**NEW MEMBER SUNDAY**

**BEARING THE BURDENS OF SINNERS AND SUFFERERS**

**Galatians 6:1-5**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today is New Member Sunday when we have the joy of welcoming our newest members into the church. This is also the Sunday when we take time to study what the Bible teaches about what it means to be the church.

All of us know what it means to *go* to church, but not all of us know what it means to *be* the church. Being the church is more than going to church, though it’s certainly not less. You can’t be the church if you aren’t going to church, but you can go to church without being the church.

To truly be the church, you need to faithfully practice the “one another’s” of Scripture, not just to people in general, but to people in the church. These “one another’s” are directed to believers in the church and are meant to inform how we treat one another. Here are some of the main ones:

* Love one another (John 13:34)
* Honour one another (Romans 12:10)
* Comfort one another (2 Corinthians 13:11)
* Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)
* Be kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32)
* Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)
* Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
* Do good to one another (1 Thessalonians 5:15)
* Bear with one another (Ephesians 4:2)
* Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25)
* Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16)
* Pray for one another (James 5:16)
* Show hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9)
* Exhort one another (Hebrews 3:13)

None of us do all these things perfectly. In fact, there are some “one another’s” in the Bible that some of us don’t do at all. That’s a big reason why churches exist: it’s to help us do the “one another’s” more faithfully.

Today, we’re going to focus on one of the most important “one another’s” in the Bible: “bear one another’s burdens”. We know that this is one of the most important “one another” commands in the Bible because Paul says that when we do this, we “fulfill the law of Christ”.

Jesus taught us that the entirety of God’s moral law with respect to how we treat one another is summed up in the single command to “love your neighbour as yourself”. What does that look like? In our text today, the Apostle Paul gives us the answer: it looks like bearing one another’s burdens.

That means at least two things: it means that we bear with those who sin, and we bear with those who suffer. Both sin and suffering have the potential to overwhelm us and would overwhelm us if not for the intervention of brothers and sisters in Christ who are committed to bearing our burdens with us.

The title of this sermon is **Bearing the Burdens of Sinners and Sufferers.** We will have two points today:

1. Bearing with Sinners
2. Bearing with Sufferers

(1) **BEARING WITH SINNERS**

The first thing we need to note is that the call to “bear one another’s burdens” in verse 2 is a command. It’s not a suggestion, or a bit of good advice, or something to do if you have enough time. It’s an authoritative command from God himself. This isn’t optional. It’s what everyone who trusts in Christ and worships God is committed to practicing and growing in.

The word for “burden” refers to a heavy weight that someone must carry for a long distance. It could be the burden of chronic pain, or the scars from physical or emotional abuse, or the lingering grief of a lost loved one. It can also be the burden of sin.

We don’t think of sin as a burden, but it is. David writes about this in Psalm 32:

“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” – Psalm 32:3-4

Sin isn’t just destructive. It’s exhausting, at least for the one who truly belongs to God. Some people love doing evil. They’re comfortable in it. But for Christians, sin saps our spiritual vitality, our emotional energy, and even our physical strength. It weighs down on our conscience to such a degree that we feel its burden every day.

That is an incredible gift. The burden of guilt is the heavy hand of God pressing down on us so that we would repent and live. But sometimes we need help doing that. Sometimes we just don’t have the willpower or strength to give up our sin because we’ve come to love it too much, and we need someone to call us out on it and tell us that we have to stop doing it.

That’s what Paul is talking about in verse 1:

**1**Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

He begins by addressing the Galatian believers as “brothers” or “brothers and sisters”. He wants to remind both the men and the women in the church of how their identity in Christ has changed their identity in relation to one another. They’re not the moral police, looking for opportunities to charge one another with wrongdoing. They’re family: brothers and sisters who love one another, and who want to see each other do well.

Part of the way they express their love is through loving correction. He says “if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness”. The word “caught” here means “detected, overtaken, surprised.” It’s what happens when you catch your teenage son watching stuff he shouldn’t, or you discover that your spouse has been lying on your tax returns, or you learn that your trusted friend has been talking behind your back. It’s what happens whenever we catch someone doing something they shouldn’t.

When that happens, our natural instinct is to yell at them, or judge them, or write them off, but Paul calls us to something greater. He calls us to “restore” them. This is a beautiful word that means to “bring back to a condition to function well” (BDAG), like how we might restore a broken appliance or piece of furniture. In the ancient world, the word was used in medical contexts to refer to setting a bone or joint back into place. That’s the goal when we set out to restore someone who has been caught in a sin. We want to restore them to a place where they can function well in the world that God has made by glorifying God and enjoying him forever.

But there are a couple of caveats to this. Paul says that the work of restoration is for the “spiritual”. Being “spiritual” doesn’t mean being on some different transcendental plane when you just sit and meditate all day. It means being influenced by and filled with the Holy Spirit.

If you look back at Chapter 5, you’ll see this in the context. Many of us know that Galatians 5 contains the famous passage on the “fruit of the Spirit”, but that’s not all it says about the Spirit. The “fruit of the Spirit” is merely the result of being influenced by and filled with the Spirit. Paul has various ways of describing this:

* “Walk by the Spirit” (verse 16)
* “Led by the Spirit” (verse 18)
* “Live by the Spirit” (verse 25)
* “Keep in step with the Spirit” (verse 25)

It is when we walk by, live by, are led by, and keep in step with the Spirit that we bear “the fruit of the Spirit”. And the fruit of the Spirit is precisely what we need if we are to restore sinners well. Paul says that restoring the sinner must be done “in a spirit of gentleness”, and “gentleness” is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Without gentleness, our attempts to restore sinners will be characterized by harshness, impatience, and self-righteousness. But with gentleness, we’ll restore sinners with tenderness, patience, and humility.

John Calvin wrote:

“We are here taught to correct the faults of brethren in a mild manner, and to consider no rebukes as partaking a religious and Christian character which do not breathe the spirit of meekness.” – John Calvin

It sounds easy but it’s not. Rather than correct people with a “spirit of meekness” we correct them with a spirit of anger or apathy. We either make it personal and blow up at them, or we decide that it’s not our business and do nothing at all. If we are to restore sinners in a spirit of gentleness, we need the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in our own lives, and not just the lives of those we are working to restore.

That’s why Paul warns us to “Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” He’s not saying this to the person being restored. He’s saying it to the person doing the restoring. It’s the physician, not the patient, who needs to watch his life, because the sin-disease he’s treating can infect him too.

If we are to restore sinners, we can’t afford to approach them with a flippant or carefree manner, but with watchfulness over our own souls, because we’re sinners as well, and the sins of others will tempt us to sin as well.

Sometimes we’ll be tempted in the same way, like when you know your friend is sleeping around, or your coworkers are cutting corners and you think, “Well, why can’t I do that too?” Sometimes our temptations will be totally different, like when your friend starts falling into sin and you start questioning God’s goodness, or you start to exalt in the fact that you’re better than them.

Sin doesn’t just affect the person doing the sinning. It’s a virus, spreading from one person to another, and the only protection we have from it is the fruit of the Spirit that comes from living by the Spirit.

This is the obligation that we have towards one another in the church. We are to take responsibility for the spiritual and moral well-being of the people you see in the pews. And when someone is caught in a sin, we are to prayerfully and gently approach them for their restoration.

(2) **BEARING WITH SUFFERERS**

That’s the first way that we bear one another’s burdens. When the burden is sin, we help them take the burden off. But when the burden is suffering, there may be times when we can do something to take it off, but more often than not the only thing we can do is to help them carry it for as long as the Lord ordains. This leads to our second point.

This may sound like the easier of the two, but it’s not. Bearing with sin may be awkward and difficult, but at least it’s a short-term commitment. You appeal to the person with gentleness, perhaps even multiple times, and they either respond or they don’t. If they do, you have regained your brother or sister. If they don’t, then there comes a time when you have to let them face the consequences of their own sinful choices. Either way, your work is done.

But bearing with a sufferer is different. It’s often a long-term commitment, because pain lingers. Grief remains. Suffering doesn’t just go away. Bearing with sufferers means walking the long and lonely road with them, because that’s how we fulfill the law of Christ.

The law is a significant theme in the book of Galatians. Paul wrote this book because there was controversy over the Christian’s relationship with the Old Testament Law. Some in the church were saying that nothing had changed. Christians still needed to observe the dietary laws in the Old Testament and be circumcised. In response, Paul mounted a vigorous defence of justification by faith: that we are reconciled and declared righteous before God, not by works of the law, but by faith in Christ. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ. And as a result of this grace, we are motivated to obey the fulfillment of the law, which is love: love for God, and love for one another.

Paul says this in 5:13-14:

**13**For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. **14**For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now in 6:2, Paul says:

**2**Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Paul is explaining that you fulfill the law by loving your neighbour as yourself, and you love your neighbour as yourself by bearing one another’s burdens.

John Stott explains as follows:

“It is very impressive that to ‘love our neighbour’, ‘bear one another’s burdens’ and ‘fulfil the law’ are three equivalent expressions. It shows that to love one another as Christ loved us may lead us not to some heroic, spectacular deed of self-sacrifice, but to the much more mundane and unspectacular ministry of burden-bearing.” – John Stott

That’s what burden bearing looks like. It is mundane and unspectacular. To bear one another’s burdens is less like being a hero and more like being a donkey, a spiritual burden-bearer laden with other people’s baggage and steadily plodding along. It’s bringing a meal to the sick. It’s being present with the grieving and washing their dishes and doing their laundry. It’s being available for a phone call. It’s texting a verse of Scripture. It’s telling someone you’re praying for them. It’s being slow to speak and quick to listen.

This may seem like undignified work, being a kind of spiritual donkey, but it’s not, because the dignity of the burden-bearer depends on the value of the burden. Was the donkey carrying Christ into Jerusalem doing undignified work? Of course not. It was doing *sacred* work, because the one it carried had value beyond measure.

Now we have the opportunity to bear Christ’s beloved people. We can carry those who are described in Scripture as making up the bride of Christ. Christ identifies himself so closely with his people that he said that whatever you did for one of the least of his brothers and sisters, you did for him. Whether you fed them, clothed them, housed them, or visited them; whatever you did for them, you did for Christ.

This is how we fulfill the law of Christ, because this is what Christ did on our behalf. We take the burdens of others upon ourselves, because Christ took our burdens upon himself first. He took our burden of sin, and he took our burden of suffering.

Isaiah 53 says that “he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”, but it also says that he was “pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.” Jesus took our burden of sin and our burden of suffering. He was the ultimate burden-bearer, bearing the wrath of God that we deserved, tasting death on our behalf, and fulfilling the law of love so that we could learn to love others in the same way.

The gospel takes people who run from burdens and changes them into people who run towards them instead. But that doesn’t happen overnight. It takes time, it takes grace, it takes countless cycles of sinning, confessing, and repenting again and again, because we’re still sinners. The power of sin may have been broken in our lives, but the presence of sin remains.

That’s why Paul writes verse 3. He is peering into the human heart and diagnosing why it is that we still find burden-bearing so difficult:

**3**For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

We don’t bear one another’s burdens because we think we’re something when we’re actually nothing. We can have such an overinflated view of ourselves that we refuse to share other’s burdens or refuse to share our own.

Both are equally problematic. The command to “bear one another’s burdens” can be broken when we’re not willing to take on the burdens of others, or it can be broken when we’re not willing to share our burdens with others. You can have a whole room full of people who are willing to take on burdens, but if no one is willing to share their burdens, nothing’s going to happen.

The only way for burden-bearing to happen is for us to remember that we are nothing. We’re not strong. We’re not self-sufficient. We can’t handle sin and suffering by ourselves. God designed us to need one another. We need others to bear our burdens with us.

Timothy George writes:

“The myth of self-sufficiency is not a mark of bravery but rather a sign of pride.” – Timothy George

Paul ends this passage in verses 4-5:

**4**But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. **5**For each will have to bear his own load.

It seems that Paul is contradicting himself by saying “each will have to bear his own load”, but he’s not, because at this point he’s talking about a different load. John Stott points out that the word for “burden” in verse 2 means an “overwhelming weight”, but the word for “load” in verse 5 refers to a soldier or a pilgrim’s knapsack. He’s talking about what we will bring before the throne of God on the great Day of Judgment.

We know that we will appeal to Christ as the basis of our justification and salvation, because no one can enter the Kingdom of God except through faith. But we will also give an account of how we lived our lives. God will give us the opportunity to boast about ourselves, not in an arrogant, prideful way, but in an honest assessment of how we used the time, resources, and gifts that God gave us. That will include giving an account for whether we obeyed the command to bear one another’s burdens. And when we do, we won’t be able to say, “Well, at least I was better than this person or that person.” That’s what Paul means when he says “his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour.” There won’t be any comparison before God’s throne. There will only be examination of one’s own life, measured under the standard of God’s law, and not by the standard of other people.

**CONCLUSION**

My role as a pastor and our role as a church is to prepare each other for that day. Yes, we will each have to carry our own load when we appear before God, but perhaps we can help each other stuff that knapsack to the brim so that we’ll have plenty to present before God. So many of you already excel at bear one another’s burdens. But if we are going to continue being a burden-bearing church, we’re going to need to commit ourselves to these three things:

1. **Relational Investment**

If you want to build the kinds of relationships where you know the sins and suffering of others and they know yours and you’re finally in a place to bear one another’s burdens, the first ingredient is time. There’s no other substitute. Investing yourself deeply into a small number of relationships is far more important than investing yourself broadly into a large number of relationships. Investing broadly may give you people to socialize with, but investing deeply will give you people who will carry your burdens with you.

That is part of the vision behind our TAGs, that they wouldn’t just be small group contexts where people are drawn to the teacher, but where people are drawn to one another. They’re a place where people bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

You may think, “I have my family for that”, and that’s wonderful. Our families are gifts from God to help us bear our burdens. But if we are to bear one another’s burdens in a distinctly *Christian* way, we must devote ourselves to our spiritual family, and not just to our biological one. To only bear the burdens of our families is to show that we’re no different than the rest of the world. But to bear the burdens of those who belong to you solely because of our common faith in Christ is to show the power and beauty of the gospel to bring people together who otherwise have nothing in common.

If we are going to be a burden-bearing church filled with burden-bearing believers, we need to give each other time.

1. **Self-Sacrificing Service**

Some people don’t commit themselves to bearing one another’s burdens because they don’t think they need it. They have a good support network, or they’re strong enough to do it on their own, or they don’t see the need to let other people in on their private lives.

But did you know that there are people in this room who don’t have any of that? Take a look around the room. It may look like everyone’s fine, but they’re not. There are broken people in this room. There are lonely people in this room. There are people who feel that no one cares, no one sees them, no one is willing to bear their burdens with them.

This is why obeying the command to bear one another’s burdens takes self-sacrificing service. We do it for the sake of others. We need to stop thinking like consumers in the church and start thinking more like servants, where we stop asking, “What’s in it for me?” and start asking, “What can I do for others?” That’s what a mature church looks like. A mature church isn’t full of inward-looking consumers who are looking for a quick religious fix. It’s full of outward-looking servants who come ready to bear one another’s burdens.

1. **Faithful Prayer**

If it takes Spirit-filled people to bear one another’s burdens, then we need to commit ourselves to prayer, because that’s when the Spirit moves. It’s when God’s people pray. It’s when they pray by themselves, and it’s when they pray together. Jesus said:

**13**If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

If you don’t think you’re spiritual in the sense of being filled with the Spirit, the only explanation is that you have not because you ask not. God delights to give us the Spirit, because it’s the Spirit who makes us more like Christ. It’s the Spirit who makes us the kinds of people who restore sinners with a spirit of gentleness, who bear the burdens of the suffering, who don’t just look to our own interests but also the interests of others.

If we are to be a burden-bearing church, then we must be a praying church. So come, pray with us, and let us see how God will answer.