



One of the strangest figures in church history was a man named Simeon the Stylite. He was the first of the so-called Desert Fathers. Around the year 423, he built a short pillar on the edge of the Syrian desert, climbed to the top, and lived on it for the next 37 years. Simeon received many visitors to his desert perch. Many of them came to see if he was out of his mind. But the hermit explained he was simply a Christian who wanted to commune with God in solitude. Living on top of a pole in the desert was his way of separating himself from sin and devoting himself entirely to God.

The life of Simeon the Stylite raises an important question: What does it mean to be spiritual? As far as Simeon was concerned, you could be more spiritual in the desert than in the city, and more spiritual alone than in relationship. Was he right? I like what one husband and father asked when he heard about Simeon's lifestyle: "Is there child-care in the desert?" How do you live that way and change diapers at the same time?

But there are Christians who think like this for any number of reasons. Some have just gotten burned by other people so much that they can't handle it anymore. They separate themselves from close relationships because it's too painful. Others see people as a temptation or at least a distraction. The idea is that if I can just eliminate those things I'll be able to focus solely on my relationship with God. There are those today who even stay away from church for this very reason. There is so much hypocrisy, so much garbage in the lives of so-called Christians, they just stay away. "It's just me and God."

We've been studying Paul's letter to the Galatians. In chapter 5 he told us what it looks like to be spiritual. He said first of all true spirituality flows from a life that's rooted in the Gospel. The Gospel says you can't earn God's favor; it's a gift. He sent His Son to die for you. Through faith in Him you're forgiven and made righteous. You're free from the law as a way of being accepted. God has accepted you in His beloved Son.

But that's not all. He also told us those who know Christ have been indwelt with the Spirit of the living God. Each of us needs to actively cooperate with the Spirit as He works in our lives. If we do that, the Spirit of God will produce fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. What's so interesting about the fruit of the Spirit is most of these things can't happen in isolation. How would Simeon learn patience with an irritating brother up there on his perch?

How would he learn gentleness and kindness? Most of all, how would learn to love?

So right at the end of chapter 5 and into the first few verses of chapter 6 Paul gets real specific about how to live in love. Right off the bat it's obvious the church can be a challenging place. Sometimes the church is like one big dysfunctional family. So Paul starts by telling us what **not** to do.

### **We are not to be boastful**

Look what he says in v.26. "*Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.*" If you want to live in community, don't be conceited; don't be boastful, don't be proud. Pride, conceit, boasting (whatever you call it) poisons relationships. I want you to notice something about this verse. It teaches us that how we treat other people will be determined by how we view ourselves. When we're boastful or conceited we'll either challenge one another or we'll envy one another.

Think about it. Selfish conceit causes us to challenge one another. The idea here is to challenge someone to a contest. You can be so sure of your superiority that you want to prove it by showing others up. It might be pride in your opinions, your knowledge, your abilities, even your spirituality. We love to challenge others in order to show our stuff. But, here is the weird thing—conceit can also cause us to envy others. Inevitably we run into someone who shows us up; someone who we can't beat; someone who is smarter, wittier, faster, richer or better looking. And that causes all kinds of problems, too. Jealousy and envy eats us up. Many of us walk around this way, either feeling superior or inferior and it poisons our relationships.

Like many of you, I grew up playing a lot of sports. Often times, athletes live in this tension that's rooted in pride and conceit. We're constantly comparing ourselves with our competitors, some of who are on our own team! We either challenge them because we think we're better than them, or we envy them because deep down we fear they're better than us. But in some way we view everyone as a rival. It's a very self-consumed way to live. It's not conducive to community.

You really can't love people when you're like that. Remember 1 Cor. 13, "*Love is...not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant...it does not seek its own, is not provoked...*" Genuine Christian community is governed not by rivalry but by service. The right attitude to other people isn't "I'm better than you and

I'll prove it." Nor is it, "You're better than me and I resent it." The right attitude is, "You're a person of importance because God made you in His image and Christ died for you. I will rejoice with you when you rejoice and weep with you when you weep."

### **We are to restore one another from sin**

But next Paul goes on and he tells us what **to do**. Look at 6:1. *"Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted."* There's a number of things I want to point out about this verse, but notice first how Paul addresses them. He calls them brothers. Right from the start he reminds us we're a family. This is to govern all of our relationships in the body of Christ. We take our cues from how a family ought to function. We're not a business. We don't follow a business model in our relationship with other believers. We're a family. Families should be up front and honest with each other. We don't sweep things under the rug. That's how dysfunctional families operate.

With that in mind Paul addresses a specific situation, *"Even if a man is caught in a trespass."* He speaks of this as a normal occurrence in the life of the church. A better translation of this would be, "Even when a man is caught in a trespass." In other words, it's going to happen. This is a normal part of church life. Some might think this kind of thing ought to never happen in a church. But you see, we're all frail humans and frail humans fall from time to time. We're all in a battle. We all have this thing hanging onto us called the flesh or the old nature. We also have an enemy who is crafty and subtle and powerful. So don't be surprised if people sin from time to time.

When he speaks of being, *"caught in a trespass,"* we need to understand what that means. The word *caught* means to be overtaken by something. Paul isn't saying this person has been caught red-handed by someone else in the act of sin. He's talking about someone who has been overtaken or ambushed by the trespass itself. The picture is of one caught in a trap who doesn't want to be there. The word "trespass" literally means to stumble or to fall by the wayside. The picture here isn't of a stiff-necked rebel shaking his fist at God; it's of someone caught by something that he can't get free of by himself. And that's how we ought to see them—as a precious brother or sister who wants to please God but who has been ambushed by sin.

Paul tells us what to do with someone like that. Unfortunately, believers usually do one of two things when someone is in this situation in the body. Some of us just try to sweep it under the rug and deny it completely. Maybe we do that under the guise of grace. Maybe we use the quote "Judge not lest you be judged." Maybe we just take the attitude that it's none of my business or nobody is perfect. Whatever the reason, these people do nothing.

On the other hand, there are those who are so harsh and angry and vindictive and judgmental they don't do any good at all. Sometimes they do this indirectly by gossiping about it, or sharing it as a "confidential" prayer request. But Paul gives us an entirely different approach. He says *"restore such a one."* We can't restore someone if we're ignoring where they're at. Nor can we restore someone if we're vindictive and judgmental towards them. To *restore* means to act in such a way that we bring positive healing and change to their life. The word *restore* was used to describe the mending of fishing nets after they had been torn. It was also used to describe the resetting of a bone by a doctor after it had been broken. The purpose isn't to tear down but to bind up and heal so it can function again the way it's supposed to. One of the ways we restore a brother is by bringing to bear on their situation the truth of God's word. Sometimes the truth hurts but the purpose is always to restore. God's word will help them to claim God's forgiveness, correct the situation they're in, and resist the enemy in the future.

Notice Paul also tells us how to do this. He says, *"Restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness."* Don't be harsh in your approach. Be tender. Be soft. This doesn't mean we're weak. The idea behind gentleness is strength under control. If you've ever had a broken bone and been in a position where a doctor was trying to reset it you know how important this is. There is a need for firmness and strength, but also for gentleness. That's how we deal with a brother broken by sin. We're dealing with sensitive areas and fragile people so it's critical to be gentle.

But Paul says not only to be gentle. He adds we're to act with humility. He says, *"Looking to yourself lest you too be tempted."* You have no right to approach this person with an air of spiritual superiority. If you think you'll never have to be in a place where you're caught in sin, then you're set up for a fall. Pride comes before a fall. Don't make that mistake. We all have to understand our own vulnerability. So if you have to go and restore a brother, go with a humble spirit.

With that in mind, Paul tells us who it is that's to do the restoring. He says, *"you who are spiritual"* Who are these spiritual people? This isn't an elite class of spiritual giants in the church. It's not a group of spiritual Rambo's that go around trying to get other people's lives straight. Back in chapter 5 Paul said, *"walk by the Spirit and you will not fulfill the desire of the flesh."* He also described the fruit I mentioned earlier. He's just talking about people who are walking in that Spirit-filled way. People who are loving and gentle and patient and kind and self-controlled. The work of restoration isn't the job of immature believers. Those are the folks that are most likely to be too harsh. This is the job of those who are spiritually in a place where the Lord is being allowed to manifest His character through their life.

## **We are to bear one another's burdens**

So the first thing we're to do is restore one another. The second thing is found in v.2. *"Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."* We're to bear one another's burdens. Of course this applies to what he just said about restoring a brother. Not only do we point out sin but we help that person get free from it. It's not enough to reset the bone. You may have to carry the load for that person for a while. It's not enough just to lift him back up on his feet. You may have to hold him up and help him walk. You don't say to the brother caught in a trespass, go and get well and when you're well, then come back to us. You say, let us help you carry some of the load. Let us walk with you through this time and be a part of the process of healing and growth and strengthening.

But this command deals with the way we're to relate with one another in general as well. There are times in life we have a heavy load to carry. It might be a financial burden, an emotional burden, a health burden. It could be sorrow, worry, doubt or depression. It could be a painful divorce, a rebellious child or a time of unemployment. Whatever it is, it's too much for us to bear alone. When you see someone like that what do you do? Do you say, "Well, they got themselves into that mess, they'll have to get themselves out"? Paul says, No! Come alongside them and shoulder some of the load. You know what? There are times that life just crushes people. If you don't know that, you've never been crushed. And when you're crushed you need someone to come alongside of you and bear some of the load for you.

Some people say we should let God do this for us. We shouldn't have to bear one another's burdens. We have the Lord. Psalm 55:22 says, *"Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you."* 1 Pet. 5:7 says *"cast all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you."* Aren't the Lord's shoulders strong enough to carry our load? Of course they are, but sometimes the way he meets your need is by using someone else. You're the body of Christ. You're his shoulders. So when someone has a burden too great for them to carry, don't just sit there on your perch, get off your perch and help them. Can you imagine seeing a little old lady trying to carry a 100 lb. suitcase through an airport and no one lifting a finger to help her? Why then would you sit by and watch a brother carry an emotional burden or a financial burden and not lift a finger to help?

There are so many different ways we can lighten someone's load. Sometimes it takes several people within the body of Christ to do it. I saw a great example of this recently in how our church family responded to the tragic death of Lisa Fellini. Lisa and her kids were part of this church for many years. Recently we haven't seen as much of her but she kept in touch with some of us. But when she died, this body stepped up. The night of her accident, it was her family and people from this church who were there. The next morning, someone drove to Grass Valley to pick up her son.

In the following days, people stepped up to help plan a memorial service and lunch, give legal advise, make meals, pray, and offer financial help. No one person did it all, but everyone did something. I have to say I was really proud of the people of this church family.

Paul says when we do this, we fulfill the law of Christ. Jesus said, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you"* (Jn. 13:34). How did Jesus love us? He bore our burden of sin on the cross. How do we love each other? We bear one another's burdens.

## **Pride will keep us from doing this**

In the next three verses Paul points out a basic attitude that will keep us from doing this and then he gives a remedy. The basic problem is what he talked about earlier: pride. Look at v.3. *"For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself."* Paul says pride makes us think we're something when we are nothing. One of the reasons we don't bother to bear one another's burdens is we feel above those who are struggling. It would be beneath us. This pride often comes out in a self-centered focus. Life is all about us. Burdened people have a way of demanding our time, changing our plans, rearranging our schedules. Helping them requires the kinds of sacrifices we only make if we see them as more important than ourselves. Most of us use "busyness" to cloak a spirit of selfish pride. The only thing that matters is me. Paul says if you think that way you're deceived. You think you're something but you're nothing. What are you apart from Christ? What do you have to boast about? There is nothing good in your life that didn't come from the gracious hand of God. We deserve nothing but judgment, but he redeemed us and made us his beloved children. When you see yourself that way, you will be much more likely to help a brother in need.

Another thing Paul says about pride is it's often rooted in comparison with others. I like the way the NIV puts v.4: *"Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else."* Comparison can keep us from bearing one another's burdens. We might think, "I'm better than they are." This is the very conceit Paul already warned against. To counter this way of thinking, Paul tells each believer to examine or test his own work. To do that you have to put your eyes on God rather than others. When we have our eyes on God rather than others, then we can take a kind of pride in what God has allowed us by his grace to accomplish.

The remedy for prideful comparison is found in v.5, *"for each one shall bear his own load."* Don't focus on how you measure up to others; focus on what God has given you to do; focus on the load he's given you. On the surface this seems to be a contradiction with v.2 which tells us to bear one another's burdens. If each of us shall bear our own load, why do we need to bear

one another's burden? But the words Paul uses are different. The word for *burden* in v.2 means an extremely heavy load that no one can carry by themselves. The word for *load* in v.5 is the word they used back then for a pack that was made for one individual, kind of like a fanny pack. Paul is saying each of us have our own fanny pack. You can't carry mine and I can't carry yours. One day each of us will stand before God and we'll give an account for how we did with that.

Do you see what this passage is saying? After all he has written in this letter about Christian freedom, he's saying real freedom doesn't eliminate either mutual accountability or personal responsibility. I've heard believers make this mistake. "We're free in Christ. We don't have to keep the law. We can do whatever we want. We all sin. But God forgives us and so it's no big deal. We don't have to care for others. We aren't under any obligation to do

anything for anyone. We don't have to worry about God holding us accountable." This is a misunderstanding of freedom.

You see, in one sense Simeon the Stylite was wrong and in one sense he was right. He was wrong to think that being truly spiritual is only about me and God. Spirituality must never be divorced from the demands of community. To be truly spiritual, we have to come down off of our perch and serve others. But he was also right about something. In the end, each of us will stand alone before God. We will have to answer to God for how we did with the opportunities he gave us. If we're in Christ, he won't condemn us, but he will hold us accountable. Christian freedom does not eliminate mutual accountability or personal responsibility.