

Bearing Each Other's Burdens/Carrying Our Own Load

Galatians 6:1-10

Bear one another's burdens....all must carry their own loads. All must test their own work....

Paul is writing to a community that has, for whatever reasons, lost sight of its call to be a community of Christ's love. There seems to be a complete contradiction in what he writes. *Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.* Three sentences later Paul writes, *For all must carry their own loads.* Which is it? This doesn't seem to make sense.

Paul gives us a tremendously important insight about being a truly loving community. Our love is to nurture and support each person in living the life of faith. This kind of love lets us know that we are not alone and accepts us whatever the condition of our lives.

I think that every human being longs for and needs such a community. Only in community can we discover our true selves. In community we find the antidote to a society that dehumanizes people, uses people for profit and power, and fills our minds with superficiality and distraction.

Bearing one another's burdens means being a community of love in which we awaken to life the way God made it to be lived. We share the struggles of discovering and living our true humanity. We offer one another the gift of listening and non-judgmental presence. Bearing one another's burdens means expressing toward each other God's unconditional love.

What does Paul mean by *all must carry their own loads*? He might mean that each person needs to contribute in some way to the life and work of the community, pull their weight, so to speak. However, I think it is something deeper than that. I think Paul says this to avoid a misunderstanding of love. Bearing one another's burdens does not mean *taking care of each other* in the sense of trying to fix each other's lives, exert control over each other, or in any other way presume that we know what is best for another person. Perhaps all of us have been in a place where life becomes so difficult or painful that we just wish someone else would do it for us! We may have also discovered precisely in such experiences that the person who showed us the greatest love was the person who did not try to take away our struggles.

No one can live our lives for us. No one can live our discipleship to Christ for us. An old spiritual says: "You've got to walk that lonesome valley/You've got to walk it by yourself/Oh, nobody else can walk it for you/You've got to walk it by yourself." This song came out of the migration from the poverty of rural and mountain regions of this country to the fast-industrializing cities. Dreams of prosperity and an easier life soon encountered the lonely struggles of urban poverty, low wages, and exploitation. So people found strength and courage in Jesus who made his journey by himself, through all his sufferings, and calls us to do the same.

We are to discover the life of faith within the struggles and challenges, as well as the blessings, of our own lives. When someone tries to solve our problems for us or take away our struggles through a wrong kind of love, they are not doing us any favors. They are robbing us of the dignity of our own lives and discovering within ourselves the strength and peace God gives us to live our lives in faith.

Paul helps us see that the community of faith is both a place for mutual burden bearing, for love that accepts unconditionally, and a community of discipleship, where each person knows herself or himself called by Christ to a journey of faith. That is, carrying our own load.

What Paul calls carrying our own load sheds light on what we call in our community **ultimate responsibility**. This means the way a mission group needs to accept responsibility for every aspect of its life and

work. Those who feel called to that particular mission accept ultimate responsibility, doing everything they can do and trusting God in all things. It is not just a way to get things done; it is the way of experiencing what it means to live by faith.

Carrying our own load can also mean that we take ultimate responsibility for our own lives. No one can take from us the burden and blessing of living our own lives of faith. Paul is saying that we need to keep both things in our awareness all the time. Bearing each other's burdens as a community of unconditional love. Each of us needing to carry our own lives, our own faith. This helps us to fulfill the "law of Christ," which is love that both accepts us as we are and calls us to the fullness of the life of faith.

How do we do this? What helps us keep both these dimensions of love in mind? This is where **accountability** comes in, something else we talk about here. It means being accountable for the commitments we make to the life of discipleship, to living out the "law of Christ," which is love. We commit to practicing minimal spiritual disciplines as Covenant or Community Members. We give our lives this framework so that we continue to grow in faith. But commitment to spiritual practices such as daily prayer, financial giving, or specific responsibility for a mission does not go very far without accountability. Accountability is what gives us our spiritual lives traction.

Accountability needs to be part of every mission group. Members need to have a regular opportunity to report on how they are doing with regard to the spiritual disciplines and their spiritual lives as a whole. This is a time for members to share what they are doing with regard to the mission itself, how they see themselves in relation to the mission, and what gifts they are using or desire to use for the work of the mission. In general, we share how we feel God is working in and with our lives, where we are struggling and where we are experiencing growth.

If we are not in a mission group, then it is essential to work out accountability in another way. Find someone in the community to meet with as a "spiritual friend," someone who can listen objectively, give you honest responses, and NOT take away your struggles but give you the support you need to carry your own load. Meeting together at least monthly is important. These times of sharing are to be approached with preparation and attentiveness to the things that matter most in our lives. Accountability is not about "checking up on each other," but helping one another with our spiritual growth.

When we share with another person or a group in honesty and trust, we experience both the supportive burden bearing of the community and the sense of responsibility for our own lives, caring our own load. Last week was my turn to give my accountability report to the Festival Center Mission Group. It was a difficult report to make, for I had a number of struggles to share. I did not look forward to reporting. Things were still too raw and I had no answers for my own situation. I read my report with a sense of, "What have I got to lose?" The group listened carefully, not interrupting, sensitive to my struggles. After we report there is a time when members of the group can share their responses. There were no attempts to minimize my struggles or to solve my problems for me. The careful listening and complete acceptance of what is being expressed enabled me, as it does with others who report, to bear my own load. Through such sharing with a group or a spiritual friend, one regains the strength, perspective, and energy to bear the load of one's life and work.

One last thing. Paul says that as we bear one another's burdens and carry our own loads, we need to "test" our own work so that we take pride in what we ourselves do. I think Paul is saying that we are to pay attention to our own work, the things we feel called to do, and not be caught up in measuring others' work or measuring ourselves against others. The life of faith is not a competition. This keeps the focus where it needs to be. God calls each of us to some expression of love, through the use of our gifts and the uniqueness of our lives. That is our work.

Our "work" is also our own faith, our own life, and not someone else's. Comparing ourselves with others, trying to get others to agree with us or approve of us...all of that is a waste of time. Also, there is

nothing more destructive of community and distracting to our own lives than demanding that others mirror our own thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and commitments. When we find ourselves engaged in such, it is a sign of our own discontentedness, our own insecurity about our lives and faith. If I feel that I am doing what God has called me to do, if I am accepting my own struggles and growth in faith, then I have no need to try and tell others what to do or think. Kaye shared with me yesterday an insight she had on this part of the reading. If we are each grateful for our own lives, accepting of the blessings and the struggles that are a part of our own lives, then we feel no need to always be getting into other people's business, the loads they are carrying.

If each of us is working conscientiously with these things—bearing one another's burdens in a community of love, each carrying our own load in terms of ultimate responsibility for our own lives, and not getting caught in comparing ourselves with others—then we will be doing what Paul says at the end of the passage. We will be working for the good of all, beginning with our own community. All of these things we talk about cannot be just words that we speak. They are to be embodied in our life together.

I think that this is the vision of community we have as the Church of the Covenant. We do not always live it out faithfully. We sometimes get burden bearing and load carrying mixed up. But as long as we keep coming back to what Paul is talking about, we will continue to grow in awareness, understanding, and practice of the kind of love that truly manifests God's love in Christ.