

Carry One Another

Galatians 6:1-5

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

In this transition of me saying “goodbye” and the congregation saying “hello” to an interim pastor, I want to share a story from my past. In the mid-1970’s, I was carrying a burden of not being sure where God wanted me to end up in the church and what God wanted me to do as a vocation in life. I wondered about being a church musician and I also wondered about being a pastor. I was in a short-term relationship with an independent church doing pastoral work and music work, and another youth pastor invited me for a few days at a retreat at Forest Home in San Bernardino, southern California. The speaker for those few days was Earl Palmer – a young Presbyterian pastor from Berkeley, California. When I heard Earl speak and teach, it was the very first time that I felt this urgent call to become a Presbyterian. It was Earl’s influence that nudged me forward to consider, along with others, the possibility of pastoral ministry and teaching ministry in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I can easily say that Earl was one of the first to carry me into this denomination. And for him I’m personally grateful. He, in fact, is an elder statesman of this denomination and I am grateful to call him friend and mentor. I am glad that you are going to call him “interim pastor.” May the Lord be with you and Earl together in your future. Let us pray. Gracious God, for your word to us, that comes through your Apostle Paul, now speak to us of our responsibility in light of your grace, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Isaiah tells us about the character and work of Messiah—whom we call “the Christ:” “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering, and acquainted with infirmity. He was despised and we held him of no worth.” He carried our rejection and despise; our view that his life and death was of no value at all. Isaiah goes on to say, “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; and yet we considered him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.” We looked at Jesus as though he was carrying his own problems and God struck him down for being a sinful person. And finally, Isaiah says: “He was crushed for our iniquities.” Under the burden of it all... under the burden of the cross, he collapsed. He collapsed under carrying the load of sin. The “Law of Christ” is, in fact, just that: sacrificial love. He carried our sin... he carried our wounds... our disease... our grief... and our infirmities. He’s carried every aspect of our humanity. He’s carried our human frailty and our failure in his suffering and his crucifixion. He’s carried us all the way to the cross, on the cross, down from the cross, into death, and through, into the Resurrection. And we call ourselves “Christian” – Christ’s followers— because we will commit ourselves to do what he did for us. We can be empowered by the Spirit, in fact, to carry one another in life. We can carry the burdens of life and the burdens of death. The Law of Christ can be kept in our individual and mutual acts of carrying these troubles and these hopes. Not adding to them, but sharing one another’s load, and accepting for our own, our own personal responsibilities and our own loads of life.

Jesus had something very important to say to us, himself, about his pattern of life – his own words :it was not a heavy burden – an oppressive load. It was not a load of a slave or an indentured servant. It was not to be under the demand of an obnoxious lord or boss. Jesus has a gentle leadership style. His pattern of carrying is to be the free and willing choice of any one of us, who, in fact, has experienced in herself or himself, the grace of God through Jesus. Jesus has touched your life. Carrying burdens, then, for those of us who see how Jesus carried them, is a responsibility of privilege, not a demand under threat and intimidation. Remember the words of Jesus himself: “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Jesus also had something to say about people who were driven by the law. This not the big Law (as in the Ten Commandments). This, in fact, is the compulsion by the little ‘do’s and don’ts’ of life; the leaders, who, in fact, have so many of these expectations and rules that they add to the burdens of other peoples’ lives. “Woe to you...” (and it happens that Luke calls them lawyers.) “...for you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.” The Good News of Jesus has a

lot to say about burdens – lifting them and loading too much on other people. We can choose to live into the Law of Christ which carries a lighter load. Or, we can live into the law of condemnation which adds to others' loads, and demands that they carry our agendas and our expectations. We can allow Christ to help us carry our loads and one another's loads... or we can lay our loads on others and demand that they carry us, whether they want to or not.

Galatians is a letter to help us discern the difference between the light Law of Christ and the heavy loads of human expectations. The Galatian church, you see, had turned quickly away from the Law of Christ, which takes away burden, and turned to the law of human demand, which adds burden. And this is our human tendency: to make each other's loads heavier – adding extra shame and guilt; extra expectations; often withholding forgiveness and restoration. In fact, it is a mark of faith that peoples' loads are lightened and we help to lighten them. It is a mark of fear and resentment that adds to the loads of ourselves and others. Paul understood the difference because he, himself, had once persecuted the church. He had added to their burden. Because they had chosen to live the lighter load of Jesus, he decided to put a heavier load upon them of oppression, imprisonment, threat, and death. He threw them into jail and had them executed; if they did not recant and comply with his religious pattern of life, then they had to go. Even the Apostle Peter, Paul says, at times, succumbed to replacing the Law of Christ with the picky laws of human expectations. "If I believe I have to carry this heavy load, then I'm going to force you to carry it for me or with me." That was the attitude of the religious leadership of Jesus' time.

Recently, I was speaking with a Christian who was wrestling with a change in a boss. She said the theme guiding her previous boss was "compassion," but the theme guiding her new boss was "compliance." The primary concern of her first boss was people; the primary concern of her second boss was rules. Both Jesus and Paul give us, as Christians, clear guidance about the better choice here: between compliance with the rules and compassion toward people. Paul would caution us today not to be like the foolish Galatians. Jesus would caution us today not to be like the oppressive Pharisees. They would both encourage us to trust God more than the work of rules and narrow expectations. You see, "law" here is not the concern for the big Ten Commandments, but the petty, detailed concerns of picky people who make, and try to live by a lot of very small rules while imposing their small-mindedness and expectations on those around them. Paul told us in his letter to the Roman church that such law points to the extravagant need for grace. If you're around an oppressive person with a lot of picky expectations, you're looking for a way out in grace. Compliance is bad when it trumps compassion. The law leads us to see the need for grace; grace completes the purpose of the law. Law without grace, in fact, as Paul says, kills people.

Grace only makes sense if there is a law to show us the full extent of human depravity. Law measures the full capacity of what humans can do in sin, for which the grace of Christ is the only cure. The grace of Jesus gives us a way to obey the greater law as a light burden, and not a heavy one. Not be overburdened by the heaviness of living small-mindedness and narrow rules. When we place our trust in Jesus Christ, we discover how much that he has done for us, and how much grace he has poured out upon us. We don't follow him because he threatens us; we follow him because he is gracious to us. We don't love him for his rules. We love him for his gentle ways and his gracious words. We love him for his life-giving truth and his presence; and we see how much he has carried our own burdens. We experience how he reduces our heavy loads, lightens our consciences. With him, it's easier for us to carry the hard stuff of life. And then we are grateful to help others carry their loads. We are no longer bound by a law of obligation and retribution, in compliance; but we are bound, as followers of Christ, by a higher law—the Law of Christ. In Christ, we discover the freedom to choose to serve Christ, and joyfully choose to carry one another's burdens.

In the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2, we read a story of a group of people who carry the burdens of a certain man. Jesus is at a home, surrounded by a big crowd because he's teaching and he's healing. They're packed-in and around the house and there's no room for anyone to get close to Jesus. "Some people," Mark says, "came, bringing to Jesus a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not get him before Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him. And having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay," right down in front of Jesus. And it says, "When Jesus saw their faith [the faith of those carrying the man], he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'"—a peculiar outcome for a group of people who carried this man to Jesus to be healed in his body.

Now, as Mark would have it, he accents the other thing – the parallel event— that’s going on in the story; and that is: present in the house were religious leaders who were critical of Jesus. They thought to themselves about this whole event, ‘He can’t do that. He can’t forgive sin. Only God can do that. That, after all, is against the law for a human being to do.’ Jesus could read their minds. And to prove a big point about his ability to carry sin, burdens, and diseases altogether, Jesus said, “So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to the paralytic, ‘Stand up, take your mat and go home.’ ” And he did. Notice everybody in this text who’s carrying something. And notice those who don’t carry anything, but add to the burden of others. The small group of friends carried the paralytic to Jesus. Jesus carried his sin and his disease. And the paralytic carried himself right out of the house. Jesus lightened everyone’s load, except those who tried to add to the loads. The religious leaders in the crowd felt angry, and with a much heavier burden – a burden of resentment. And they had to do something about it: ‘If we can’t control this guy and he won’t play ball with us, he’s becoming way too popular. We have to find a way to get rid of him. After all, how dare he connect healing to forgiveness of sin?’

When you come to Jesus with a burden, he will lighten your load. He will help you carry your own load. He recognizes the faith of those who carry our loads for us. The man was forgiven and healed because his friends carried him to Jesus. This is the powerful thing about the Law of Christ – it lightens our loads. It helps carry our own loads. It helps us carry one another. But there are some, as in this story, who specialize in adding to the oppressive loads. The law of compliance without grace does not carry a load; in fact, it adds. Grace, you see, leads us to a higher purpose for compliance: it’s no longer just compliance— it is love. It is love that freely gives itself for another person. It transcends the Law – it’s a higher law – it is the Law of Christ.

How would you have felt if you were the owner of the home and they had just dug through your roof? Your roof is now a mess. The man has walked out, healed and forgiven. Would you sue Jesus? Would you move him toward the law? Or would you see the moment of grace? “Either Jesus stops forgiving sin and connecting that to healing,” the Pharisees said, “or we’re going to take him to court.”

The Galatian problem was not that they weren’t carrying each other’s grief and physical troubles, but that they were, in fact, not carrying each other’s sins: “If anyone is detected,” Paul says, “in a transgression... bear this burden and fulfill the Law of Christ.” In the church we often find it easier to visit someone in the hospital than forgive another for their sin, particularly if the sin has hurt us. Paul’s call for us to carry one another surely includes pastoral care for the sick and the grieving, but it specifically commands care for the person who has failed morally. It’s not just care, but includes picking them up, walking with them, and even carrying them into their future as they move into healing and restoration. When Paul looked at Jesus and looked at the churches, he knew he needed to carry them in his prayers, his letters, and his presence— all the way to full moral restoration. And that’s why Paul writes the letters. He doesn’t want to leave these people in a dark place, in terms of their own patterns of sin.

In America today, I believe, especially in the American church, we have a hard time carrying these kinds of moral burdens. We would rather carry the emotional pain or even the physical pain of another person. It is too often outside of our comfort zone to carry a person who has made a serious moral error, or has fallen into an immoral pattern of life. Too often we abandon them, or we just tolerate them and act as if nothing went wrong. We, too often, would rather curse them and walk away or avoid dealing with them at all. As Paul says, we need to step in and carry one another especially when there is moral failure. Remember in Mark, chapter 2: “When Jesus saw the faith of those carrying the paralytic... he said to the paralytic... “Your sins are forgiven.” Responsibility for us to carry one another, according to Paul, has a lot to do with how we carry one another through and out of immoral life patterns.

A few years ago I was speaking with a man who was part of a support group. This group was, in fact, walking with a leader who had had dozens of affairs with married women. He described the diligent and consistent work of the group and what they had to do to hold this man accountable to stop his addictive sexual behavior. The man had learned the moves and practiced the looks of seducing women for most of his life. He had made a mess of his life and he needed, frankly, the help of his friends, in forgiveness and restoration, to turn it around. He needed help to be restored into his full human righteousness. But, in fact, many of the members of the group grew tired, over a period of time, of carrying this man’s pattern. It was hard to see him through the recovery and the healing. They had to be with him whenever he went out

in public. They had to hold him accountable to put off the old seductive behaviors and put on the new healthier ones. And frankly, it was taking a lot of their time and energy. But they decided to commit themselves to it because they loved Christ and he was a brother in Christ. I believe sometimes that A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous] does this better than the church. And why is there an A.A. today? Because the church, frankly, doesn't do this well.

Carry one another. Carry those who are in transgressions and don't abandon them. That fulfills the Law of Christ. It's not tolerance for sin, but it's communal accountability to see people transformed by the Spirit of Christ. Yes, we can fulfill the Law of Christ by carrying one another. And while doing this, we must remember that, in fact, Jesus' burden is light. So let us not add to one another's burdens in the guise of caring. It is the way of Jesus for us to carry the light burden—for his burden is light; his yoke is easy. Let us pray. We pray, Lord Jesus Christ, that you would teach us this very hard pattern of life as fellow believers in Christ— to carry one another even through frailty and failure. Help us to do so in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.