

Carry Each Other's Burdens

Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 12:24-26

Turn to Galatians 5 please. This is a sermon to encourage us all to talk to each other a little more, and listen to each other a little more, and to pray for each other together. We do much of this, but we could widen it.

Here are some questions that I ask myself, and have been for some time. Why can we go a long time and not tell the people closest to us what we really feel, what we fear, what we battle against? Why can we go so long and say so little about the difficult things of our own souls? Why is this common?

When these deep things, our struggles and fears, get so strong in us we can't properly carry on, we can't function, why we will go tell it to a complete stranger? We will pay to tell a stranger things about ourselves that we've never told those closest to us, those we trust the most. Why a stranger, and not those we trust the most?

This is NOT a sermon against counsellors and therapists. There are all kinds of useful specialists in our world, and they all have their place. The problem is not that we go to a therapist of some kind. But why did we not talk to each other before that?

There are a few among us who speak more openly about their struggles and fears and troubles, bless you, you are an example to us. Today I am urging the rest of us, including myself, to be more like you.

This sermon makes me uncomfortable, because I don't really want to do what this sermon will call us to do, I don't want to tell you more about myself, my difficulties and the things I'm ashamed of. But we'll carry on anyway. These thoughts today are not new to me, but all of a sudden it was time to speak, so here we go.

Here is another question: What did God expect his people to do with our personal troubles before there was counselling? This kind of therapist has been common for perhaps 4 decades. God's people have had marriage troubles and fear troubles for 4 thousand years. Mental illness has been around a long time.

Before we could say, "you should go for counselling," what did God's people do? What resources did God give his people during all that time?

I am NOT preaching against counselling. I AM trying to steer us away a kind of negligence, ignoring what God gave us, and toward a way of being more helpful toward each other, toward a fuller way of bearing one another's burdens.

We are pretty open about health problems, and about financial or job problems. That's good. But, for example, don't feel free to say, "I have been struggling with temptation and sin for a while, and I would like you to pray for me."

That's all we'd need to say: "I am struggling with temptation and sin. Please pray for me." On any given Sunday, today for example, plenty of us here have been struggling with temptation and sin. These things trouble us, but we are silent. Why could I not say that to you? To those we trust, we could give details.

We don't feel free to say, "Our marriage has had some rough times this week, we'd like you to pray for us." On any given Sunday, like today, that is true of several marriages in this church. These things cause us great distress. We could say it, and receive prayer.

I do not mean these things need to be said on Sunday morning. They could, if it was brief, but there are other places to say it, which we'll talk about later. And I am *not* claiming this will fix everything. Maybe, and maybe not. But these are resources God has given all of us, and we could use them more than we are.

God's resources: God has given us real love for each other. We will live that out by talking to each other, listening to each other, praying for each other. Talk. Listen. Pray. In love.

Let's look at the Scriptures now for a few minutes.

Gal 5:13-15 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Gentile believers are free from Moses' Law *so that* we can serve one another humbly in love. And in fact, if we Gentile believers serve one another humbly in love, we *are* keeping Moses' Law, because this one command fulfills the whole law: *love your neighbour as yourself*.

Serve one another humbly in love. Paul writes "humbly" because the Galatian believers were not humble to one another. Biting and devouring, envying and provoking were more their style.

Then Paul writes about the works of the flesh, and the fruit of the Spirit, and then he gets more specific about serving each other humbly in love.

Gal 6:1-2 Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ [that is, "love your neighbour as yourself," from 5:14, serve one another humbly in love].

We get caught in sin and temptation. This is not a reason for shame, this is normal Christian life. Jesus built it into the Lord's Prayer, "forgive our sins, Father, don't lead us into temptation, Father, help us with this, we don't do well when tempted, deliver us from evil, we need your help." We are all vulnerable to this.

In Luke 5, when Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John to follow him, it was right after incredibly successful fishing. The net was bursting. Peter realized that Jesus was someone from God. He fell on his knees he said to Jesus, "Go away from me, I am a sinful man, Lord."

Jesus said, "Don't be afraid. Here is how I want you to serve me." So Peter followed Jesus. Was Peter actually a sinful man? Yes. Was it good that Peter said it? Probably yes, it seems to be. Was his being sinful a problem to Jesus. No, it does not seem be, does it. So instead of acting like we're not sinful, we could agree that we are all sinful. That be okay?

Carry each other's burdens. This fulfills the law of Christ, which is love your neighbour as yourself, serve one another humbly in love.

Carry each other's burdens. The burden does not actually transfer from one person to another. But when one person has a load that is too heavy, one person is staggering, worn out, then others come beside and support and help and lend a hand, share the load for a while.

This may not be connected to someone caught in sin and temptation, but it could well be talking about the same thing. Being caught in temptation and sin is a burden. Carry each other's burdens. We help each other gently in love, carrying each other's burdens. We don't need to preach. We restore the person gently.

But we are not mind readers, and if the burden is private, we have to tell someone. Suppose I have a burden, I am struggling with temptation and sin. I go to one person, and tell them briefly that I am struggling this way, and I ask them to pray for me. This person responds kindly, gently, sympathetically, and right then and there prays for me.

Three powerful things have just happened. One, I have gotten rid of a barrier between me and you. I was despondent and distracted, and you had no idea, and my silence was a barrier. I knew it, you did not, but it was there. By a brief generic description, we've gotten rid of that barrier.

Two, I have been treated kindly and gently and sympathetically by a brother or sister in the Lord, right at my point of despair. That's very good for me. The trouble didn't leave, but that is a healing moment, even if nothing else happened. And it is good for the brother or sister, too.

Three, together we called on the Almighty to get involved, we've asked the Maker of heaven and earth to roll up his sleeves here and help. God will respond! I don't know what he'll do, and I am not giving a recipe for a quick fix, but God will certainly act in our best interests.

Some difficulties never leave, like thorns in the flesh (2 Cor 12). So prayer and support are ongoing. But: God *never* does nothing, he *always* acts for us when we pray.

Php 4 prayer: *Don't worry about anything, but in everything, by prayers and requests, with thanksgiving, tell God what you need! And the peace of God will guard you, and the God of peace will be with you. And I repeat, the peace of God will guard you, and the God of peace will be with you. God will act.*

And all the brother or sister needed to do was to listen, to be sympathetic, gentle, and pray for me. Did not need to advise, or correct, or make suggestions. Did not need to fix anything.

In May of last year, Marilyn and I had a dark time in our marriage. At a Wednesday evening midweek, Marilyn and I were there, she told the group that we were having a rough time in our marriage. She gave no other details. We'd agreed ahead of time that this would happen.

Two or three people prayed for us. I was moved by people's prayers that night, and by the end of the evening we could both feel that this thing had lightened up. The basic situation had not changed, but the darkness and heaviness had backed up, retreated.

A week or two later, we decided to tell the other elders. I was not that eager, but Marilyn wanted to do that. I've thought what I'm saying today for many years, and I knew Marilyn was right. So we invited the other elders, Marilyn and I talked for 20-30 minutes, told them our stories. They responded, there was a gentle and kind conversation for a while, and then they prayed for us.

Things turned around for Marilyn and me remarkably in the next week or two. Darkness turned into light. We all have many unanswered prayers, but that night God answered their prayers, and things changed for us faster than I thought possible. Talk. Listen. Pray. In love.

Our covenant of membership includes this section: "I will pray for you, share your happiness and your tears. I will accept your help and your gifts with thankfulness, as wholeheartedly as I offer you my help and my gifts." Here's how the Scripture puts it ...

1 Cor 12:24-26 *God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it,*
²⁵ *so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.* ²⁶ *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.)*

God has put the body together, ... so that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

If I have a big unpleasantness going on in me, and it is one of the things we don't talk about, my silence separates me from you, and from the healing you would bring. Sometimes it gets bad enough I don't want to meet with you, I stay away. Even bigger separation.

Make no mistake, if one part of the body of Christ suffers, one part of the church suffers, the whole body is suffering, even if they don't know. There is a loss to the whole body. When it's bad, the rest of us can feel it, but even if not, there is a loss to the congregation.

So, talk. We don't tell people mostly because we are ashamed of our sins and our weaknesses. Let's concede that we are all weak, and that temptation and sin are chronic problems. We all know it's true, so let's make it an open agreement. Weaknesses of all kinds, and temptation and sin, these are regular events in a believer's life. Certainly are in mine.

We need to talk to each other. We need to not try to carry our burden all alone. How much will we say, and to whom will we say it, are the questions. I cannot answer that here. We certainly do not say everything to everyone.

I could say it briefly in this room. "Pray for our marriage, its rough these days. I am having trouble with sin and temptation, pray for me." Sunday morning is not the place for details, but it is a good place for a plain and honest one-line summary.

People talk at our Wednesday evening midweek. Over the years people have been remarkably open there, and received affection and support and prayer. It is so good for the soul, it is how the Holy Spirit ministers to us.

Or meet with a few people you trust, and say "I want to meet with you, I want to tell you about something and I want you to pray for me." You can say that to the elders, and we will meet with you. I don't think elder prayers are special, and carrying each other's burdens needs to be a part of church life not elder service. But some or all the elders will meet with you and pray for you.

Listen. Let's all keep our ears open for someone to say, "I want to tell you about something, and I want you to pray for me." Let's keep our ears open for that. Let's stay ready to listen.

When you are listening, just listen. You don't have to fix anything, you don't have to answer questions, you don't have to give advice. The brother or sister who is talking needs to be heard, be loved, and needs prayer. Ask questions. If they don't want to say more, that's fine.

When people are quite fragile, even good advice can feel like criticism. We're not counsellors to each other. We are brothers and sisters to each other. On the other hand, a brother or sister can see things I can't see, and that has been very helpful in my life. Mostly, listen. Listen with sympathy as a way of obeying the Lord. Listen gently, being patient with the one speaking.

Pray. *Don't worry about anything, but in everything, by prayers and requests, with thanksgiving, tell God what you need! And the peace of God will guard you, and the God of peace will be with you.*

The prayer does not need to be too specific, and it does not need to be long. We do need to invite God, he wants us to bring him into this openly. But he does not need to be persuaded because he's not reluctant to help, and he does not need our instructions because he's a wise father. Most of the prayers in the Bible are not detailed and not long.

Lastly, people, we will not forget thanksgiving. Church is not about our needs, our burdens, our weaknesses and our temptations. We meet together because God has given us a Champion, Jesus the Christ. We will tell God what we need and we will give thanks.

If we are a church that takes good care of each other, but our Lord Jesus is no longer the obvious center of everything, we have lost our way.

We shall give thanks, because no matter what burdens we carry, and how much we weep with those who weep, and no matter how much one member suffers and we all suffer with that person, Jesus the Lord has made big picture of our lives glorious and wonderful. We see that as we refuse to stop thanking God for Christ.

Both what we have now, and what we have promised, together make believers the most fortunate of people. *By prayers and requests, with thanksgiving, tell God what you need! And the peace of God will guard you, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Talk. Listen. Pray. In love. With thanksgiving. Amen.