

July 15, 2007
Pentecost 7

"Bound by Freedom in Christ to Help Hurting Christians"

GALATIANS 6:1-10

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. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, ⁵ for each one should carry his own load. ⁶ Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸ The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

You cannot travel on an airplane today without having to go through a security check. You will need to pull out your driver's license or passport. You need to remove your jacket, your shoes, and anything that might have metal on it. If you are carrying a water bottle it will be taken from you unless it contains less than 4 ounces of liquid. That's the price we have to pay for freedom, freedom from the fear of terrorists attacks on our airlines as we travel. The threat of these terrorist attacks will not go away very soon.

The freedom you have in Christ is also under attack. That's the message we have given to us in this letter of Paul to the Christians in Galatia. The greatest freedom in the world is the joy of knowing that all the consequences of my past sin have been paid for by Christ, I have been declared righteous and I can face God in the final judgment. I can also face the daily problems of life knowing God's love for me never changes because it has been secured for me at a great price through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. This freedom comes under attack when someone suggests that I am not totally free in Christ unless I add something to what Christ has done, preferably something I do, or I feel, or some tradition I follow. As we heard last week this threat is called legalism. Then there is the other threat. It is the threat of thinking that I can indulge my sinful nature because I am free in Christ, I can turn to the Lord and he will forgive me. This danger of license, or giving free rein to sin, is just as dangerous as the legalism that says I need to add something human and faulty to what Christ has done.

Today we want to talk about helping other hurting Christians who may be in danger of losing their freedom in Christ because they are caught up in some sin they are justifying and condoning it in their lives. You don't mind going through the check points in the airport because you know you are helping preserve the freedom to travel safely on the airline. On an even higher level you want to protect the freedom we enjoy by helping other hurting Christians who are on the cusp of destroying their lives and losing their freedom because they have been caught and tripped up by some sin they are tolerating.

Look at the opportunities that come to you

If you will open your eyes you will see yourself surrounded by other Christians who are living in great danger because they are compromising what they believe and how they live their lives. "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." If a friend of yours stops at your house and you notice the tire on his car is flat, would you not tell him, "Your tire is flat. You need to get it fixed or you could have an accident." We see Christians around us who get caught in sin. The Greek word for getting caught has the thought of taking something ahead or before. Sin can sneak up to us and catch us before we even realize what is happening. Our job is to restore that person gently. We speak the truth in love. We warn, but always in a loving tone of voice that shows the deepest concern and compassion that comes from realizing the same thing could happen to us. Remember what Jesus said about looking for the sliver in another person's eye but always realizing that we may have a beam in our eye.

It is so much easier to simply go on in life and ignore the needs of other brothers in sister in Christ when they are going through some spiritual crisis and hurting because of the ravages of sin. Remember the priest and the Levite who walked by on the other side as one of the fellow Jews lay alongside the road bleeding and suffering. It was a Samaritan who showed compassion. The Lord Jesus had compassion on you and me. He found us along the road of life, without God and without hope. He gave his life to rescue us and bring us back to God. It is this love of Jesus that has given us freedom. With this freedom comes a deep sense of duty and responsibility to Christians who are hurting especially those caught in sin, compromising their faith, slowly slipping away from Jesus. By carrying each other's burdens, our text says, "We are fulfilling the law of Christ."

What would ever lead you or me to not have compassion on those who are hurting? How about those who have messed up their lives with sin, or even those who are slowly drifting further and further away from Jesus? Paul gives us the answer when he encourages us to be sure to look at our own lives first. "If anyone thinks that 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 someone body else, for each one should carry his own load." People with blood sugar problems test their blood each day to make sure that the blood sugar is at the right level. If we test our lives every day using God's Word to help us we will come to the startling conclusion that some of the same problems we see in other Christians are also present in our lives in varying degrees and measure. It is very humbling because all fall short of God's standard of glory and perfection. If I compare myself to others, I may see things in them that are worse than in me. Then I could even be like the man who prayed, "Lord, I thank You that I am not like other people."

There was once a woodpecker pounding away at a tree as the sky was growing dark for a storm. Suddenly there was a loud crack as a lightning bolt hit the tree and split it down the middle. The woodpecker flew away thinking to himself, "My am I good." Truthfulness and honesty will reveal that I am not as good as I think I am. Yet Paul encourages us to take pride in ourselves. They only thing I can truly be proud of in my life is what Christ has done for me and who I have become by his grace without deserving anything at all.

The Apostle Paul inserts a thought here about sharing good things with those who instruct

us in the Word. "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor." Instructors in the word help us test ourselves and measure ourselves so we can see our need for help in Jesus. Instructors in the word also help us open our eyes and see where we can help other people who are hurting.

I am holding in my hand a sharp knife that works very well for chopping vegetables. Have you ever watched the food show and seen the way they can chop the food without chopping off a finger? They are good because they keep their fingers in close when cutting. If I see someone carelessly chopping vegetables, would I not in love show them the right way to hold the vegetables in their one hand and chop with the other? And if they cut end of their finger would I not in compassion offer to help them with the wound, even take them to the emergency. Look at your fellow Christians around you. See how careless they can become with life, ignoring God's Word, ignoring the Sacrament, ignoring prayer, opening themselves up to sin. Christian love says, "Let me help you. Let me help you keep the freedom you have in Christ and not lose it. It is the most precious gift you have."

Look at the results that last forever

Is it really worth getting involved in the lives of other Christians? What if they do not want me interfering? What if they resent me talking to them and trying to help them? What if I notice that a son or daughter, husband or wife, good friend, or even father and mother, really don't want me saying much to them? Let's listen to what Paul tells about the harvest that will take place when we make investments for people in the kingdom of God.

First, notice what happens when people plant sin in their lives. "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." If I take carrot seeds and carefully plant them in my garden I will see nice carrots growing as you can see from this example I am holding. However if I take seeds from a thistle or other weed seeds and plant them in the garden, I will grow thistle plants. If I plant seeds in my life that encourage and give into my sinful nature or sinful flesh, water it and give it enough light and sunshine, the sinful nature will lead to sinful actions and even lead to the horrible condition of justifying and making excuses for what I do wrong. The word "destruction" here has the thought of something rotten and decaying.

On the other hand, if I sow to please the Spirit, from the Spirit I will reap eternal life. There is nothing more beautiful than life in the Spirit. Romans 8 says of this new life in the Spirit, "There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit set me free from the law of sin and death." This is the freedom that we want to preserve and keep in ourselves, and also the freedom we want to see kept alive in other Christians.

Finally the Apostle Paul encourages Christians of every age to make the most of their time on this earth by investing it in helping other people, all people, but especially those who are brothers and sisters in the faith. "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." Do

you ever get tired of doing good? Do you ever get tired of trying to help people who are hurting themselves as they begin walking down a path further and further away from the Lord? You see no results. Your best efforts to help are rebuffed and resisted. Take comfort then in these words, "For at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." If the Lord wanted angels to do this work of helping other Christians then he should have chosen the angels. Instead, he asks you and me to perform this task. He even promises that in the end there will be a harvest as people are brought into the kingdom of God and spared from the wrath to come.

The best investment you can ever make in life is an investment of time in the lives of other people who need your help, your encouragement, and your life. "As we therefore have opportunity, let us do good to all people..." The Lord will give us opportunities to help other people, especially brothers and sisters in Christ, who are hurting. As we sing in the hymn,

We share our mutual woes, Our mutual burdens bear,

And often for each other flows The sympathizing tear.

The freedom we have in Christ is worth dying for, and it is worth living for, even if it means the hard work of helping other people who are hurting. Amen.