

The Gospel *and the* Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 6:1–10, Matt. 18:15–17, 1 Cor. 10:12, Rom. 15:1, John 13:34, Luke 22:3.*

Memory Text: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (*Galatians 6:10, ESV*).

Some farmers decided to save the biggest vegetables for themselves and to plant the smaller ones as seed. After a few disappointing harvests, they discovered that nature had reduced their crops to the size of marbles. Through this disaster, those farmers learned an important law of life.

“They could not have the best things of life for themselves and use the leftovers for seed. The law of life decreed that the harvest would reflect the planting.

“In another sense, planting small [vegetables] is still common practice. We take the big things of life for ourselves and plant the leftovers. We expect that by some crazy twist of spiritual laws, our selfishness will be rewarded with unselfishness.”—*International Student Fellowship Newsletter*, March 2007.

Paul applies this principle in Galatians 6:1–10. Instead of its members “bit[ing] and devour[ing] one another” (*Gal. 5:15*), the church should be a place where the Spirit leads us to put others before ourselves. Understanding that we are saved by grace should make us humble and more patient and compassionate in how we treat others.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 23.

Restoring the Fallen

While Paul has lofty expectations for the nature of the Christian life (*Gal. 5:16*), his counsel to the believers in Galatians 6:1 also is refreshingly realistic. Humans are not perfect, and even the most dedicated Christians are not immune from making mistakes. In Greek, Paul's words in Galatians 5:16 indicate that he is envisioning a situation in which such mistakes might occur. Paul gives the Galatians practical advice on how to deal with such situations when they arise.

How should Christians respond when a fellow believer falls into some sinful behavior? *Gal. 6:1, Matt. 18:15–17.*

To benefit from Paul's advice in Galatians 6:1, we need to understand the precise type of situation that Paul has in mind. The two words used in the first half of the sentence offer clarification. The first word can be translated as *caught* (*ESV*) or *overtaken* (*KJV*). It literally means “to be detected, overtaken, or surprised.” The context and different nuances associated with this word suggest that Paul has two aspects in mind. This is because it refers not only to a believer who “catches” another believer in the act of some wrongdoing but also to the process by which a person finds himself “overtaken” by a behavior (*see Prov. 5:22*) that, under the best of circumstances, he would have chosen to avoid.

The likelihood that the wrongdoing Paul is discussing is not deliberate is evident from the terminology he uses. The word translated as “fault” (*KJV*) or “sin” (*NIV*), which comes from the Greek word *parap-toma*, does not refer to a deliberate sin but to a mistake, a stumble, or a false step. The latter makes particular sense in light of Paul's previous comments about “walking” in the Spirit. Although this in no way excuses the person's mistake, it makes clear that Paul is not dealing with a case of defiant sin (*1 Cor. 5:1–5*).

The proper response in such circumstances should not be punishment, condemnation, or disfellowship but restoration. The Greek word translated as “restore” is *katartizo*, and it means “to mend” or “to put in order.” In the New Testament it is used to refer to the “mending” of fishnets (*Matt. 4:21*), and it is used as a medical term in Greek literature to describe the process of setting a broken bone. In the same way that we would not abandon a fellow believer who fell and broke a leg, as members of the body of Christ we should gently care for our brothers and sisters in Christ who may stumble and fall as we walk together on the path to God's kingdom.

Instead of practicing Matthew 18:15–17, why do we so often talk badly about the person with whom we're angry, let our anger simmer against the person, or even plan revenge?

Beware of Temptation

“And Nathan said to David, *Thou art the man*” (2 Sam. 12:7).

The seriousness of Paul’s words in Galatians 6:1—to guard our own lives lest we also follow into temptation—should not be overlooked. An indication of the urgency and personal concern behind Paul’s counsel can be seen in the way he makes his appeal. The word translated as “considering” (*KJV*) or “take care” (*NRSV*) literally means “to look at carefully” or “to pay careful attention to” (compare Rom. 16:17, Phil. 2:4). So, what Paul literally is saying is, “Keep a careful eye on yourself” lest sin also takes you by surprise. To highlight this warning, Paul switches from the second person plural (“you all”) in the first half of Galatians 6:1 to the second person singular (“you”) in the last half of the verse. This is no general warning that applies to the whole congregation; it is a personal warning addressed to each individual within the church.

Paul does not explicitly identify the nature of the temptation that he so strongly warns the Galatians against. Perhaps he didn’t have one specific trespass in mind but is simply referring to the danger of committing the *same* sin, whatever it is, from which the Galatians are trying to restore one another. At the same time, his words in Galatians 5:26 against becoming “conceited” (*NKJV*) suggest that he is warning the Galatians against feeling that they are in some way spiritually superior to those they are restoring.

Why would Paul need to warn the Galatians against spiritual pride?

Consider 1 Cor. 10:12, Matt. 26:34, and 2 Sam. 12:1–7.

One of the greatest dangers to the Christian walk is a sense of spiritual pride. Such pride makes us think we are somehow immune from committing certain types of sin. The sobering fact is that we all have the same sinful nature—a nature that is opposed to God. Thus, without the restraining power of God’s Spirit, we could stoop to just about any sin, were the circumstances right. Such an awareness of our true identity outside of Christ can keep us from falling into the sin of self-righteousness, and it also can give us greater sympathy for others who make mistakes.

How many times have you found yourself condemning others (maybe even only in your heart) for doing sins that, at one time, you were guilty of yourself?

Burden Bearing (Gal. 6:2–5)

In addition to restoring the fallen, what other instructions does Paul give to the believers in Galatia? (Gal. 6:2–5; see also Rom. 15:1, Matt. 7:12).

The Greek word translated as “burden” in Galatians 6:5 is *baros*. It literally refers to a heavy weight or load that someone had to carry a long distance. Over time, however, it also has become a metaphor for any type of trouble or difficulty, such as the burden of a long day’s work on a hot day (Matt. 20:12). While the immediate context of Paul’s injunction to “bear one another’s burdens” certainly includes the moral lapses of the fellow believers mentioned in the preceding verse, the concept of burden bearing he has in mind is much broader. Paul’s instructions reveal several spiritual insights about the Christian life that should not be overlooked.

First, as Timothy George notes, “All Christians have burdens. Our burdens may differ in size and shape and will vary in kind depending on the providential order of our lives. For some it is the burden of temptation and the consequences of a moral lapse, as in verse 1 here. For others it may be a physical ailment, or a mental disorder, or a family crisis, or lack of employment, or demonic oppression, or a host of other things; but no Christian is exempt from burdens.”—*Galatians*, p. 413.

Second, God does not intend for us to bear *all* our burdens alone. Unfortunately, we often are far more willing to help others to carry their burdens than we are in allowing others to help us shoulder our own. Paul condemns this attitude of self-sufficiency (Gal. 6:3) as human pride, when we refuse to admit that we also have needs and weaknesses. Such pride not only robs us of the comfort of others but also prevents others from fulfilling the ministry that God has called them to perform.

Finally, God calls us to bear the burdens of others because it is through our actions that God’s comfort is made manifest. This concept is built on the fact that the church is the body of Christ. An illustration of this is in Paul’s words, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Cor. 7:6, *ESV*). Notice that God’s comfort was not given to Paul through his private prayer and waiting upon the Lord, but through the companionship of a friend and through the good news which he brought.

“Human friendship, in which we bear one another’s burdens, is part of the purpose of God for His people.”—John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, p. 158.

What keeps you from seeking help—pride, shame, a lack of trust, or a sense of self-sufficiency? If in need, why not seek out someone whom you trust and ask this person to share your burdens?

The Law of Christ (*Gal. 6:2–5*)

Paul connects burden bearing with fulfilling the law of Christ. What does he mean by “the law of Christ”? *Gal. 5:14, 6:2, John 13:34, Matt. 22:34–40.*

Paul’s use of the phrase “the law of Christ” (*ton nomon tou Christou*) occurs nowhere else in the Bible, though he uses a similar expression in 1 Corinthians 9:21 (*ennomos Christou*). The uniqueness of this phrase has resulted in a number of different interpretations. Some mistakenly argue that this is evidence that the law of God given at Sinai has been replaced by a different law, the law of Christ. Others claim the word *law* simply means a general “principle” (*see Rom. 7:21*), meaning that in bearing the burdens of others we are following the example of Jesus. While the latter interpretation has some merit, the context and similar terminology with Galatians 5:14 suggest that “fulfil[ling] the law of Christ” is another reference to fulfilling the moral law through love. Paul showed earlier in his letter that the moral law was not annulled with the coming of Christ. Instead, the moral law interpreted by love continues to play an important role in the Christian life. This is the epitome of what Jesus taught during His earthly ministry, as well as practiced throughout His life and even in His death. Thus, in bearing the burdens of others, we are not only following in the footsteps of Jesus but also fulfilling the law.

Another issue that arises in these texts is the apparent contradiction between Galatians 6:2 and 6:5. This problem, however, is easily resolved when one realizes that Paul is using two different words to describe two different situations. As we have already seen, the word for “burden” in verse 2 (*baros*) refers to a heavy load that has to be carried for a long distance. The word *phortion* in verse 5, however, refers to a ship’s cargo, a soldier’s backpack, or even a child in the womb. Whereas the former burdens can be laid aside, the latter cannot. A pregnant mother must carry her own child. As this example suggests, there are some burdens that people can help us bear but others that no human can bear for us, such as the burden of a guilty conscience, suffering, and death. For these, we must rely on God’s help alone (*Matt. 11:28–30*).

While for some burdens you can get help from other people, some you have to take to the Lord alone. How can you learn to give to the Lord the things that you just can’t bear?

Sowing and Reaping *(Gal. 6:6–10)*

In Galatians 6:7, the word translated as “mocked” (*mukterizo*) occurs only here in the New Testament, though it often appears in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It literally means “to turn up one’s nose in contempt.” In the Old Testament it typically refers to the despising of God’s prophets (*2 Chron. 36:16, Jer. 20:7*), and it even is used once to describe graphically a rebellious attitude toward God (*Ezek. 8:17*).

Paul’s point is that people may ignore God or even flout His commandments, but they cannot outwit God. He is the ultimate judge, and in the end they will have to pay the price for their actions.

Read Galatians 6:8. What does Paul mean here? What examples can you find in the Bible of characters sowing to the flesh and sowing to the Spirit? (See, for example, *Acts 5:1–5, Luke 22:3, Dan. 1:8, Matt. 4:1.*)

Paul’s metaphor about sowing and reaping is not unique. It is a fact of life that appears in many ancient proverbial sayings. What is significant, however, is how Paul uses it to highlight his previous comments about the flesh and the Spirit. James D. G. Dunn notes, “A modern equivalent is that we are free to choose, but we are not free to choose the consequences of our choice.”—*Galatians*, p. 330.

Although God does not always deliver us from the earthly consequences of our sins, we should not be overcome with despair for the bad choices we have made. We can rejoice that God has forgiven us of our sins and adopted us as His children. We should capitalize on the opportunities we have now to invest in those things that will yield a heavenly harvest.

Galatians 6:10, meanwhile, illustrates the point that “Christian ethics has a dual focus: one is universal and all-embracing, ‘Let us do good to all people’; the other is particular and specific, ‘especially to those who belong to the family of believers.’ Paul’s universalistic appeal was based on the fact that all persons everywhere are created in the image of God and are thus infinitely precious in his sight. Whenever Christians have forgotten this primary *datum* of biblical revelation, they have inevitably fallen victim to the blinding sins of racism, sexism, tribalism, classism, and a thousand other bigotries that have blighted the human community from Adam and Eve to the present day.”—Timothy George, *Galatians*, pp. 427, 428.

You are sowing right now, either for good or bad. Look at yourself. What kind of harvest are you going to reap?

Further Thought: “The Spirit of God keeps evil under the control of conscience. When man exalts himself above the influence of the Spirit, he reaps a harvest of iniquity. Over such a man the Spirit has less and less influence to restrain him from sowing seeds of disobedience. Warnings have less and less power over him. He gradually loses his fear of God. He sows to the flesh; he will reap corruption. The harvest of the seed that he himself has sown, is ripening. He has a contempt for God’s holy commandments. His heart of flesh becomes a heart of stone. Resistance to truth confirms him in iniquity. It is because men sowed seeds of evil, that lawlessness, crime, and violence prevailed in the antediluvian world.

“All should be intelligent in regard to the agency by which the soul is destroyed. It is not because of any decree that God has sent out against man. He does not make man spiritually blind. God gives sufficient light and evidence to enable man to distinguish truth from error. But He does not force man to receive truth. He leaves him free to choose the good or to choose the evil. If man resists evidence that is sufficient to guide his judgment in the right direction, and chooses evil once, he will do this more readily the second time. The third time he will still more eagerly withdraw himself from God and choose to stand on the side of Satan. And in this course he will continue until he is confirmed in evil, and believes the lie he has cherished as truth. His resistance has produced its harvest (MS 126, 1901).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1112.

Discussion Question:

- 1 In a practical sense, what does it really mean to “restore” a fellow believer who has fallen into sin? In what ways does the nature of the sin committed affect the restoration process? Does restoration mean that everything will be the same as before? Discuss.
- 2 Because there are some burdens that people must bear on their own (*Gal. 6:5*), how does a believer determine if he or she should try to help someone?
- 3 How does your church measure up to Paul’s instructions in Galatians 6? What can you do personally to make a difference?

Summary: The indication of God’s presence among His people is in the Christlike spirit manifest within the church. It can be seen in the way forgiveness and restoration are extended to those who err, in how they help each other in trials, and in intentional acts of kindness shared not only among themselves but also with unbelievers.