

So today we're finishing Galatians. And you know when you go on holiday, and your suitcase is so overflowing that you can't do the zip up, well, Paul packs this last chapter with so much practical application it's practically overflowing. But what you've got to see is that it's not a list of does and don'ts. It's an outworking of everything he's been talking about so far. That when you know you're accepted by God because of his grace, and not by you being good enough; it's going to radically affect the way you see yourself which will radically affect the way you treat others, and the way you spend your life.

So, if you haven't got one, go grab a Bible and we'll study this together.

### **Burden Bearing Service**

Take a look at v25-26: 'If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.'

And Paul is telling us some crucial there: that the way we think of and treat others depends on how we see ourselves. Don't become conceited he says, because if you do, you'll either provoke or envy others. And to be conceited is to have a false, distorted opinion of yourself. That maybe overinflated, and you think you're superior to others; or it maybe that you always feel inferior to others. Either way is has serious knock on effects in the way you treat others, Paul says.

You see, the word for 'provoking one another' in v26 is the word for challenging someone to a contest, to a duel. And if you tend to think of yourself as superior to others, you're always going to pushing, provoking, challenging others, telling them they're wrong, and you can show them they're wrong, because it's by doing that that you can *prove* you're superior, that you're better, wiser, more moral than others.

But, if you tend to think of yourself as inferior to others then, rather than provoking them, you'll envy them, for their skills or talents or achievements.

But instead of living like that, you can keep in step with the Spirit, Paul says. Because when we know we are loved and accepted by God because of Jesus, and not because of our performance or achievements; when our identity is grounded in the gospel of God's grace in Christ, then we know what we're really like - so sinful Jesus had to die for us, which kills any idea of superiority, but so loved that he did die for us, which nails any ideas of inferiority

And then, rather than provoke or envy others, we'll love them and serve them. Look at v1: 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.'

Now, Paul's not talking about pointing out everyone else's faults. Which would get pretty negative pretty quickly, especially if you're trapped with them during lockdown! He's talking about when someone is trapped in a sin, and it's dominating their life.

And Paul says, those who are spiritual - not super-spiritual, but those who are living by the Spirit and not the flesh, i.e. all of us, should restore them... gently. Now, if you think your and everyone else's worth and value before God and others is dependent on performance, and you see someone caught in a sin, you'll either not care about seeing them restored, because them being down makes

you look all the better; or you'll be happy to point out what's wrong with them but you'll be harsh with them. Or, if you tend to feel *inferior* to others, their opinion of you will matter too much to you, so you won't have the courage to confront them.

But when your identity is grounded in Christ, you'll have the courage to confront *and* you'll do it with gentleness.

But there's a risk in getting involved in others' lives, isn't there. Try pulling someone out of a hole, and you might just get pulled in. Verse 1 again, 'Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.'

And just think how that can work. If you invest in other's lives, especially when that's messy, it's tiring. And when you're tired *you* become more vulnerable to temptation. It can take up your time, and you begin to resent it, and self-pity sets in, and when that happens you can think you deserve to indulge yourself. Or, maybe the person you're trying to help is not responding, which breeds frustration and anger in your heart - which you take out on others. Or the thing they're stuck in, begins to be a temptation for you.

And so, when you're helping others back on their feet, more than ever you need that grace-rooted identity - that realises, I'm just as vulnerable to temptation as they are, so I'm going to keep watch over myself.

But then in v2 Paul broadens this out: 'Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.' And a burden isn't just a sin you're stuck in, it's anything that puts you under pressure. And Paul assumes we all have stuff like that, and he's right isn't he? And he also assumes that we're in this burden bearing business together. Those times when your resources to cope are at full stretch; finances are tight; or singleness or marriage is hard; doubt is getting the better of you; or temptation is strong; or you're just sad. And when we're walking in the Spirit, when those fruit of the Spirit are growing in us, we'll want to help carry each others' burdens.

That might mean helping someone sort their finances, or look after their kids, or provide them with a meal, invite them into your family, or come alongside them in their marriage. During lockdown it might mean calling them up; it might mean eating a meal with them over Skype or Zoom; it might mean helping them financially. One of the reasons lockdown is hard is because life in the Spirit, the Christian life, is a life in community. It's not an individualistic life. And as we seek to care for one another, Paul says we 'fulfil the law of Christ'. Christ bore our burden at the cross, and so we bear one another burdens.

So let me ask you, are you a burden bearer? And are you secure enough in Christ that you're able to ask others to help bear your burden?

You see, look at v3: 'For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.' And that word, *for*, means that v2 - being a burden bearer, or being willing to have others help bear your burden, can only happen if you don't fall into the trap of v3 - if you don't have this overinflated view of yourself. You'll only be able to bear others burdens, and have them bear yours, if you realise, outside of Christ, I'm nothing.

Think you're something and you'll think serving others is for others. And/or, you won't be humble enough to ask or accept others to help carry your burdens. But know that outside of Jesus, you're

nothing, and that we're in the difficulties of life together, and you'll want to be a burden bearer *and* you won't be too proud to have others help carry yours.

But then, there's a but - and, at first glance, it looks like Paul's contradicting himself: v4-5: 'But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour. For each will have to bear his own load.'

But he's not contradicting himself, is he? He's reinforcing what he's already said. Don't get your significance, don't base how you see yourself on others - either as beneath you, or above you. Instead, bear your own load. And your load is the gifts and abilities God's entrusted to you, along with your weaknesses, combined with the challenges and responsibilities and opportunities you face. And that load is your responsibility before God. Ultimately, you're responsible before God for yourself, so spend less time judging or comparing yourself to others. Don't think you're doing *so amazingly* well, because no one else is as good as you; or that you're doing terribly, because everyone else is doing better than you.

Your load is your load, and you don't judge how you're doing by comparing yourself to others. You test yourself. As John Stott says: 'There is one burden that we cannot share...and that is our responsibility to God on the day of judgement. On that day you cannot carry my pack and I cannot carry yours.'

And then we come to v6, and it seems like Paul is changing tack - to paying pastors - but in reality, he's continuing to drive home how living in the Spirit is going to influence the way you treat others, and what you invest your life in.

### **Reaping What you Sow**

Verse 6: 'Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.' Now, as a church you generously provide for me. So this is for whenever you find yourself in another church. You see, that word 'share' is the word for *fellowship*. So providing financial support for those who teach us the word of God isn't about *paying the pastor a salary*, it's about sharing, it's about a fellowship. One shares the word, another shares finances. Teachers and taught, we're in this together. So we don't approach church as a consumer/provider relationship, or even as a spectator sport, but as a sharing of our lives and gifts in Christ.

And that phrase, 'all good things' primarily means financial support, but that's not all it means. It might mean encouraging the one who teaches you. As Paul says in 1 Tim 5:17, it might mean honouring them. As the writer says in Hebrews 13:17, it might mean listening to them, obeying and submitting to them, so that they can serve you with joy. And none of that is about putting Bible teachers on a pedestal. It's simply an expression of the mutual sharing of loving service that should mark us as Christians.

Because, once again, Paul widens this out. Verse 7: 'Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.' And that tells you, you *can* be deceived. You can think that what you sow *doesn't* influence what you reap. That you can be tightfisted, or unloving in the way you treat your church leaders, and you won't face the consequences of that. But Paul is saying, sow Brussel sprouts and you will get Brussel sprouts, you won't get beautiful sunflowers. But sow sunflowers and you will get sunflowers. But this is not just about life in the church, is it, it's about

all of life: v8: 'For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.'

So, going back to those works of the flesh in chapter: Sow to sexual immorality, impurity, idolatry, strife, jealousy, anger, division, envy, and you will reap corruption. Indulge, repeatedly given in to your sinful nature, rather than crucify it, and an inner decay is going to set in in your life. Sow to sexual impurity and you'll become steadily more impure. Sow anger or discord and you'll reap broken relationships. Sow jealousy and you'll reap bitterness and resentment in your heart against others. Sow dishonesty and you'll repeat distrust from others. And if someone makes a life-time habit of that and never turns to Christ, the end is not just inner decay but eternal destruction.

But sow to the Spirit - count yourself dead to sin but alive in Christ, daily living in the goodness of his grace, and you'll reap a harvest of life, in this life and in eternity. As the old saying goes, 'Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.'

You see, godliness, and holiness and a life full of christian joy, a life of happy, self-sacrificial service, are harvests. And you don't reap them by sowing to your flesh, by living self-centredly, by letting your thoughts wander to sin, or bearing grudges, or being ill-disciplined. You reap them by sowing your life to the Spirit, in what you watch, read, think about. In the prayers you pray, in the company you seek, in the songs you sing. Sow to the Spirit and you will reap eternal life. You'll know the fullness of Christian life now, and the knowledge that you'll enjoy that in ever greater degree for eternity.

So, v9, 'Don't grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.' In other words, one of the key ways to sow to the Spirit is to persevere, to keep on keeping on, because you'll only finish the race if you stay in the race! And Paul knows what any farmer or gardener knows - that there's a delay between sowing and reaping, so persevere.

And persevere in doing good to others. Verse 10, 'so then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.' Now, there are times, maybe like now, when you can feel overwhelmed by the needs of the world. But Paul's much more realistic. He's talking about the self-sacrificial service of doing good *as you have opportunity*. Of meeting those needs around you. That might mean checking on your elderly neighbour. It might mean doing their shopping and putting yourself at risk rather than them. It might mean staying in regular contact with your friend who feels loneliness more than you do. Caring, rather than just consuming, may be costly, but you will reap a harvest in your heart and character that'll last far longer than the short-lived thrill of sowing to your flesh.

But then in v11-18, Paul draws this letter to a close.

### **Getting your Boasting Right**

Look at v12, 'It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised.' And v13, 'they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.'

And in saying that, Paul's highlighting one of the key problems with religion - that it's about giving a good showing, it's about appearing good in the sight of others, of being well thought of and

winning their approval by outward acts, like circumcision. And if you want to be able to feel good about yourself, and boast in yourself, then religion offers you that.

The problem is it's all outward. But Christianity is very different, because it's about an inside-out, transformation. Look at v14, 'But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.'

Now, you boast in the thing that you're confident in don't you? In the thing that makes you feel big, or secure, that tells you and everyone else that you're ok. And so someone might boast in their career, or wealth, or success with the opposite sex, or the latest thing they've just bought. But Paul boasts in something that in his day was shameful - the cross, the crucifixion of Christ.

Why? Because it's there that he knew and we know that we are loved and accepted by God and it's nothing to do with our performance. It's there, in what Jesus has done for us, that we know we're secure; that whatever else happens, God has us safe. Because if Christ would die for us, he's not going to let us go now. And it's because of the cross that we don't need to constantly seek the approval of others, or God, but can find deep inner rest. No wonder Paul says, 'the world has been crucified to me and I to the world', because when you see what Christ has done for you at the cross, the power the world has over you is broken. You don't need to fear the world, but neither do you need to worship it. You can enjoy it, and critique it. But its hold on you is gone.

Which is why Paul says in v15, 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.' Life isn't about keeping the rules, or throwing off the rules, both will leave you enslaved. It's about new creation - about the new heart, new desires, new life of Christ in you.

So let me finish by asking you, what are you boasting in? What are you basing your identity on, or finding your security in? You can't boast in the cross, and how good you are, at the same time. You can't look down on others and look up to Christ at the same time. And if your boasting, your hope and security is in yourself, or external things like the applause of others, you'll never know the grace and peace Paul talks of at the end here. But find your worth, your acceptance, in the cross of Christ, in all he has done for you, and you will reap a harvest of peace and joy - in this life and in the one to come.