

Bearing the Burdens of (Br)others Galatians 6:1–5 July 20, 2025

At the outset of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, after Frodo agrees to set out on that perilous quest, Gandalf tells him, "I will help you bear this burden, as long as it is yours to bear."¹ A few chapters later, that hobbit's loyal friend Sam speaks of his own resolve, pledging his own loyalty, "I am going with him, if he climbs to the Moon; and if any of those Black Riders try to stop him, they'll have Sam Gamgee to reckon with."² But it's not just Gandalf and Sam. Twenty pages later Merry tells him, "You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. . . But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone."³

In that story there's a burden. It's a burden Frodo *himself* must carry. But it's a burden he *cannot* carry on his own. And we might say those three sentences encapsulate the next 900 pages of Tolkien's story.

And we might say they describe *more* than that story. Here, at the end of this letter, Paul's just asserted that to live by the Spirit means to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). And yet, based on *last* week's text, and the week *before*, walking in the Spirit is not to be confused with a solitary hike. It absolutely has to do with the way we live with and among *others* (Gal. 5:22-23; 5:26). To walk in the Spirit is a walk done alongside. And that means, according to our text today, it's a walk we're to help one another on.

1. Bearing the Burdens of Others (vv. 2-3)

John Stott began his comments on this section with verse 2. At first, I didn't understand *why* Stott did that. No one else I read did. Why not start with verse 1?⁴ But the more I studied the text itself, the more I saw that verse 2 serves as the umbrella under which all the other verses fit. Or to say it another way: if we can get *this* right, the other verses will make more sense. Verse 2 reads: **Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.**

Now, is this one of those verses I had to read fifteen commentaries on so that I might unearth some obscure hidden meaning in the Greek middle voice? Not even close. Understanding what Paul is saying in verse 2 is not hard. All of us know precisely what "bear one another's burdens" *means*. And that's part of the reason observing it is so difficult. We can't hide the cost behind some complicated interpretation.

Because, to begin, the command implies certain things. It implies that there will be burdens—not all—but *some* burdens we *can't* carry on our own. Which cuts at the roots of our pride. We—those whose stoic souls are often tattooed with, "I've got this"—might need to admit that *maybe* we're not designed to be as autonomous as we'd prefer to be. And this is the *first* way we might apply verse 3: **For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.**⁵

Verse 2 is clear. There are certain burdens you *cannot* bear on your own. A right understanding of sin and self acknowledges this. It considers the effects of sin within you, upon you, and around you. So, we can admit that when creation groans, we do too. And we admit that because

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 71.

² Tolkien, 96.

³ Tolkien, 115.

⁴ Like Paul!

⁵ Now, as we'll see in verses 4 and 5, Paul's not baptizing laziness here, nor advocating an unhealthy dependence.

if we never acknowledge a need for help, we'll never get the help we need. No one can "lift" the boulder *with* you, if you keep acting as if it's a pebble.

To have a burden carried by another requires a certain humility. But humility goes both ways, doesn't it? There's another application of verse 3's **if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing**. We might be tempted, not only to think we don't need help, but also to think helping others is *beneath* us—not quite lined up with our impressive goals. In our thinking, that coffee meeting, that phone call—that question I know I should ask but am terrified to—all that's going to take some of my precious, precious time.⁶

But note that Paul doesn't limit the application of this command to a select group of Christians. He doesn't say, for example, merely, "Deacon, bear the burden of the people," or "Shepherd, bear the burden of the sheep," as if seminary is the prerequisite. Note how broad the application is. It's for *everyone* to apply. And it's for everyone to apply in a reciprocal fashion: **Bear one another's burdens**.

So, in a healthy local church, there will be burdens a church member carries alongside another church member that an elder or deacon never knows about. And in a healthy local church that lives together for years and years, we, practically, often take turns. That means something might come into my life that I can't lift. Someone shows up. And no matter how broad your shoulders are, eventually a burden comes into your life that you can't lift either. However providence aligns it, we bend our knees and lift the heaviest loads together.

It's a command in the present tense. It's to be an ongoing reality in the life of God's people.⁷ It's part of the purpose of God for His people.⁸ In fact, it's what Christ intends for us.

Isn't that what verse 2 goes on to state? **Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ**. It's quite possible Paul's words here, in particular "burden" and "law," are something of a side glance at the spirit of the Judaizers. They loved to make the law a burden, to pile on and on. In contrast, God intends for His people to lift burdens; and in doing so they fulfill Christ's law.⁹

Verse 2 speaks broadly. But this is *after* he's spoken more specifically in the previous verse.

2. Bearing the Particular Burden of Another (v. 1)

Verse 1: **Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.**

Now, I imagine when you hear the phrase, "even if" in everyday conversation, you take it as language of escalated circumstances. As in, "do this, *even if* someone else does *this*." And that's actually a good way to think about what's happening here in verse 1. Paul didn't write a big 6 on his Greek manuscript. Verse 1 picks up on what he's *just* been talking about.

So, let's read verses 25 and 26 and walk into this "even if." Verse 25: **If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass.** I trust you hear the escalation. Paul's saying that another person's sin in the body does not excuse us from the command in the previous verse. Their sin doesn't excuse ours.

So, *even* when confronted by another's trespass, we're to walk in the Spirit. Which is actually what the clause about being "spiritual" in verse 1 re-iterates: **even if anyone is caught in any**

⁶ And this feed isn't going to read itself.

⁷ Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians*, Founders Study Guide Commentary, 109.

⁸ John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, BST, 158.

⁹ Stott, 158.

trespass, you who are spiritual. Now, does that word mean what the world around us takes that to mean? “Oh, he’s so *spiritual*. Wow. She’s so ‘in tune’ with the ethereal vibe, so ‘connected’ to her inner child.”¹⁰ No, what Paul means, simply, is what he’s been talking about in every sentence prior! The spiritual person is the one who is led by the Spirit (5:18), the one living by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit (5:24), and producing that fruit the Spirit produces (5:23).¹¹

So, if that’s you, that is, if you’re in Christ, and another person is the body is, verse 1, **caught in any trespass**, what are you to do? Verse 1 continues: **restore such a one**.

Now, to rightly apply this, we should first define “trespass.” Verse 1 isn’t a *carte blanche* license to conform every living organism to your personal conviction about that random thing. Those that read and believe Romans 14 distinguish between conviction and command. The “trespass” Paul speaks to here is a clear violation of Scripture.¹²

But if it *is* sin, it’s clear: we’re not to be passive. And if we’re thinking rightly about sin’s effect on others, we *can’t* be. Not if we love someone. We know that sin is a burden. And to be “caught in it,” is one of those burdens we *can’t* lift on our own. I don’t need to give too many examples. But I imagine you’ve seen sin destroy someone. And I imagine you’ve known someone *so* caught up in their sin they haven’t seen any way out.¹³

Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens.” And *this* is a particular burden.

So, if this attitude or that action is actually a trespass, those who are spiritual aim to restore—a word used for setting a fractured bone, as well as for the mending of nets.¹⁴ And Paul makes sure to use a present tense verb to emphasize that none of this is a single act, but a process. As it is with Matthew 18, there are steps, but they’re not hurried. As bearing burdens is a present tense ongoing process, so is restoration.

Which is, by the way, *also* the goal. The objective is not to unnecessarily guilt, to show yourself to be in the right once again, or to hop on a power trip because you feel powerless elsewhere. The aim is restoration.

But how? *How* might we seek to restore? Paul continues: **you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness**. There are at least two significant dangers when we think about this particular subject. One is the posture, “It’s none of my business.” That’s actually both a wrong view of sin *and* of the church. But the other posture, a significant danger as well, is “Wait until they hear what I have to say.” That’s a wrong view of sin, of the church, *and* of grace.

Refuse to erect false dichotomies. You *can* love someone enough to hate their sin, speak clearly enough to help them hate their sin, but do so in a way that God Himself might call gentle. Now, of course, you can’t do this on your own. But Paul just said that *gentleness* is something the Spirit produces.

This kind of gentle restoration is one of the hardest, heaviest ways we bear one another’s burdens. And not unlike verse 2, verse 1 is clear. Any trespass. You who are spiritual. Restore with gentleness.

And you do so, in that way, because of what you know about yourself.

¹⁰ Ugh. Gross.

¹¹ Vaughan, 109.

¹² Further, if we’re keeping the passage you studied last week in mind (Matthew 18), we know that should the person caught in sin choose not to hear us, then the next step in the process implies that others will agree with us that the issue is, in fact, sin. So, before doing anything, it’s worth thinking through that process.

¹³ Maybe you know that person *really* well.

¹⁴ Stott, 160; Vaughan, 109.

3. Knowing Our *Own* Burden (vv. 1, 3, 4-5)

Paul continues speaking of burdens in verse 5, but does so in a way that, at first, sounds like he's contradicting himself. Listen to verse 5: **For each one will bear his own load.** What? Come on, Paul! Well, if we look a little closer, we'll note he's actually holding a certain tension that needs to be held. And some of it is captured in the two *different* words he uses. Verse 2's "burden" speaks to a crushing weight. It's a burden one person *couldn't* carry. Verse 5's word, a *different* word, was often used to speak of a soldier's pack.¹⁵

I found helpful Andy Davis's illustration of a long hike. If ten of us set out on one together, all other things being equal, *each* person would be expected to carry their own pack—with water, snacks, extra socks, etc. And yet, if at the *top* of the mountain one of us sprained his or her ankle, what would we do on the way down? We'd take turns carrying that person's pack down the mountain.¹⁶ That's some of the distinction.

So, while there are burdens a person can't carry on their own, if they've not sprained their ankle, there is also a load each person should carry. So, Paul's not baptizing laziness, nor advocating an unhealthy dependence. There are some things *you* must shoulder, things we're not to push off on another.

And there's a sense in which this helps us do what the Scriptures command us to do. That is, *because* we ourselves carry a particular load, and know the *weight* of it, we're better equipped.¹⁷ In other words, knowing your *own* burden—knowing it personally—can help you to bear the burden of others.

In fact, we might say it keeps us from speaking into others' lives as if we've never faced sin ourselves. Verse 1 already said as much: . . . **restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.** We aim to restore, in a spirit of gentleness, *not* because we think we're better, but ever aware of sin's power in our *own* life. Again, verse 3: **For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.** We might say it this way: Don't lie to yourself. *There*, but for the grace of God, go I.

So, though it seems like Paul takes a hard right in verses 4 and 5, he's not. He's keeping us from an overcorrection.

Verse 4 continues speaking to the "log in our own eye" (Mt. 7:3): **But each one must examine his own work.** In following Christ, we're not first, or primarily, looking for sin in other people's lives, but in our *own*. This is yet another present tense verb. As we live among others in the body, we examine *ourselves*. And then we do it again.

Paul goes on in verse 4, **and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.** Now to understand what Paul's referencing here, we should recall what the Judaizers were doing. In 6:13, Paul will write this: **For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh** (6:13). The Judaizers didn't even do what they burdened the Galatians to do. They were theological bullies. And they were so, for the aim of self-glory. They desired to boast in what they'd made the Galatians do.

You see the clarification Paul's making? It's absolutely connected to the restoration noted earlier. We're not correcting others harshly, or as if we're immune, nor as a power-play. Instead, we're to examine our *own* work, first. And if we do, taking sin that seriously, Paul speaks of what's

¹⁵ Vaughan, 110.

¹⁶ <https://twojourneys.org/sermons/series/galatians/the-christian-family-watches-over-one-another-in-love-galatians-sermon-23-of-26/>

¹⁷ Vaughan, 110.

ahead.¹⁸ Note the verb in verse 4: he *will* have reason. By that he means the continual examining of self, the ongoing dying to sin, and the living by faith in the Son of God—the kinds of things he’s talked about throughout the letter—leads to a reason for boasting.

And with the entirety of the letter in mind, we know that *any* reason for boasting—now or in the future—is the same as it is in the next chapter, where Paul writes, **may I never boast, except (except!) in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world** (6:14). There *is* reason to boast. And it’s not in what we’ve done in another’s life, nor for self-glory. It’s what Christ has done in ours, to His honor.

And, with that in mind, for that reason, we bear the burdens of others. We know the burden ourselves.

And we know the burden we bear is our brother’s.

4. And Knowing the Burden You Bear is Your Brother’s (v. 1)

I skipped the *first* word of verse 1. But Paul put it in there, *once* again. Part of me wonders if you’re getting tired of us pointing this word out. But the other part of me keeps being reminded that God inspired it to be there. It’s not filler. Verse 1 begins, **brethren**. That’s a significant identifier. It means that the sin of another, or the burden of another, is not the sin or burden of the “other.” No, the one who’s caught, or the one who’s overwhelmed, is family.

And that’s a category God inspired to help us grasp this reality. We wouldn’t sit back and watch while a sibling is crushed. We bear burdens of those around us, including the particular burden of sin, because God’s adopted us, put His Spirit within—not just me, but *us*—and called us His children.

And that reality helps us do this rightly. Unfortunately, what we discussed in Matthew 18 last week, and what’s in this passage today, often gets a bad rap. Instead of the biblically gentle, honest correction, we have been taught to believe that admonition in the church, all restoration from sin, is akin to Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*.

And it’s not. Biblical community is motivated by love for God’s glory and the good of God’s people. And it *can* be done rightly, in a way that restores. And it has been, *here*, even with *me*.

As you might guess, in eighteen years here there are things we’ve walked through. And in one of those trials, I was in a meeting with the elders, discussing how to work through it.¹⁹ Like many other times, this was something that had to be thought through carefully. But as I was talking through it with those men—men I trust, men who’ve walked with me for well over a decade now—one of them said something like this, and he did so gently, “Matt, you’re internalizing this too much. And you’re trying to carry it on your own.”

When he said that, if you were to look around the room, the other guys weren’t jumping to correct him. They might as well have been nodding their heads. Because it was patently true. It was truth spoken in love.

And even though a while has passed, that’s a moment I still think about often. Because a brother redirected me. He did so gently. And through Him Christ mended. And in the months ahead, those brothers bore that burden *with* me.

Why do I share that? Because that’s the kind of community Jesus died for. It’s not someone at arm’s length. But someone *in* it, and *with* you.

¹⁸ The verbs in this verse are future tense.

¹⁹ And by the way, it’s been a minute.

Toward the end of Tolkien's trilogy, Frodo, still carrying that burden, knows it's too heavy for him alone. In that moment, Sam says, "I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well."²⁰ And that's precisely what he does. He carries *him* and *it* up the mountain.

Conclusion

We bear the burdens of others, *particular* burdens, knowing our *own* burden, and knowing the burden is our brother's.

We do this, in part, because our elder brother bore our burden first. He took upon Himself a burden we could *never* bear—the weight of sin and shame. We were caught. He came to those under the Law, condemned by it. And in our place, He bore its curse. So that He might redeem and free us. And He did so—that by the Spirit He might restore, and do so gently. What mercy.

²⁰ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 218.