

January 13, 2008

## “The Truly Spiritual Life” Galatians 6:1-5

FCF: The folly of privatized faith

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Because the truly spiritual life is to be lived in community, (magnet) we must be prepared to love one another even when it's hard.

### **SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Spirituality sells. You can't walk through any bookstore and fail to see it. Little consensus but still great interest. And great flexibility. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow put it this way (**READ quote**), “*Growing numbers of Americans piece together their faith like a patchwork quilt. Spirituality has become a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks in his or her own way.*” What is Wuthnow saying? Essentially, the reason spirituality sells is because you can make it whatever you want it to be. It's easier.

It's easier to just spurn the public and formal. It's easier to embrace the private and spontaneous. But not necessarily better. We may well be spiritually poorer for it.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Galatians 6:1-5

### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

### **SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

One of the more unusual figures in church history was Simeon the Stylite, the first of the “Desert Fathers.” Around 423, he constructed a pillar on the edge of the Syrian desert, climbed on top, and lived on it for the next six years. Simeon received many visitors to his desert perch. No doubt some came simply to see if he had lost his mind. But Simeon simply said he wanted to commune with God in solitude, free from distractions. Living on top of a pole in the desert was just his way of being spiritual. Which brings me to a question. Just what does it mean to live a truly spiritual life?

It's been a while since we were in our study of Galatians, so let me remind you of where we are. Paul took special pains in chapters 1 and 2 to remind his readers both of his authority as an apostle and the truth of his message. In chapter 3, he reminded them of the message itself – we are justified, made right with God, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In chapter 4, he pressed the point that something has changed. We were once slaves. We are now sons. We've been adopted into God's family. In chapter 5, Paul began to explore the nature of true freedom – where it comes from and how it's lived out. And finally, in chapter 6, he continues that theme, developing it further.

The general principle is this. While personal responsibility is real, the emphasis is on mutual accountability. We really are our brother's keeper. We all have struggles and God does not intend for us to endure them alone. Yes, He promises to carry our burdens for us. But His intention is to do this most often through others. We are to be God's bellhops or, as Luther put it (**READ quote**), “*Christians must have strong shoulders and mighty bones.*” The truly spiritual life is one that is lived out in community with others.

Such is the general principal in vv.2-5. A general principle Paul mentions because of a specific command to carry a specific burden in v.1 – the need to love when it's hard, to come alongside and confront when a fellow follower of Christ has drifted in their walk with Christ. We are not to just walk away for the truly spiritual life is lived in community. And so we must be prepared to love one another, even when it's hard.

### **I. WHAT IS THE SPIRITUAL THING?**

Let's look at this. What is, after all, the spiritual thing? (**READ Galatians 6:1a**)

#### **A) To See Things Truly**

What perspective should we have? The spiritual thing begins with seeing truly.

1. “Caught” – the meaning

Seeing first that this one “caught in any transgression,” is just that – caught. The word means to be overtaken or surprised. They’ve been ensnared when off guard.

2. “Caught” – the image

The image is of a fisherman who wasn’t paying attention, got entangled in his net as it was going overboard, and is now hanging to the side of the boat, in danger of drowning.

B) *To Respond Rightly*

How should we then pursue them? What is the right way to respond?

1. “Restore” – the meaning

Paul says we are to “restore” them. Luther said (READ quote) “*run unto him, and reaching out your hand, raise him up again, comfort him with sweet words, and embrace him with motherly arms.*” The word means to mend, repair, equip, complete, or prepare.

2. “Restore” – the image

Here the image is of mending and preparing a fisherman’s net, of setting a fractured or dislocated bone – of putting in order, or restoring someone to their former condition.

And Paul’s point is that this is what it means to bear another’s burden in such a situation. This is what it means to love, to fulfill the law of Christ. God, in adopting us, made us His sons and daughters. And we are to love one another as brothers and sisters.

*Illustration:*

Mountain goats live in a precarious environment. One wrong move and they can fall to their death – young mountain goats especially because of their playfulness. Douglas Chadwick in National Geographic writes that they are (READ quote):

*Born to romp – and leap, twist, skip, prance...High spirits and wandering attention can be fatal for young goats. Fortunately, nannies dote on their offspring, tending them from the downhill side to block falls...*

This is a perfect picture of how mature Christians should nurture other believers – knowing they will stumble and fall, being ready to “block” their fall as best we can.

*Application:*

This is what Paul is getting at here, life in a gospel-centered community. Some of you have heard me say this before. The church is not a country club but a hospital. It’s not a mountain top but a sink hole. The gospel of God’s unconditional love in Christ, rightly taught and widely lived will attract all kinds of people. Messy people – people like us, if we’re honest. And we need to care for them – like Jesus does with us. So then the truly spiritual life, lived in community, is often quite messy because people are often quite messy. And so we must be prepared to love one another even when it’s hard.

**II. HOW IS IT TO BE DONE?**

But how is this to be done? What does this look like?

A) *With Gentleness*

(READ Galatians 6:1a) Paul says we should restore with a spirit of gentleness.

1. What it entails

Now, to the reader of Galatians, that should sound familiar since gentleness is part of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5. Not timidity, not a weakness but a strength – a quiet strength, an attitude deeply grounded in our security and identity in Christ.

2. Why it’s necessary

An attitude desperately needed in such situations where a confrontation has to take place. Think with me here. Some situations require but blunt instruments – carpentry and plumbing. But others require great care and patience. Surgery, for instance.

### B) *With Watchfulness*

So Paul calls for gentleness. But watchfulness as well (**READ Galatians 6:1-3**).

#### 1. Sobered

Part of what Paul is referring to is a spiritual sobered-ness, a grieving for what has befallen this person and an understanding that truly “*but for the grace of God, there go I.*”

#### 2. Humble

Such burden bearing also requires humility, an understanding of our own weaknesses even as we come alongside someone who has given in to temptations of their own.

Pride here, failure to exercise such watchful care, can prevent us from getting involved in any helpful way at all. Or it can set us up for what could be a deadly fall.

#### *Illustration:*

The Parachutist, the official publication of the United States Parachute Association, publishes an article each year called their “fatality summary.” In the article, a writer analyzes the factors contributing to parachuting deaths in the previous year. Parachutists are classified first as students, then after 20 jumps they receive their A license. After 50 jumps, their B license. After 100 jumps, their C license. After 200 jumps, their D license. A few years ago, they discovered an alarming statistic. 59% of all parachuting fatalities were suffered by elite jumpers, those with a D license. A graph accompanying the article showed a dramatic upward spike for fatalities among those with 200 to 1000 jumps. It would seem that some simply got overconfident and careless. The lesson is clear. Just because a person is mature doesn’t mean they’re invulnerable.

#### *Application:*

And that lesson applies to the spiritual warfare that comes in working to restore a straying believer. When we are setting out to bear that burden, it is precisely in those seasons when we are most open for attack. The dangers of pride, of the delusions of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness are real. And so the guard must be kept up. Being gentle towards others. Yet also being watchful towards ourselves. It’s part of what it means to live the truly spiritual life – in community, loving others even when it’s hard.

### **III. WHO IS TO DO IT?**

One last thing. Not only does Paul show us what we’re to do and how we’re to do it. He speaks to who is to do it as well (**READ Galatians 6:1a**).

#### A) *The Qualification*

What is it to be qualified to engage in such a work? Paul says to be “spiritual.”

#### 1. Not spirit as opposed to body

Now, understand that, just as we talked about weeks ago in our study of Galatians 5, this is not the spirit as opposed to the body. The Bible rarely makes that kind of distinction.

#### 2. But Spirit as opposed to flesh

This refers to Galatians 5 and the fruit of the Spirit (**READ Galatians 5:22-23**). What Paul is saying is that those who are growing in these things, those who are mature, who know themselves to be freed from the foolishness, self-righteousness, self-dependence of the flesh are called to engage in this work. And they are really the only ones who can.

Anyone else will simply do more harm than good.

#### *Illustration:*

A great but scary quote from Your Health magazine (**READ quote**):

*A spotless kitchen may harbor as many bacteria as a less tidy one, says surprising new findings from the University of Arizona, in Tucson. That’s because the most germ-laden object in a kitchen is often the sponge. Researchers tested sponges and dishrags collected from 500 kitchens across*

*the U.S. and found that as many as 1 out of 5 contained salmonella bacteria that, when ingested, could make people ill.*

The point? Some attempts to cleanse do more harm than good – especially when a self-righteous attitude prevails, tainting an already difficult confrontation with condemnation.

### B) *The Enablement*

All that is to say one must be “spiritual” to engage in such a work. But who among us could ever be described that way? How does one become spiritual?

#### 1. Walk by the Spirit

Again, back to chapter 5. Hear the promise (**READ Galatians 5:16**). Our part is to “walk by the Spirit” – to set our feet upon the path, engaging in regular time in the Scriptures, in prayer, in times such as these here. We are like farmers, responsible to sow the seed.

#### 2. Be led by the Spirit

Yet at the same time, we are like farmers required to wait for the Lord of the harvest to bring the growth of the seed. Paul alludes to this as well (**READ Galatians 5:18**).

*Application:*

We are to walk by the Spirit. But the only way we can do that is to be led by the Spirit. What does that mean? A prayerful posture, an active dependency. In particular, in times of bearing the kind of burden here in Galatians 6, going to the Lord this way. *“You know them. And I know you are working in them. You know me. And you know my weaknesses. Help me not to go too slow or be too soft. Help me not to go too fast or be too hard. You’ve ordained this. You’ve brought us together. Please, do your work.”*

And all of us are called to this work. Yes, some of us are more mature than others. It would be foolish not to acknowledge that. But none of us has arrived. We are all called to grow in the “spiritual” life. We are all called to burden bearing and seeing people as “caught” and then working towards restoring. Again, the truly spiritual life is to be lived in community. Which means we must be ready to love even when it’s hard.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Let me come back to the longing for spirituality in our lives. It’s a good longing, a God-given longing. It just needs to be satisfied and pursued in the right way. Back to Simeon the Stylite. Eventually, he decided to become more spiritual. So, with the help of some friends, he took the six foot pillar and made it sixty. And there he remained, “being spiritual,” until his death sixty years later. Again, just like the “codes” or the “secrets” so talked of today, it was easier. Not necessarily better but easier. So it sold.

Galatians is altogether different. Paul shows us here that the truly spiritual life is not defined by us but by the one true God. It flows not from us but from the Holy Spirit. It is not primarily for us, for our self-fulfillment, but for the sake of others. It is not grown in isolation but in community. It is meant to be shared. Or, as Phil Ryken put it (**READ quote**), *“It is less like a fruit tree hidden away somewhere in a secret garden, and more like one that grows in a public park.”* Despite what we might think, despite what we might want, we are not autonomous – able to make our own rules. We are not independent – able to make it on our own. True spirituality doesn’t work like that. The truth is that, at one time or another, we will all have burdens. And some will be so heavy, perhaps so enslaving, they must be shared by others if they are to be borne at all and any escape is to be found. The truly spiritual life must be lived in community. And so we must be prepared to love, to really love, one another – even when it’s desperately hard.

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Because the truly spiritual life is to be lived in community,  
(magnet) we must be prepared to love one another even when it’s hard.