

Christian Community is Marked by Burden-Sharing

A Sermon on Galatians 5:25-6:10

Knox @ Faith PCA Tacoma

August 25, 2024 AM

This morning's sermon will be the last of a four-part sermon series that Pastor Steven asked me to preach leading up to our small group launch in September. While the previous three sermons each gave a theological rationale for the three main activities of small group meetings (*hospitality, sermon discussion, and prayer*), this sermon will focus more on the intended by-product of these activities: bearing each other's burdens. In other words, bearing each other's burdens will not so much be a distinct item on the schedule of each small group meeting, as it will be, Lord willing, the cumulative effect of hosting, knowing, speaking truth to, encouraging, sympathizing with, and praying for one another.

Although the idea of bearing each other's burdens is taught, modeled, or implied at many points in the Bible, few passages, if any, are as clear, direct, or comprehensive as Galatians 5:25-6:10. Moreover, this is one of the main passages from which we've drawn the mission statement for our small groups.¹ So, for both of those reasons, I think it's important to revisit this passage today, even though I preached on Galatians 6:1-5 just a few months ago in the context of the Peacemaking series. While there will be some overlap between that sermon and this one, I want to reassure you that this will be a different sermon since the act of restoring is only one aspect of the broader work of bearing each other's burdens.

I also want to begin this morning by acknowledging my indebtedness to Pastor Steven, whose sermon on this passage from 2022 was helpful to me,² and whose thinking laid much of the foundation for our small group structure. If you weren't here in spring of 2022 for the series he did on our church's theological vision, then I encourage you to consider checking out the entire series online.

As I continued to work on the sermon throughout the week, I realized after it was too late that 5:25 and 26 would be important verses for this sermon. So, please forgive my mistake in omitting those two verses from the bulletin.

¹ By the way, the mission statement of our small groups is, "to build each other up and bear each other's burdens."

² Nicoletti, Steven. "Our Theological Vision: Aspirational Values: Shepherding and Discipleship. Galatians 5:25-6:5. May 1, 2022. Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

As we read the passage together, notice with me how central burden-sharing is to Paul's vision of Christian community.

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep the text in front of you, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Galatians 5:25-6:10 shows us that Christian community is marked by burden-sharing. To see why and how that is so, let's consider five questions: What burdens do we bear? How do we bear each other's burdens? What hinders us from bearing each other's burdens? Why should we bear each other's burdens? And what encourages us to persevere in bearing each other's burdens?

First, what burdens do we bear? Look again at verse 2 and notice that Paul simply assumes that all of us have burdens to bear. Paul can safely make that assumption because we live in a fallen world.

Biblically, burdens are whatever makes life frustrating, wearisome, perplexing, toilsome, and/or grievous. On this side of the Fall, work, for example, is often burdensome. Matthew 20:12 illustrates this when some of the workers in Jesus' parable of the vineyard describe their manual labor as "bearing the burden of the day and the scorching heat." Imagine spending 12 hours under a Middle Eastern sun, bending, squatting, and stretching to pick grapes and to carry heavy baskets! Fears are another category of things which the Bible describes as burdensome. Proverbs 12:25 says that "anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down." A common description of anxiety is that it feels like a weight on the chest. Hebrews 12:1 describes sin as a burden that tires and slows us down in our Christian walk, "let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Imagine trying to run a marathon with a backpack full of bricks. A guilty conscience is a heavy burden. Listen to how David describes it in Psalm 32:3-4, "For when I kept silent [*i.e. did not confess my sins*], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." Grief is one of the heaviest burdens we bear in this life. Think of Jacob's reaction in Genesis 42:38 to the idea of Benjamin going down to Egypt with his other sons, "But he said, 'My son shall not go down with you, for his brother [*i.e. Joseph*] is dead, and he is the only one [*i.e. only son of my chosen and beloved wife, Rachel*] left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol." Picture Jacob falling headlong into his grave, weighed down with crushing grief. Surely the wrath and curse of God must be the heaviest of burdens. Think of Jesus' warning in Matthew 18:6, "but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

As you can see in just these few examples, this imagery of burdens fits into a broader pattern of Biblical symbolism that associates downward movement with humility, suffering, shame, defeat, and death. Adam fell into sin. Joseph's brothers threw him down into a pit. Jonah 2 says that the great fish carried the recalcitrant prophet down to the depths of the seas, and "the belly of Sheol." During his earthly ministry, Jesus said that he saw Satan fall like lightning, and John saw Satan being thrown down into the abyss.

But this way of speaking isn't just an idiosyncrasy of the Ancient Near East. We often communicate with the same kinds of metaphors. When someone is obviously sad, we say, "what's got you down today?" When someone looks anxious we ask, "What's weighing on you?" When you hear bad news you might say, "that's heavy." When someone looks weary and stressed out we say, "He's wearing the weight of the world on his shoulders."

But even more profoundly, these patterns seem to be engraved in our bodies. When we fail, when our guilt is exposed, or when we mourn, we hang our heads in shame or grief, almost as if there was a physical burden on our back. Think about the moments of profound failure, loss, or shame that you have either experienced or witnessed: your favorite athlete striking out, tapping out, or fumbling at the pivotal moment of the game, the funeral of a child, the conviction and sentencing of your friend, the day when your dad was fired from his job, the moment when your spouse or parent left. These moments weigh heavier on us than a barbell that is frowning with a full stack of 45 pound plates on both sides.

We've already named several of the most common burdens, and if we were to search the entire Bible and our experiences in this fallen world, I'm sure that we could name dozens more. But for our purposes this morning, it's sufficient to group them into four basic categories: needs, weaknesses, sins, and suffering.

Look again at Galatians 6:6 and notice that the first category, needs, is represented by Paul's exhortation to financially support faithful ministers. Although it may seem like Paul has transitioned in verse 6 to a new section of thought unrelated to the call to bear each other's burdens, I think there are several clues that these are connected in his mind. The first is simply that the previous verse, verse 5, clearly continues the theme of burden-sharing, as Paul clarifies that sharing each other's burdens does not erase our individual responsibility before the Lord at Judgement Day. The second clue is found in the Greek word that the ESV translates as "share." In Greek the word is *koinoneo*, which is the verb corresponding to *koinonia*, fellowship. When you take this passage as a whole, it's clear that the call to bear each other's burdens is inextricably woven into the more general call to Christian fellowship. After all, Paul says in verse 2 that the bearing each other's burdens fulfills the law of Christ, and just a few verses ago, in 5:14,

he told us that “the whole law is fulfilled in one word: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The third clue that verse 6 is still related to the theme of burden-bearing is that Paul himself describes the financial support of ministers as a “burden” in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12.

Now, in one sense, meeting the needs of others and having needs of our own, is not, or at least should not, be burdensome to us. What would we think of a parent who thought it “burdensome” to meet his children’s need for affection by giving them hugs and verbal affirmation, or who thought it “burdensome” to meet their needs for food by making their meals. After all, even Adam in his unfallen state, apparently had needs, which is why the Lord declared Adam’s his condition in Paradise “not good” and made him a helper, Eve. Surely a large part of Eve’s calling was to meet Adam’s needs, that is, to supply his lack, and surely this validates the idea that not all of our needs are necessarily the result of Fall. Some are merely the result of being creatures. It seems misguided to call any of Adam’s pre-Fall needs “burdensome.”

But what makes this category of “needs” tricky is that, on this side of the Fall, virtually every need is complicated, amplified, or aggravated by sin. Sometimes we are selfish, entitled, and demanding, which causes us to confuse self-indulgent wishes with genuine needs. Sometimes we are proud, self-reliant, or naive, and so we ignore or deny the real needs we have. Sometimes we are surrounded by people who are manipulative, unsympathetic, or tyrannical, and so we are forced to conceal our needs, lest they be used against us. And many times the hardships of life in this fallen world simply mean that meeting the legitimate needs of others is exhausting, or even, impossible.

Prior to the Fall, Adam would still have needed food and water to survive. But prior to the Fall there would not have been drought, famine, war, and theft to make eating and drinking burdensome. Prior to the Fall, Adam would have needed the companionship of other people, and cooperation to complete his task of filling and subduing the earth. But prior to the Fall, there would not have been the myriad of vices that destroy companionship and cooperation.

In a similar kind of way, we could point out that the Bible teaches that children are a blessing, and so it should follow that meeting their needs is also a blessing to the parents. And yet, which of us would deny that being a single-parent can be a heavy burden at times? It wasn’t meant to be this way. You were supposed to have a partner to help carry the load.

Likewise, the Bible clearly teaches that the Lord designed marriage to be one of His greatest blessings. Therefore it would seem to follow that husbands and wives meeting each other’s needs is always a joy, never a burden. And yet, which of us could deny abusive marriages are crushing burdens? That trying to meet the endless “needs” of a tyrannical spouse is burdensome? It wasn’t meant to be this way.

In this fallen world, meeting the needs of others, and even dealing with our own needs, can be burdensome.

Secondly, weaknesses. Although Paul does not explicitly name this category of burdens here in Galatians 6, he does name it at several other points: Romans 15:1, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” I Thessalonians 5:14, “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”

Some weaknesses are sinful in and of themselves: when we say that a man has a weakness for alcohol, or sweets, or women, or video games, we are implying that he is a drunkard, a glutton, an adulterer, or a sluggard. Paul speaks in a similar way in Romans 5:6 when he says “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

Other weaknesses are not sinful in and of themselves, but are still the sad and frustrating results of the Fall: depression, debilitating diseases and physical disabilities, paralyzing phobias, and mental illnesses for example.

Thirdly, sins. Look again at Galatians 6:1 and notice that Paul explicitly names sin as a category of burdens here, much like the writer to the Hebrews does in Hebrews 12:1. We could probably do an entire sermon series on how and why sin is burdensome. The shame of sin weighs on the conscience. The mastery of sin weighs on a sinner like chains and an iron collar. The guilt of sin threatens to drag a sinner down to hell. And the sorrow of sin can slow even a strong Christian down to a crawl.

Fourthly, suffering. This is the most obvious category of burdens, and given that I’ve already named several examples, I’ll refrain from elaborating.

Now, I admit that I have belabored this whole first point. It’s a bit long, I know. But I’ve belabored it, not to be dour or severe or depressing, but simply because I want you to realize and to remember that your brothers and sister all have burdens to bear. Many of them may be invisible on Sunday mornings when you are standing in the Narthex drinking coffee and chatting about the weather or the sports game. But that does not make them any lighter or any less real.

It is our hope that the intimate setting of hospitality, combined with discussion of sermons, earnest prayer, and time to build trust will provide the right conditions for many of those burdens to be known and shared with each other. Of course I’m not suggesting that small groups are the only way to do that or that burden-sharing is unknown at our church. I’m simply saying that we have tried to design a format that we hope will be especially conducive for it.

Our sermon text this morning is a reminder that, you, Christian, are called to be a burden-lifter. You are called to bring relief and help to those who are weary and heavy-laden. Think about someone doing bench press at the gym: he has foolishly put too much weight on the barbell, and it is slowly sinking onto his chest as his arms quiver. If no one is there to lift that weight off him, it will suffocate and crush him. Christian, when the burdens of this life press down upon your brothers and sisters, threatening to crush their joy and suffocate their faith, you are called to be their spotters.

So how do we do that? And what hinders us from fulfilling this calling?

Look again at verse 6 where Paul exhorts the Galatians to help bear the financial burden of supporting faithful pastor-teachers. Remember that in 2 Corinthians 9 Paul instructed the Corinthians not to give reluctantly or under compulsion, but cheerfully, trusting that the Lord will give generously to us so that we can give generously to others. I think it follows from this that all burden-sharing ought to be done cheerfully, willingly, and generously, and that burden-sharing is hindered by resentment, grumpiness, and stinginess. And this makes perfect sense, for who wants to ask a score-keeper, a self-pitying martyr, a grouch, or a miser for help?

Look again at verse 1, and consider Paul's exhortation to restore (*which is a form of burden-sharing*) in a spirit of gentleness. As we considered a few months ago, gentleness is needed when dealing with the most sensitive parts of a Christian's life- his failures- just like it's needed when removing a speck from the most sensitive part of the body- the eye. And so it logically follows that burden-bearing is hindered by a harsh, censorious, fault-finding, angry, or heavy-handed approach. That makes perfect sense, for who wants to ask a fault-finder, a bully, or a tyrant for help with his failings and weaknesses?

Look again at 5:26-6:1 and consider Paul's instruction that the work of restoring is to be done by those who are "spiritual," that is who are characterized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. I think it follows from this both that burden-sharing ought to be characterized by the fruit of the Spirit (*that it should be loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, gentle, faithful, and self-controlled*), and that it is empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is one of the ways that He weaves us together: by enabling us to bear each other's burdens.

Compare this emphasis in 5:25-6:1 with Paul's warnings against conceit, envy, and provocation. It follows from this that burden-sharing is hindered by contempt, envy, and rivalry. This makes perfect sense, for which of us wants to confess his sins to someone who is puffed up with pride and has an air of superiority? It's more likely that our confession will be met with scorn than with sympathy! Or which of us would willingly confess his flaws to a fastidious, self-righteous Pharisee? It's more likely that such a confession would be met with more nitpicking and

unfavorable comparisons than with encouragement! Or who would willingly confess his weaknesses to a rival? As one author put it, “Don’t tell your problems to people: 80% don’t care; and the other 20% are glad you have them.”³

Husbands, when your wife is overwhelmed by needs, don’t add to her burdens by despising her for her failures, her weakness, her lack of organization or inefficiency. Take as many of those burdens off of her back as you can and put them on your own shoulders. Parents, when the secret sins of your children are revealed, don’t add to their burdens by heaping angry words of condemnation, or self-pitying guilt trips, or wearisome, self-righteous monologues. Tell them how thankful you are for this window into their hearts, shine the light of God’s word into the lies they have believed, and apply the medicine of the gospel. Christian, when the consequences of your brother’s immaturity and folly are starting to pile up, don’t add to his burdens by looking down at him with self-righteousness and contempt. Prayerfully wait for the moment when he is finally ready to listen, to learn, and to grow. Friends, when your sister is weighed down with grief over the loss of a loved one, don’t add to her burden by telling her that “it’s time to get over it and move on.” “Weep with those who weep,” says Paul in Romans 12:15, and “encourage one another with these words” about the resurrection and the Second Coming says Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:18. Church members, when your fellow Christian’s life is falling apart, don’t add to his burdens by being like Job’s friends, who immediately assumed that it must be because of unconfessed sins. Go sit with him and silence and tears, and lift him up in earnest prayer. When your brother is weighed down with frustrations and anxieties, don’t add to his burden by running the other direction when you see the grumpy look on his face. Cheer his heart by lending a sympathetic ear and by reminding him of the Lord’s faithfulness.

How do we bear each other’s burdens? What hinders us from bearing each other’s burdens? And why should we bear each other’s burdens? These three questions converge at one point: Christ-likeness. I’ve given you many specific suggestions on how to bear some of the most common burdens, but I hardly do better than to encourage you to be like Christ to them, who bore the cross that our sins deserve. We’ve considered a number of specific vices that hinder us from sharing the burdens of others, but we could summarize all of them by meditating our need to grow in the mind of Christ, who looked not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others, who counted others more significant than himself and so humbled himself to a life of service and death on a cross. We could talk about all kinds of reasons why we should bear each other’s burdens: because Americans are lonelier than ever before; because one day you will need the same help that you are extending; because it makes for strong churches, strong families, and

³ Lou Holtz, at least according to BrainyQuote.com

strong friendships; because it's more blessed to give than to receive. But what could be a more compelling reason than this: you should bear the burdens of others, because Christ has already borne the burden of your guilt on the cross?

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that Paul connects the law of Christ with bearing burdens. It's interesting to read and hear how different commentators and preachers explain that connection in verse 2. Many suggest that this is an allusion to Christ's words, "A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another." Certainly, that makes sense given that Paul has recently equated love and the fulfilling of the law. Others have suggested that here Paul is also emphasizing that the authority of Christ stands behind the law of God revealed at Sinai, and he is implying that Christ's commands and the Mosaic law are not so much two different laws as the same law viewed from different perspectives.⁴ Along these lines Augustine and Pastor Rayburn both have fascinating insights that you can find referenced in the footnotes.⁵

But could it be that Paul also has another layer in mind? Could it be that in addition to those things, Paul is also thinking of Jesus' call to discipleship in places like Matthew 16, "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."

I can't say for sure whether Paul had these words of Jesus in mind when he wrote Galatians 6:2, but I can say for sure that many of your crosses in this life will come in the form of one another's burdens. After all, what was the cross of Christ other than our burden of guilt and shame?

And it's instructive to notice how both of these passages about carrying heavy things (*burdens in Galatians 6 and crosses in Matthew 16*) end with an encouragement to look forward to Judgement Day and eternal life. Bearing crosses and burdens is hard work. And so we must keep our eyes on the finish line: a harvest of eternal life.

⁴ "The 'law of Christ' means the law of love. The one who loves his neighbor fulfills the law. The love of neighbor is strongly commended even in the OT. The apostle elsewhere says that it is by love that all the commands of the law are summed up. If so, then it is evident that even that Scripture which was given to the covenant people was the law of Christ, which, since it was not being fulfilled by fear, he came to fulfill by love. The same Scripture, therefore, and the same law is called the old covenant when it weighs down in slavery those who are grasping after earthly goods. It is called the new testament when it raises to freedom those who are ardently seeking the eternal good." Augustine, page 89 of Edwards, Mark Ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament VIII. IVP.*

⁵ Also see Robert Rayburn's sermon on Galatians 6:2-5 STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 27 Galatians 6:2-5 October 24, 1999. FaithTacoma.org

It's hard to give at least 10% of your money to meet the needs of pastors and missionaries and to give your time to serving needy people. It would be so much easier just to spend that money and time on yourself. It's hard to keep on putting up with the oddities, weaknesses, and immaturities of other sinners in the context of a Christian family or a church family. It would be so much easier just to escape to your own little island of peace, quiet, and sanity. It's hard to restore your brother when he sins, especially when he sins against you. It would be so much easier to take revenge, to look down on him, or just to walk away. It's hard to enter into the suffering of a fellow Christian; to invest the emotional energy listening, understanding, sympathizing, encouraging, praying, serving. It would be so much easier to just keep things light, fun, and shallow.

But the apostle Paul here at the end of Galatians 6 is reminding us that it's worth it. He's exhorting us to think forward to the Great Day when it be revealed how the Lord used our feeble efforts to bring about the salvation of His people. So let us not grow weary of bearing one another's burdens, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up! Amen?

Works Consulted

- Bruce, F.F. Commentary on Galatians. The New International Commentary. Eerdmans
- Burton, Ernest. A Critical and Exegetical commentary on The epistle to the Galatians.
- Calvin, John. Calvin's New Testament Commentaries. Eerdmans.
- Edwards, Mark Ed. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament VIII. IVP
- Hendrickson, William. Exposition of Galatians. New Testament Commentary. Baker
- Luther, Martin. Galatians. The Crossway Classic Commentaries.
- Nicoletti, Steven. "Our Theological Vision: Aspirational Values: Relationships and Community." A sermon on Various Texts. April 24, 2022. Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
- Nicoletti, Steven. "Additional Thoughts on Our Theological Vision: Pursuing Real Community" Various Texts. April 24, 2022 Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
- Nicoletti, Steven. "Our Theological Vision: Aspirational Values: Shepherding and Discipleship. Galatians 5:25-6:5. May 1, 2022. Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
- Pipa, Joseph. Galatians: God's proclamation of Liberty. Focus on The Bible.
- Piper, John. The Law of Christ: Bearing Each Other's Burdens. A sermon on Gal 6:1-5. August 14, 1983. DesiringGod.org
- Rayburn, Robert. STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 29 Galatians 6:7-10 November 7, 1999. FaithTacoma.org
- Rayburn, Robert. STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 28 Galatians 6:6 October 31, 1999. FaithTacoma.org
- Rayburn, Robert. STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 27 Galatians 6:2-5 October 24, 1999. FaithTacoma.org
- Rayburn, Robert. STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 26 Galatians 6:1 October 17, 1999. FaithTacoma.org
- Roberts, Alistair. Galatians 6. Galatians: Biblical Reflections. Mar 22, 2023. Theopolis App
- Ryken, Philip Graham. Galatians. Reformed Expository Commentary. P&R
- Stott, John RW. The Message of Galatians. The Bible Speaks Today. Intervarsity Press.
- Wilson, Doug. A sermon on Galatians 6:1-10. May 17, 2022. Canon + app