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Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:1, 2)

1. Introduction

The above text from Paul's Letter to the Galatians teaches us to help and care for one another on our journey of faith. The first part of the text teaches us to help a person who has fallen in sin and also in what manner we ought to help them. The second part of the text teaches us to share one another's burdens.

2. If a man be overtaken in a fault

As children of God we wish to follow the Lord Jesus and preserve faith and a pure conscience. Nonetheless, we have experienced that while endeavoring to follow Jesus we often fall into sin. The devil has not left us unscathed. With his seemingly unlimited tricks, he has often wounded us and with the help of our corrupt flesh caused us to sin. And sin, because it is deceitful, may harden our heart and conscience (Heb. 3:13) and we may be "overtaken," that is, caught or entangled in sin. The hardening of heart and conscience can begin with something that to one who has fallen may seem relatively small and innocent, for example, a little lie, the occasional use of make up, watching a ball game on television, listening to worldly music, watching unsuitable videos, or visiting offensive sites on the internet. Our conscience, if it is properly functioning, urges us to put sin away. But if we ignore these promptings, our conscience begins to harden. Little by little, we begin to permit sin in our lives and we become blinded to its dangers. If we continue to neglect the care of our conscience and let it become a harbor for sin, we will eventually suffer spiritual shipwreck. James says, "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (James 1:15).

3. Restore Such an One

Paul instructs us to "restore" one entangled in sin. This process of restoring often involves two parts: rebuke and forgiveness. Rebuke is a necessary part of the gospel, but words of rebuke and instruction cannot in themselves remove sin or "restore" anyone. That occurs only through faith in Jesus Christ and His redemption work. As Paul writes to the Romans, "the just shall live by faith."

Generally, we find rebuking another person to be an unpleasant task and are often reluctant and timid to do so. A healthy timidity rises from the knowledge and understanding of our own poorness. But we must also acknowledge that there are other factors that may cause us to be timid and sometimes even negligent. For example, we may fear that we will start an argument, be rejected, lose a friend, or even make an enemy. Sometimes we may simply be lazy and indifferent. Such fears rise from our flesh and our darkened reason. God's Word, however,

teaches us that when we ignore a brother's sin we both hate him and share in his guilt (Lev. 19:17). Proverbs teach that "open rebuke is better than secret love" and that he that rebukes another will afterward be more favored than someone who has merely flattered him (Prov. 27:5; 28:23). In the so-called "church law of Christ" (Matt. 18:15-17), Jesus teaches that when our brother sins against us, we should discuss the matter with him alone, one on one. If our brother does not hear us, Jesus says to take "one or two more," and if he still will not hear, Jesus says "tell it unto the church." If the offending brother refuses to hear the church, then he is no longer to be regarded a brother in faith. Then the keys of binding are used (Matt. 16: 19; John 20:23).

There are, of course, sins and faults that do not necessarily involve offence against another individual. If an individual, or even several individuals, become aware of such a matter, we understand that they should deal with the matter in as small a circle as possible. Some sins are open and public from the beginning, however. Such sins may be openly rebuked, as Paul wrote to Timothy: "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim 5:20).

4. Forgive One Another

As I noted, rebuke is but one part of "restoring" a fallen sinner. True restoration occurs when the gospel of absolution is preached and believed. God's children form His royal priesthood; it is the office of the Holy Spirit. Peter writes, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Pet. 2:9). Christ has given His disciples, His priests, the authority to forgive sins. When Jesus appeared to His disciples following His resurrection, He said: "Peace be unto you; as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:21-23). While, as God's children, we have the power to retain or bind, we do so reluctantly and with sorrow. At the same time, we understand that this too is founded upon love for the sin-fallen. On the other hand, we are eager to preach the gospel and remit sins, for it is precisely through the forgiveness of sins that fallen and wounded sinners are healed and restored. Jeremiah says, "Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved" (Jer. 17:14).

In this too there are temptations and the Apostle Paul warns us of the temptations involved in soul care with good reason. Our sin-corrupt flesh often hinders us in this task. Weariness and impatience, a sin-burdened conscience, pride, or self-righteousness, for example, may cause us to be harsh and unforgiving much like the wicked servant in Jesus' parable of the ten thousand talents (Man. 18). It is important that we are ready to forgive. Jesus said, "Freely ye have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8). And He warned His disciples: "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14, 15).

When we remember and believe that our Heavenly Father has graciously forgiven our debt of ten thousand talents, we also wish to graciously forgive our brethren and approach them in meekness and humility as Paul here teaches. We must remember that understanding and spiritual gifts, like all other gifts, are not the result of our own virtue and skill, but are gifts of God. Paul warns the Corinthians, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10: 12).

Jesus, the Great Caretaker of Souls, gave us the best example of the humility needed in caring for souls while washing His disciples feet. John writes, “So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me master and Lord: and he say well; for so I am. If then your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.” (John 13:12-17).

5. Bear ye one another's burdens

Soul care does not always involve dealing with sin and matters of conscience. Life often brings burdens and trials, for example, depression, illness, the death of loved ones, or perhaps financial difficulties to mention but a few. In this text Paul instructs us to carry one another's burdens and “so fulfill the law of Christ.” The author of the Letter to the Hebrews also writes, “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body” (Heb 13:3). The prayers of God's children, comfort and instruction in His Word, singing songs and hymns, and the sharing of personal psalms all offer relief and encouragement for those that are faced with adversity. Likewise help and support with the practical matters of daily life may lighten someone's burden.

6. Conclusion

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that we need to recognize that man is also an intellectual and physical being. Due to the nature of psychological and emotional problems, as well as our inexperience in dealing with them, we may in some cases confuse them with spiritual problems. We need to exercise caution in dealing with such cases and when necessary recommend professional help. We may lean upon current knowledge when dealing with both psychological and physical health. It is written in Ecclesiasticus, “Honor a physician with the honor due unto him for the uses which ye may have of him: for the Lord hath created him. . .The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them. . . And he hath given men skill, that he might be honored in his marvelous works. With such doth he heal [men,] and take away their pains” (Ecclus. 38:1, 4, 6, 7). We also understand that it is easier to face both psychological and physical difficulties with a heart and conscience that have been cared for and obtained peace in the gospel.

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