

## Galatians 6:1-5

Gal. 6:1 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. 4 All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. 5 For all must carry their own loads.

## FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Today is Independence Day. Today is all about freedom. Today we celebrate the fact that we have the privilege to live in free country.

But, what is freedom? Is freedom being able to do anything we want to do when we want to do it? No, that's not freedom; that's anarchy. If we don't consider the greater good we have condemned ourselves to a life that is self-serving and ultimately destructive.

Freedom isn't free. Freedom requires discipline, sacrifice and hard work. Freedom is always in danger of being destroyed by those who do not appreciate its blessings and its responsibilities.

In order to preserve the freedoms of this country it is necessary for us to understand our history, participate in the political process and work in good faith with others to solve our common problems. We need to appreciate the sacrifices that were made on our behalf in this country so that out of gratitude we might voluntarily serve this country that we love.

Freedom and responsibility, they're like love and marriage; they go together.

That's true not only when we're talking about our country but also when it comes to our faith. In the Bible salvation is often described as freedom. For example in Galatians 5:1 the Apostle Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free ..."

What is this freedom that Paul mentions? It is freedom from sin.

I say it each week in response to our declaration of pardon. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We are saved not by our works but by grace through faith.

What we cannot do for ourselves God in Christ does for us.

Does this mean that God has no claim on our lives? Does this mean that God will forgive us simply because He is in the forgiving business?

Paul asked the question this way in his letter to the Romans, “Should we continue to sin so that grace may abound?” Paul answers, “May it never be.” No way, no how is this a good idea.

God did not save us from our sins so that we could get comfortable with them. God saved us from our sins so that we could live in a new way. If we are in Christ, we are a new creation. And we are enabled by the power of forgiveness to live in a new way. We are no longer captives to our sins.

Those of us who have the privilege to live in a free country also have responsibilities to that country. Our freedom comes at a price, and each of us is called to pay that price.

In the same way, those of us who know the forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus have a responsibility to live that faith. If God has been gracious to us, we need to become a gracious people.

We need to understand our faith history. We need to participate in the community of faith. And we need to work together with others to make that forgiveness a reality in that community of faith.

To put it another way: since we are redeemed, we need to look redeemed. We need to live out the implications of the gospel, and do what faith requires.

We don't do it to try and earn our salvation. We do it out gratitude.

## INEFFECTIVE REPOSES TO SIN

And nowhere is that principle more important than when a person stumbles in their Christian walk and falls into some kind of sin. In our lesson for today Paul describes someone who is “detected in a transgression.”

What do we do when that happens? How do we deal with sin in the community of faith?

There are two ways of dealing with sin that are not helpful. The first approach is to simply ignore (or even celebrate) sin. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we see this approach by the church

leaders, and Paul roundly condemns their lack of morality. It provides a poor witness.

In our own society we often ignore sinful behavior. We say that we should live and let live. And there is the temptation for us to just go along with the way of the world.

But, if we have been saved from our sins shouldn't we desire others to have the same experience? Sticking our heads in the sand is not an appropriate response when it comes to sin.

On the other hand self-righteously condemning the sinner is not an appropriate response either. If the church at Corinth was too lax in their discipline, the church at Galatia seems to have been too harsh.

They were very legalistic in their interpretation of the faith. Instead of keeping the fact that Christ died for our sins at the center of the faith, they concentrated on religious rituals (like circumcision), and the keeping of the law.

But, as Paul points out throughout his letter to the Galatians, no one has been able to keep the law. We all fall short of God's glory. We are all sinners

without hope except for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

So if we're all sinners how can we help a sinner who has stumbled? How can we restore someone who is suddenly overwhelmed by sin and shame?

## RESTORED BY A FELLOW SINNER

We do it by acknowledging our own struggle with sin and by trying to restore the one who has fallen with a gentle spirit.

The manner in which we try to restore the fallen sinner is important. We do not do it because we think that we are somehow better than someone else. We do it in a humble and gentle way. We do it not as a judge who has all the answers but as a fellow sinner who has found forgiveness.

This week I found a good example of how this process works. On the counter in the church kitchen I found a brochure, and I began to read it. The headline read, "Where do I go from here?"

In that brochure there was a story about two men who in 1935 had hit bottom. They were addicted to alcohol, and it had ruined their lives.

They knew it would kill them if they didn't stop drinking, but they couldn't do it on their own. Their family, their friends and their doctor tried to help them but to no avail. The brochure put it this way,

“There was no personal loss or calamity big enough to make either of them stop drinking. Willpower didn't work, either. The countless and sincere promises they had made to themselves were broken over and over again—over that first drink.

Each of the two men had been diagnosed as hopeless alcoholics. Worse yet, they saw themselves as hopeless ... until they saw each other.”

These two men met and began to share their common experience with alcohol. They found that they understood each other's problems better than anyone else. And through this fellowship these two broken people found healing. They found the strength they desperately need to pass up that first drink and live in a new way.

Eventually they founded an organization for people who struggled with alcohol. And today it is estimated that over 2,000,000 men and women meet

together to share their experiences and lift each other up in their struggle with alcohol.

This is my vision of how we are called to live together in the church. The church is not a community born of self-righteousness and pride. The church is not a place where everyone has all the answers and has it all together.

The church is a community born in the crucible of pain and loss. The church is that place where fellow sinners come together acknowledging that we have all failed miserably. On our own we are hopeless and do not know where to turn. But, through the power of the Spirit we can be transformed.

## TESTIMONIES

I grew up in a church where “testimonies” were often a part of the worship service. Testimonies were simply personal stories of faith. People told how once they were far from God and how they came to experience salvation and a new way of life through their commitment to Jesus.

The good thing about testimonies is that people often admitted to significant failures in their life. There

was something humbling about giving a testimony. A good testimony made the faith seem more real.

People in the congregation who had similar problems could understand more clearly how the broken spots in their life might be changed and restored by the power of God's forgiveness. Sometimes after a touching testimony others would come forward to give their life to God.

Like every other worship practice the use of testimonies can be overdone and misused. But, testifying to the power of God's grace in our life is really something all of us are called to do. We are called to tell our story. We are called to tell how the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ has changed our lives.

Someone once described evangelism as one poor beggar telling another poor beggar where to find food. I think that's a good description of evangelism. And I think that's also a good description of how we help each other when sin and failure seem to take over the lives of people in our community of faith.

We cannot restore people to spiritual health by "laying down the law." That was what the Galatians were trying to do, and that is what church leaders

have tried to do down through history.

## LEGALISM YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Sometimes Christians seem to turn on one another at the very time when support and encouragement are needed the most. In the name of preserving holiness and purity we often attack instead of help.

Legalists invariably apply the law more harshly toward others than toward themselves. The legalist concentrates on his or her strengths while emphasizing the weaknesses of others.

There are many examples of this in the New Testament.

The Scribes and Pharisees were ready to stone the woman guilty of adultery (John 8:2-11) yet throughout the gospels we see how these religious leaders were guilty of taking advantage of the helpless (Mark 12:40), neglecting their responsibilities for their own families (Mark 7:10-13), and even persecuting the righteous. (Matthew 23:29-39)

The legalists made religion a burden. (Matthew 23:4; Acts 15:10) Jesus made religion something that

lightened the load of the burdened. (Matthew 11:28-30)

But, in our lesson for today we see that legalism is still alive and well even in the early Christian community. The legalists of Paul's day seemed to be more interested in judging the sinner than restoring the sinner.

And this had to change. This struck at the very heart of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

We have preserved the session minutes from this church and some of those minutes go way back to the late 1800s. One day I was curious about what they talked about in session meetings in those days.

Did they (like us) spend hours talking about fixing a leaking roof? No, they spent much of their time talking about church discipline. If some folks had not been living up to their personal standards, they would deny them the opportunity to take communion.

Believe me. Sometimes the good old days weren't so good! The very symbol of forgiveness was being used as a means of punishment. Sinners were taking upon themselves the right to withhold the grace of God.

Throughout his letter to the Galatians Paul points out that this is a hypocritical approach. The Galatians were proud of their spiritual heritage and thought that everyone else needed to follow the same path.

The males would need to be circumcised and everyone would have to obey the ritual laws of the Old Testament. Instead of salvation being by grace through faith, these folks implied that salvation came through religious works. (Galatians 5:1-5)

There were two problems with this approach. First, no one ever lived up to the requirements of the law. And second, this emphasis upon the law was a denial of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

It didn't produce a community that was marked by love. It produced a community that was marked by dissension and division.

## THE SOURCE OF CONFLICT

I've done lots of conflict management work in the church, and this is the common denominator in churches that are struggling with conflict. They concentrate more on the law than on the cross. They concentrate more on judgment than grace. Instead of

seeing themselves as part of the problem they see their adversary as the one who has the problem.

Paul tells the Galatians,

“Don’t fall for that trap. When you are trying to help someone who has fallen, don’t do it from a position of strength. Do it from a position of weakness.

You are not a judge but a fellow traveler on the road to forgiveness. Remember your own sinful ways and use that knowledge as a way to understand the weakness of your brother or sister.” (Galatians 6:3-5)

Today is not only Independence Day. It is also the first day of the Presbyterian Church’s General Assembly.

Quite frankly some of us dread this biennial meeting of the whole church.

We often consider controversial topics, and the church is often divided rather evenly on what should be done. Sometimes we act like it is always the other person who is to blame for our problems. If only those liberals (or conservatives) would behave themselves the church wouldn’t be in such a state.

Come to think of it many of the same problems that divide our country also divide our church. And just as political division keeps us from doing what we need to do for our country so theological division also keeps us from doing what we need to do for our church.

I am not suggesting that any of us embrace a theological or political view that we believe to be wrong.

On the other hand perhaps the time has come for us to display more humility when we struggle together on these problems. Perhaps the time has come for all of us to worry not so much about what the other person has done wrong but about what we have done wrong.

Maybe the time has come for us to “test our own work” instead of our neighbor’s work. Maybe the time has come for us to carry our own load of guilt instead of trying to assign blame to someone else. (Galatians 6:4-5)

## THE SOURCE OF HOPE

This is not an easy thing to do. We would much rather assign blame than repent.

But, the church is a community based upon repentance. The church is a community based upon forgiveness and restoration.

I like the way one commentator put it,

“In Christ God eternally accepts us, warts and all.

On the basis of this kindness toward us, we are asked to show mercy toward others. We are asked to accept, without question, a brother or sister who has made a mess of their lives.

We are asked to accept them, warts and all, in the same way God accepts us.

We are asked to carry the burden of their imperfect character, their failure and the consequences of their sin.

Of course, we may be offended or hurt by a brother or sister’s sin, and we may need to address that sin, but rather than condemn, we are bound to include, to encircle them with our acceptance and bear the burden of their imperfection.”

I think this is what Paul meant when he said that we are to bear one another's burdens. We bear the common burden of our sins.

We do not hide our sin. We confess our sin openly.

And together with fellow sinners we find hope. We find a way forward.

That's why we come to the Lord's Table today. In the body broken for us and the blood shed for us we find God's forgiveness for today and God's hope for tomorrow.

We do not put a limit on God's forgiveness. We do not restrain anyone from taking this meal of hope.

Instead we say that this is the Lord's Table, and our Savior invites those who trust him to share the meal, which he has prepared.

Amen.