**Galatians: Paul’s Letter of Freedom**

**Sunday November 18, 2018**

**“Don’t Get Tired of Doing Good” (Galatians 6:1-10)**

**1. Introduction: *Stopped by a Brick***

A young and very successful executive was travelling down a suburban street in his brand -new black Jaguar. Suddenly a brick was thrown from the sidewalk, thumping into the side of the car.

 Brakes slammed! Gears ground into reverse, and tires madly spun the Jaguar back to the spot from where the brick had been thrown. The driver jumped out, grabbed the kid who had thrown the brick and pushed him up against a parked car. “What was that all about?!” he screamed. “That’s my new Jag, that brick you threw is gonna cost you a lot of money!”

 “Please, mister, please …. I’m sorry! I didn’t know what else to do!” pleaded the youngster. “I threw the brick because no one else would stop!” Tears were dripping down the boy’s chin as he pointed around the parked car. “It’s my brother, mister,” he said. “He rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can’t lift him up.” Sobbing, the boy asked the executive, “Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He’s hurt and he’s too heavy for me.”

 The mood was transformed in a moment as the young executive realised what had occurred.  He lifted the young man into the wheelchair and took out his handkerchief and wiped the scrapes and cuts. He then watched as the younger brother pushed him down the sidewalk toward their home.

 The young exec never did fix the dented side door of his Jaguar. He kept the dent to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone must throw a brick at him to get his attention (storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/helping-others).

 Last Sunday we reflected on Paul’s contrast between the *works of the sinful nature* and the *fruit of the Spirit* (Galatians 5:19-26). His point in all that was to stress that the choices we make as Christians affects our character and actions. If we use our freedom from the law for self-indulgence in the sinful nature, then, the works of the flesh will be evident in our lives. If, instead, we use our freedom to walk in the Spirit and be led by the Spirit, then, the fruit of the Spirit will grow in our lives. For Paul, there is no room for compromise on this because the sinful nature and the Spirit have opposing agendas (Galatians 5:17); a point that is very evident in the contrasting lists in last Sunday’s reading. As Paul concluded his discussion, he stressed that definitive action needed to be taken: “*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there.* *Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives*” (Galatians 5:24-25). Growing in the spiritual life involves a decisive dealing with our sinful nature *and* walking in harmony with the Holy Spirit. Then, the fruit of the Spirit’s work will be evident in our lives.

 In this morning’s Epistle lesson (Galatians 6:1-10), Paul gives a series of instructions that spell out in practical terms what it means for the Galatians to living by the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit, and so to keep in step with the Spirit. A closer look at the fruit of the Spirit reveals that all of them entail *action*. For instance, if we *love* someone, we will show this in practical ways. Our tendency, however, is to view the fruit of the Spirit in an abstract way, so Paul offers some concrete instructions on how to show *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,**gentleness, and self-control* in practical ways. This helps us to see that being filled with the Spirit is not some private mystical experience of our own; rather, the Spirit’s influence is lived out in our relationships with other people. Thus, Paul ends his reflections on the fruit of the Spirit with these words: “Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another” (Galatians 5:26). The presence of the Spirit in our lives moves us from our sinful self-centredness to a Spirit-inspired responsiveness to others. When we keep in step with the Spirit, we will serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13).

**2. Bearing Each Other’s Burdens**

 Serving one another in love means that we help our brothers and sisters when they face difficult situations. Paul instructs us to “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfillthe law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). While those *burdens* might entail the many troubles and trials that people face in life, the context of this verse defines these burdens in a specific way, in relation to sin. In the previous verse, Paul wrote, “*Dear brothers and sisters, if another believeris overcome by some sin, you who are godlyshould gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path*” (Galatians 6:1). Bearing one another’s burdens means that we lovingly help them back to God when they are weighed down by sin.

 Paul has just talked about the negative impact of the sinful nature on a person’s life (Galatians 5:19), noting that Christians have crucified the sinful nature along with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:24). At the same time, however, he recognizes that believers are still susceptible to being entrapped by sin (Galatians 6:1). The word for *sin* here has the root meaning of *taking a false step off the path*, an act which is in stark contrast to *keeping in step with the Spirit.* If a situation arises where one of our brothers or sisters is entrapped or overtaken by sin, Paul instructs *the spiritual ones*, which includes all Christians, to *restore* this person *gently and humbly.* The verb, *to restore,* was used in Greek literature for resetting a broken bone. This verb is also used in the Gospels when the fishermen were *mending* their nets (Matthew 4:21; Mark 1:19). So, when we *restore* a fellow believer, who is burdened and broken by sin, we are helping him or her to be healed and mended and to return to the former good condition he or she was once in.

 Helping people address the sin in their lives is not an easy task and in our world of private spirituality it is even more challenging. James 5:16 instructs Christians to “*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed*.” While this directive is found in Scripture it is rarely followed in our churches today. Embarrassed by the reality of sin that infects our lives, we keep our struggles secret and suffer alone. Overwhelmed and weighed down by guilt, feelings of unworthiness, or self-loathing, we think that we are the worst Christians ever. We are reluctant to share our struggles with others because we’re afraid that they’ll look down on us, judge us, or gossip about us. So, we put on a mask of spirituality that hides the real problems going on in our lives.

 Our fears about confessing our sins to others are not completely unreasonable. All of us have seen instances where other believers have not treated a brother or sister struggling with sin with compassion. It seems that many are ready to cast the first stone. Yet Paul recommends that restoring a brother or sister should be done *gently and humbly.* Our attitude and actions toward our overwhelmed brother or sister reflect one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit, namely, *gentleness* (Galatians 5:23). Approaching the situation with a *spirit of gentleness* keeps us from feeling superior to the person and standing in judgment over the person. Instead, *gentleness* allows us to walk humbly alongside of someone who is struggling with sin, knowing full well that we are just as susceptible to moral failure.

 Dealing sin is messy business and it is something we’d rather avoid. But we are called help each other in this struggle - to carry the oppressive burden of temptation for each other. So, instead of feeling morally superior to those who struggle with sin (Galatians 6:3), let’s show compassion and love toward them. On a practical level, how might we at Donway create a loving atmosphere where confession of sin and the mutual bearing of burdens becomes a reality? Brian McLaren suggests the following, “It might involve a small group or a pair of spiritual friends who gather regularly – weekly, monthly, whatever – to review honestly the hold of money, sex, and power on their lives. They might gather in a home, or a restaurant or online. Their gathering wouldn’t be an ‘accountability group’ exactly, where the shame of having to admit your failures to the group members is supposed to motivate you to avoid failing. It would instead be a ‘vulnerability group,’ where the members tried to admit to themselves and others how much power pride, greed, and lust have on them” (*Finding Our Way Again,* p. 154). I encourage you, my brothers and sisters, to develop relationships with spiritual friends where you can honestly talk about your struggles, practicing mutual burden- bearing, healing and restoration, all in a spirit of gentleness. But we need to accept the help of others.

A small boy tried to lift a heavy stone. Despite his huffing and puffing, he could not budge it. His father, watching nearby, finally asked him, “Are you using all your strength?”

“Yes, I am,” the boy cried, exasperated.

“No, you’re not,” the father replied. “You have not asked me to help you.” (*Preacher Magazine,* March-May 1989, p. 63).

 Are you trying to handle the oppressive burden of your struggle with sin on your own? Remember, you have brothers and sisters who are willing to help you bear the burden.

**3. Doing Good to All**

Serving one another in love means that we will strive to do *good things* for *everyone*, including those within the family of faith (Galatians 6:10). Paul’s final exhortation to “do good to all” summarizes what he’s been saying all along, that life in the Spirit is a life spent in serving others. Again, we see a key quality of the Christian life is a focus on others and not on the self. If we are consumed by our own needs, we will become susceptible to self-indulgence and self-gratification. But, if we live by the Spirit, we will joyfully serve one another. The Spirit produces fruit in our lives, but these spiritual virtues are not meant for private piety; they are intended for loving actions toward others.

 Serving others becomes an important way that we plant seeds to the Spirit, instead of to the sinful nature (Galatians 6:7-8). Christian writer, Richard Foster writes the following, “Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing transforms the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition. It will devise subtle, religiously acceptable means to call attention to the service rendered. If we stoutly refuse to give in to this lust of the flesh we crucify it. Every time we crucify the flesh we crucify our pride and arrogance” (*Celebration of Discipline,* p. 114). True service takes us out of our sinful egoism and opens us up to God and to the people around us.

 In a world that is increasingly divided into separate camps, we have an opportunity to express God’s love for *all* people by *doing good* to them. God’s love knows no boundaries and he doesn’t show partiality. So, now is not the time for the Christian church to give in to the boundary-setting agenda of the culture and pick and choose the kind of people who are deserving of our benevolence. Yet our concern for the human community must be balanced by our concern for the welfare of our fellow believers.

 In closing, I’d like us to consider Richard Foster’s thoughts on true service. I found his insights to be especially relevant to my reflections this morning.

“Self-righteous service comes through human effort. True service comes from a relationship with the divine Other deep inside.
Self-righteous service is impressed with the ‘big deal.’ True service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large service.
Self-righteous service requires external rewards. True service rests contented in hiddenness.
Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. True service is free of the need to calculate results.
Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve. True service is indiscriminate in its ministry.
Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims. True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need.
Self-righteous service is temporary. True service is a life-style.
Self-righteous service is without sensitivity. It insists on meeting the need even when to do so would be destructive. True service can withhold the service as freely as perform it.
Self-righteous service fractures community. True service, on the other hand, builds community”

(*Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 112-113).

 Foster ends his chapter on service with the following advice, “Begin the day by praying, ‘Lord Jesus, I would so appreciate it if You would bring me someone today whom I can serve’” (*Celebration of Discipline,* p. 122). May this be our prayer as we see to serve others in love.