” that we see in Galatians 5:22 are really all about relationships and how we manage life together. These things uphold human *being* (being human) in relationships with God, others, and self within creation. Paul thinks of the church as an extended family, in which members should take responsibility for one another. He wants the members of the Galatian churches to see themselves not as rivals (5:26), but as brothers and sisters supporting one another as they walk through times of spiritual warfare.

Galatians 6 allows Paul to say more about what the life of people who live by the Spirit looks like. He continues describing what life in community looks like when we live in the freedom Christ gives and use that freedom to serve one another.

The phrase “you who are spiritual” (6:1, NIV) refers to all members of the community, not to a select group of spiritual leaders. (NRSV tries to clarify this point by offering the paraphrase “you who have received the Spirit”). By addressing the Galatians in this way, Paul gently challenges them to accept and live up to the description: They are to be people whose identity is shaped by the Spirit. In this case, “spiritual” means to act for the mending of the community, the recovery of order and peace. (R. Hays, *Galatians*, 348).

Because we bear responsibility for one another, we can’t allow other members of the family to go astray; we have an obligation to live as faithful followers of Jesus. Paul first offers the example of dealing with a member of the community who has been overcome by sin. “You who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (6:1). Gentleness, after all, is one of the fruits of the Spirit. As Richard Hays observes: “The goal of dealing with the transgressor is not punishment, but restoration and healing. The verb *katartizo* is often used “as a medical term, to refer to setting a bone or joint right so that proper healing can occur” (*Galatians*, 340).

To live under the guidance of the Spirit is also to live in a relationship of interdependence. “Bear one another's burdens,” Paul says, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). Paul has a radical understanding of the responsibility believers have for one another. They are to share all burdens, even the burdens of guilt and shame when one of them goes astray. Bearing one another’s burdens also entails the sharing the stresses and sorrows of life, the practice of economic sharing, and all kinds of imaginative ways of becoming servants to one another (Gal 5:13).

What is the source of the command to bear one another’s burdens? Paul leaves no doubt about the answer to this question. If the Galatians bear the burdens of their brothers and sisters, they will fulfill “the Law of Christ,” the command to love neighbor as self (5:14). Christ “fulfilled the Law” through his self-sacrificial death (see Galatians 1:4; 2:20), which embodied and illustrated the meaning of love—and therefore also the Law’s true meaning (cf. Romans 15:1-4). In this way, Christ took possession of the Law and transformed it. From the point of his death onward, the Law can be understood anew as the Law of Christ, the Law defined by him (Hays, 341).

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The Galatians, then, are called to reenact the event by which Christ brought the Law to fulfillment. To paraphrase verse 2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you yourselves will repeat Christ’s deed, bringing to completion in your communities the Law that Christ has already brought to completion in the command about loving the neighbor” (Martyn, Galatians, 547-48). To fulfill the Law of Christ, then, is to play out over and over again in the life of the community the pattern of self-sacrificial love that he revealed in his death.

As one author reminds us, loving the neighbor this way means resisting self-deception (6:3), recognizing that I am just as vulnerable to temptation as my neighbor and every bit as dependent upon the grace of God (Henrich, “Self-Awareness in the Cross”). It means that rather than comparing myself to my neighbor, I engage in self-examination: "Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load" (6:4-5).

How, then, do we get from “bear one another’s burdens” (v. 2) to “bear your own load” (v. 5)? We hold each other up. We are present in burdensome times. When we are left alone in burdensome times there is a strong sense that the faith has failed. In holding each other up, we never start thinking, *I'm better than you*. Mother Teresa’s “Patient’s Prayer” is a good example of this, as she speaks of times when *she should be the healer*, and other times when *she needs to be healed*. We need to examine our lives, not in comparison to our neighbor, but only to see whether we are walking according to the Spirit. We do what is needed on behalf of our neighbor, just as God has done what was needed for God’s people.

By calling his hearers (both then and now) not to grow tired (6:9-10), Paul reminds us that this is indeed a hard way to live. To continue Paul’s harvest metaphor, such a life must be sown in graciousness, perseverance, and a refusal to judge who is worthy of help and who is not. Such a life needs the Spirit’s presence surrounding and filling it. It needs the presence of others who are “filled with the Spirit” (the meaning of the word *pneumatikoi* in 6:1) to assist us when we’re burdened.

Ultimately, Paul insists that the church is to be a community in which believers share responsibility for one another’s lives. Life in the Spirit is not a life of lonely wandering, not a life restricted to a zone of privacy; rather, it is a life lived in community. The church, like an extended family of brothers and sisters, is characterized by the interdependence of its members.

By urging the Galatians to bear one another’s burdens, Paul calls them to conform their lives to the self-sacrificial pattern of Jesus’ life. He operates from the same understanding that informs his counsel in passages such as Philippians 2:1-13; 1 Corinthians 11:1; and 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7. When we look not to our own interests but to the interests of others (Phil 2:4), we are faithfully mirroring the character of “the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us” (Gal 2:20).

Because we are members of one body in Christ, our common welfare depends on the spiritual health of each members, and we have a stake in helping one another walk faithfully.

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How do we begin to carry one another’s burdens? What are some practical ways to put this command into action? In a collection of articles on comforting those who are burdened and suffering, John Mark Hicks provides a number of suggestions for us to consider:

Show Up, Be Present, and Have a Healthy Sense of Inadequacy: The most important thing is not what you say, but your presence. Those who are carrying heavy burdens need connection. Don’t leave them alone and isolated. Make them feel seen and heard. Be present and be God’s instrument of comfort. One of the worst things to someone who is burdened is for someone to come with all the answers, so assume a posture of humility and engage them with compassion.

Be Willing To Listen and Experience the Other’s Pain: We may have enough problems in our own lives that we often don’t want to experience the pain and hear about the problems of others, but a sufferer needs someone to listen and feel with them. Proverbs 25:2. Be willing to listen without needing to have a response to everything they share. When we are willing to sit with others in their feelings they can also feel the empathy of God’s own presence.

Bless and Affirm: Words of blessing and affirmation can make all the difference to someone who is bent beneath their load. We all need to hear that we have value, gifts, and talents. We need people in our lives who will say, “No matter what has happened or what burden your carrying, I love you and I will walk with you through every valley.” We need people who will never leave us or forsake us; we need people who will be the instrument of God’s own faithfulness.

Do Something: A burdened person doesn’t need more burdens. People need assistance—sometimes with kids, sometimes with finances, sometimes with jobs. Ask them what we need; do something for them without asking. Demonstrate God’s love to them as a way of reminding them that God loves them.

In sum, we can begin to carry another’s burdens by being present with them, listening to them, weeping with them, expressing our love for them, telling them how we feel about them, and doing something for them. Much more could be said, but if we can love those who are heavily burdened in at least these ways, it can be truly transforming and comforting.

DISCUSSION

1. What is one of the most physically exhausting things that you've ever done? Did you do it by yourself or did you have help?
2. The "fruit of the Spirit" that we see in Galatians 5:22 are really all about relationships and how we manage life together. Which virtues (fruit) of the Spirit from 5:22 are most essential to living out what Paul says about the community in Galatians 6:1-5, especially the command to bear one another's burdens?
3. Describe the ways in which another person has helped you carry a burden, or describe how you helped someone else carry a burden. On a basic level, what does this look like in practice?
4. Loving our neighbor in the that Paul describes in 6:2 means resisting self-deception (6:3), recognizing that I am every bit as vulnerable to temptation as my neighbor, every bit as dependent upon the grace of God.
 - How good are you at carrying your own load? When does a load become a burden you need to share with others?
 - How have you learned the difference?
5. Paul insists that the church is to be a community in which believers share responsibility for one another's lives. Life in the Spirit is not a life restricted to a zone of privacy; rather, it is a life lived in community. Because we are members of one body in Christ, our common welfare depends on the spiritual health of each members, and we have a stake in helping one another walk faithfully.
 - In what ways do we embody this identity as a church? In what ways can we continue to grow into this identity?
 - How do we grow in transparency about our own burdens and in our willingness to let others help carry them?