

Bear One Another's Burdens

"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.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul teaches us to 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 him or her. The second part teaches us to share each other's burdens.

If a Man Be Overtaken in a Fault

God's children wish to follow the Lord Jesus and preserve faith and a pure conscience. Nonetheless, we experience that in our endeavor to follow Jesus, we often fall into sin. The devil has not left us unharmed. With his seemingly unlimited tricks he often wounds us, and with the help of our corrupt flesh he leads us to sin. The deceitfulness of sin hardens the heart and conscience, and we may be overtaken, that is, caught or entangled in sin's fine nets (Heb. 3:13).

The hardening of heart and conscience might begin with something that seems small and innocent to one who has fallen. For example, a little lie, the occasional use of makeup, 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 allow it to become a harbor for sin, we will eventually suffer spiritual shipwreck. As James writes, "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (James. 1:15).

Restore Such an Entangled One

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

We often find it unpleasant to rebuke another person, and we are reluctant and timid to do so. A healthy timidity rises from the correct knowledge and appreciation of our own sinfulness. But we must also acknowledge that there are other factors that can cause us to be timid—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 feel lazy or indifferent. Such fear and leniency rises from our flesh and darkened reason. However, God's Word teaches us that when we ignore a brother's sin we both hate him and share in his guilt (Lev. 19:17). Proverbs teach us that "open rebuke is better than secret love," and that he who rebukes another will afterward be more favored than someone who merely flatters the fallen one (Prov. 27:5; 28:23).

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In the church law of Christ, Jesus teaches that when our brother sins against us, we should discuss the matter with him alone, one on one. Then we patiently wait for the discussion to bear fruit. If our brother or sister does not hear us after repeated efforts to resolve the concern, Jesus says to take one or two other people and discuss the matter again. Sometimes, multiple visits with others are necessary. But if the fallen one still will not hear, then Jesus says to “tell it unto the church.” If the offending one refuses to heed the voice of the church, then they are no longer held as a brother or sister in faith (Matt. 18:15–17). Thus 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 issue in as small a circle as possible. However, some sins are open and public from the beginning. Such sins may be openly rebuked, as Paul writes: “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (I Tim. 5:20).

Forgive One Another

Nevertheless, 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, and 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 power to forgive sins. When Jesus appeared to His disciples after 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).

God’s children have the power to retain, or bind, someone in his or her sins. However, we do so reluctantly and with sorrow. Nevertheless, we understand that this action is founded in love for the sin-fallen one. On the other hand, we are eager to preach the gospel and remit sins, for it is precisely through the forgiveness of sins that a fallen and wounded sinner is healed and restored. As Jeremiah says, “Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved” (Jer. 17:14).

However, temptations exist even in matters of soul care. With good reason Apostle Paul warns us of these temptations. Our sin-corrupt flesh often hinders us in this task. For example, weariness and impatience, a sin-burdened conscience, pride or self-righteousness may cause us to be harsh and unforgiving much like the wicked servant in Jesus’ parable of the ten thousand talents (Matt. 18). We must always be ready to forgive. Jesus says, “Freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). And He warns 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 sin, we also wish to graciously forgive our brothers and sisters in faith. We approach them in meekness and humility, as Paul 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, “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

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When washing His disciples' feet, Jesus, the Great Caretaker of Souls, gave us the best example of the humility needed in caring for souls. "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 ye 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).

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. Depression, illness, the death of loved ones or financial difficulties are only a few examples of such tribulations. Paul instructs us to carry one another's burdens and "so fulfill the law of Christ." The letter to the Hebrews also says, "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). Help and support with the practical matters of daily life may lighten someone's burden. Above all, the prayers of God's children, the comfort and instruction of God's Word, the singing of songs and hymns, and the sharing of personal psalms all offer relief and encouragement to those who face adversity.

Conclusion

Finally, we need to recognize that people are intellectual and physical beings. Due to the nature of psychological and emotional problems, as well as our inexperience in dealing with them, we may confuse these matters with spiritual problems. We need to exercise caution in dealing with such cases, and recommend professional help when necessary. We can freely turn to modern science and medicine when dealing with both physical and psychological health.

It is written in Ecclesiasticus: "Honour a physician with the honour 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 honoured in his marvellous works. With such doth he heal men, and take away their pains" (Ecclus. 38:1,4,6,7). God's children also understand that it is easier to cope with physical and psychological difficulties when the conscience is cared for in the gospel, and the heart is at peace.

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