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Galatians 5:25-6:6
6th Message
Steve Zeisler
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BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

SERIES: GREAT TRUTHS RECONSIDERED

by Steve Zeisler

Jesus was a master storyteller. Probably the two best-known parables of Jesus are the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). They are wonderful tales of redemption. Each of them deals with a problem that everybody is familiar with. In the story of the prodigal son, sin and failure destroy someone's life and they need to find a way back to a place of hope and opportunity. In the story of the good Samaritan, someone suffers from life's hard circumstances, not his own sin. A man on his way to Jericho is overtaken by robbers who steal his money, beat him, and leave him for dead by the side of the road. For most of us, at some point life becomes painful and difficult, and we feel as if we too have been left bleeding by the side of the road.

In this message we'll be looking at Galatians 5:25-6:6. As we do so, it will be helpful to keep in mind the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son. In the last message (Discovery Paper 4602), we began a two-part discussion of body life. What is the nature of the church, and what does it mean to be part of a Christian community? How do we understand connectedness to each other in the body of Christ? Of course, by far the best-known, most widely read of all the books that have ever been published because of this ministry is Ray Stedman's *Body Life*.

Love one another

We began with a discussion of the invisible realities—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all—these articulations of unity that draw us together even though we can't see them. We are members of one another, and we each have gifts that equip us to serve one another. We are connected in ways that the world can't know, that are invisible to us and yet are real and life-giving.

In this message we'll see the actions that should proceed from these. Jesus said the night before he died, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). The invisible connectedness we have in Christ should manifest itself in acts of love for each other. The primary evidence that you belong to Jesus is not what you say but whether you care for those who belong to Jesus.

In Jesus' prayer to the Father about his own in John 17, he said, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23). Expressed in love for each other, our unity is the evidence not just that we are the Lord's but that he is the Savior. How will the world know that God sent his Son? What will persuade them that the gospel is true and important and life-changing? It is our expression of Christian unity.

The call for the expression of love, reaching out and ministering to one another, the body life of common care for each other, is the subject of this message and was, of course, the subject of Jesus' parables. In the one, a father welcomes back a son who has failed. In the other, after a priest and a Levite have passed by the beaten man, a Samaritan man, of all people, reaches down and binds his wounds, puts him on his own animal, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care. That is practical love for somebody who is hurting.

Let's read Galatians 5:25-6:6:

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to

somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.

Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.

Keep in step

In our discussion in the last message, the metaphor the apostle Paul used in Ephesians 4:15-16 was that of a human body: "...We will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does it work." We are marvelously connected to each other and contributing to each other, and we're growing up into the Head, becoming mature. The metaphor that is probably in Paul's mind in Galatians 5:25, "...Keep in step with the Spirit," is a little more subtle. It suggests an army marching down the road together. The great Roman roads were built with the idea that armies should be able to march quickly along them in military formation to whatever part of the world they were sent. The Greek word translated "keep in step," or "march along together," is *stoicheo*. It could be used of any sort of formation of people. The idea is of groups making progress together.

Now, in Galatians 5:16 Paul wrote, "...Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (NASB). The word for "walk" there is *peripateo*, and it is addressed to an individual. Many English versions also translate *stoicheo* in verse 25 "walk," but it really means "march," to make our way forward together.

Paul's thought here is that if we're going to go forward in Christ, we have to do so together. And we're close enough together as we proceed along that if one stumbles, it will affect everybody else. In chapter 6 he has in mind two ways a person might stumble.

Verse 1: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin..." Here the thought is about something that traps you by the leg—a snare that might be laid for some kind of animal, and all of a sudden it wraps itself around your feet and you can't move forward, and everybody else is impeded. (This is *not* referring to being caught in a sin in the sense of being caught in a searchlight, humiliated, with everybody looking at you and pointing at you.)

Verse 2: "Carry each other's burdens...." The other way a person might stumble is that a great burden descends on them, and it's so heavy that their knees buckle and they can't stand up any longer. Again, everybody else around them is impeded.

Whenever I read these verses I always remember an experience of playing high school football. One of the things our coach had us do was a close-order drill. We would trot out onto the field together and stand close to one another. He would bark out a set of signals, and we would do calisthenics, warm up, and move in unison, getting used to snap counts in preparation for the game.

We were playing a championship game with our arch-rivals, and it was at their field. It was an older school, and the lighting was poor. We had to go through a narrow tunnel to get from our locker room out onto the field. Circling the field was a track, and alongside the track was a concrete curb. So we came running out of the tunnel close together, concentrating on how we were going to win the game, and one of the guys in the front tripped over the curb. Before we could help ourselves, three rows of us had catapulted onto the field, completely ruining the effect we had hoped to achieve of being tough and organized.

I always think of that, because if we are marching together and someone falls, many others fall as well. In the case of the person caught in a sin, like the prodigal son, and in the case of the person burdened by suffering, like the man left by the side of the road, we need to respond to their needs in part because they are connected to the larger community.

Restore one caught in a sin

Let's think about the first problem, being caught in a sin. Everybody I know who is honest will admit that there are temptations very near at hand. Everyone has their own set of weaknesses, and unless we are alert, they are going to trip us up. We're often embarrassed about these things, and it's difficult to ask for help.

Consider Galatians 5:19, where Paul lists the influences of the flesh in our lives: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery...." It doesn't take us long to think of ways in which the flesh can make such suggestions about sexual sin, whether in the mind or in actions.

Paul continues in verse 20: "...Idolatry and witchcraft [loving power in dark ways that it should not be achieved]; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy...." This speaks of all those sins between people in which we are jealous or envious of others, or we are angry at them. We want what another has; we undermine them. How many of us at some time in our life have realized that we were caught in some terrible version of anger, envy, or something else that was destroying Christian unity?

He ends in verse 21: "...drunkenness, orgies, and the like." Substance abuse, whether it's alcohol or something else, is easily at hand as well, and that can be a source of tripping us up.

Now, what Paul is describing here is a brother or sister in the Lord who in their heart really wants to serve Christ. The Bible speaks of stiff-necked sinners who refuse to bow their knee before God and who insist on their own way. But such people, who have no interest in a life that honors God, are not in view here. They need a different word from God. This passage is concerned with people who want to serve Christ, but they have now found a snare around their feet that has trapped them, they are stumbling, and they can't make progress.

What should happen for people like that? Paul says that those who are spiritual should restore them. Now, the spiritual are not super-saints, some exalted genus of people, and they are not professional clergy. They are ordinary Christians who are walking in the Spirit. Paul has just discussed in chapter 5, the fruits of the Spirit and what it means to have the Spirit produce life in you. If at this stage of your life you are nearer to the Lord than before, if you've dealt with your issues, if your heart is warm toward God and you find obedience is coming naturally, if you find that your life is overflowing, then you should be the one who turns and helps the person who is snared and falling and embarrassed by what is happening to them.

Someday you are going to be the one who needs a "spiritual" believer to help you. There is no advantage in creating an environment of judgmentalism in the Christian culture, being holier-than-thou and pointing fingers at sinners. To the degree that you create this environment, it is going to rebound back on you someday, because you are going to be the one who needs help. If we are honest and can say that Christians trip and fall as this text teaches, then our response needs to be, "How can I help?" not, "How can I judge?"

The restoration ought not to be harsh, slapping the one who has fallen on the face, jerking them to their feet: "What do you think you're doing? How could you have done such a thing?" There ought to be gentleness and concern and tenderness in the restoration.

But the concern *is* for restoration. Paul is not saying that when someone trips and falls, we should put your arm around them and wallow in the ditch with them, feeling bad for them, discussing at great length all the reasons that they got there. We are to help them get them back on their feet. The point is for them to get enough gentle, firm, direct, godly help so that they can let go of whatever has held on to them, and get back in line and marching forward, so that we are all making progress again. It's not kicking people out, and it's not leaving them where they are. It's a ministry of gentle restoration.

The caution Paul offers at the end of verse 1 is to always restore with an awareness that there is some danger in this ministry, either that we will be self-impressed or subject to the same temptation.

Lighten someone's crushing weight

Let's think about the second problem, that of suffering, of awful blows that you didn't expect from life, the rock that has been rolled onto your shoulders. It is unexpected suffering that makes your knees buckle, and you stumble in the march.

One year ago the El Niño flood took place in this area, and many families were flooded out of their houses. They went to sleep in their beds with everything dry, and they woke up in the middle of the night with three feet of water everywhere in the house. Do you remember the consequences to the Hebert family? They were without a home. Just overnight a rock landed on them and their whole world was turned upside down. One church member helped with the burden and offered his home to this family of six. How do we respond when tough, hard blows come out of nowhere?

One of the great love stories I've seen was my widowed father-in-law's second marriage. He remarried at eighty years of age. He had a wonderful year with his second wife. But recently we received a phone call that she had suddenly fallen very ill, and then another phone call the next day telling us that she had died.

Sudden widowhood can be a staggering blow. So can being abandoned by someone you love, or seeing your children go through terrible circumstances—perhaps a daughter in some cult, or a son with AIDS.

People who are otherwise vigorous and hopeful feel paralyzed by such blows. So when these crushing weights make them stumble, what should the church community do? We should offer practical help, walk alongside them, pray with them, have hope that they can't have, help give them a sense of direction, help them make decisions.

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Interestingly, verse 5 says, "...For each one should carry his own load." The word translated "load" is a completely different Greek word from the one translated "burden." It refers to a soldier's pack. Everybody has a certain amount that they are suppose to buck up under. It's reasonable, so we're not to whine and feel sorry for ourselves. We've all been given some difficult circumstances. It's our responsibility to grow in grace, trust the Lord, and carry our own pack. It's not heroic for us to do so. It's when the thing that happens to you is one of these awful, difficult, knee-buckling sort of experiences that others should be underneath the

rock with you.

Why do you boast?

The last word I want to mention is Paul's challenge and instruction concerning people who are too proud to get involved. Galatians 5:26 says, "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." Too often what happens is that everybody is aware of their place in the pecking order: the inner circle, or next to the inner circle, or the third circle out from the inner circle.... The question on people's minds is whether they are appreciated by those who have position and authority. When we begin measuring ourselves against other people, we provoke those who are less influential than we, and we envy those who are more influential. We are trying to move up some ridiculous ladder that no one ought to care about at all. The commitment to help those who have stumbled is lost because we're too concerned about whether we're valued, applauded, and so on.

This point is made again in Galatians 6:3: "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load." If I am too impressed with my place in the scheme of things, I am a fool. The comparison I should make is not who I am relative to you. God is completely uninterested in such comparing and measuring. If I want to compare myself to anyone, I should compare myself to who I would be if Jesus had every bit of my strength and energy, every moment of my thoughts. That comparison will do much to deflate pride: "I am not who I ought to be-therefore, why am I impressed with myself?" But I'm not to compare myself to someone who has a whole different set of circumstances that they have to struggle with.

The last word in verse 6 is, I believe, an exhortation to let go of being proud: "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor." Those who know a lot tend to exalt how much they know. What Paul is saying here is, "You didn't start out knowing everything. Everybody who is now a counselor, speaker, or authority started out as an immature, inadequate student. Somebody knew you when you were a child who didn't know anything and cared about you, disciplined you, and built you up. Periodically say thanks to them for putting up with you. Just having that attitude will do something for your pride." In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul writes, "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" You're the beneficiary of somebody else's concern. The very act of saying thanks makes you less impressed with the place you have in the scheme of things.

In conclusion, spend some time thinking about the people around you, and ask yourself if there is something you can do for someone. Perhaps someone near you is really hurting. What burden can you lift? Or perhaps someone is really struggling with a sin pattern in their life that they just can't seem to get free of. What involvement could you have that would strengthen them and allow them to march with greater freedom?

Perhaps you yourself need to ask for help. You've been hiding, denying, and pretending about things in your life. There is a snare about your feet or a weight that is crushing you, and you hoped it would go unnoticed. But you know it's there, and you need help.

When the church acts in love to strengthen those who struggle, it offers hope to the world.

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