

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A look at the Epistle to the Galatians: Galatians 6

According to tradition, there was a time when Jesus and His disciples were going to climb a mountain. Near its foot were a pile of twelve stones. Jesus told each of his followers to take one up to the top of the mountain. Peter, as always, was first in there, and picking up a small rock, he set off. Poor John was left to carry the biggest rock. When they all reached the top, they sat down, and Jesus promptly turned the rocks into bread for their lunch. Now Peter had soon finished his small loaf, and it wasn't long before he was asking John to share his loaf. Sometime later, Jesus and His disciples were walking to the Sea of Galilee when again they passed a pile of stones. Again Jesus commanded His disciples to carry one each. This time Peter headed for the largest stone and, with much huffing and puffing, carried it to the seashore. Jesus then commanded the twelve to throw the stones into the sea. Poor Peter got a good drenching and was not at all pleased. Turning to him, Jesus said to Peter "Peter, who were you carrying those stones for?"

That question is one that really touches the very heart of what we have to look at this morning as we come to Galatians 6. It is very easy to do so much that is good, but all the time it is duty, or a sense of pride, that motivates us. Jesus would always have us totally dependent upon Him. We saw at the end of chapter 5 how our lives were to be governed by the Spirit, and not by the flesh. Now in chapter 6, Paul gives four broad areas in which this Spirit filled life is to be shown. It is no good just knowing what the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit is. That fruit is to be practised in increasing measure in the life of all believers.

Chapter 6 can be divided up into four sections that will help us to remember the general instructions given. So:

- in verses 1-5 we have the divine paradox,
- in verses 6-10 we receive a divine promise,
- in verses 11-15 we are given a divine principle, and finally,
- in verses 16-18 we are reminded of divine peace.

A Divine Paradox

Firstly then we shall think about a divine paradox. Paul opens the chapter by calling upon those who are spiritual to have a particular care for those who are weaker in the faith, and who may have fallen into sin. We should note that Paul says that it is those who are spiritual, not those who think they are! In the story Jesus told about the two men who came to pray, we clearly see this distinction. The first man thought he was spiritual, with all his good works to back him up. In fact, his life was governed by the flesh. It was not the Holy Spirit who had directed him to do these works, but a sense of his own importance. Those who are most governed by the Spirit will also most keenly feel a sense of their own sinfulness. This condition of spiritual maturity is one that is open to all believers. It is not something that is given to a select few, but a way of life that is taken. It is interesting to see that it is to be those who are spiritual who are to undertake the task of reaching down to the believer who has fallen into a sinful way of life. Human reason may have thought that surely such an individual would be overbearing and unable to sympathise with the weaker believer. As always, God's wisdom is seen to be infinitely greater. It is just such an individual who will be most sensitive to the pain that sin causes to the Saviour. Those who are most in tune with the leading of the Spirit will most quickly pick up on the fault of another, and know how to restore such an individual. Note that it is the work of restoration that is given to individual believers, not the work of condemnation. But they were to have particular care that they too were not dragged down by their involvement with another's sin. Satan, in all his wickedness, would like to damage the faith of none more than one who has been living in close communion with God. How vital the protection of prayer in such circumstances! But then Paul outlines a seeming paradox. In verse 2, he says that we are to bear one another's burdens, but in verse 5 he says that we shall bear our own load.

These foolish Galatian believers had so wanted a law to govern their lives. How easy it would be if there was a set of rules to live by. It would remove all need for a daily relationship with the Lord, and a humble need for His strength and direction. But if they truly wanted a law, then Paul would give them one. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." We may well ask ourselves to what this law of Christ refers. The Lord Himself left us a new commandment, to love one another in the same way that He had loved us. This may be a part of what was in mind here. What a testimony it would be to the unsaved, if believers loved each other with this Christlike love! However, in

view of the context, I think more is in view here. What was it that motivated and ruled the life of the Man who came from heaven? Romans 15:3 says, "Even Christ pleased not Himself." In all He did He subjected Himself to the will of God His Father. There was no room for personal ambition in His life. At all times, even to the point of death, He displayed a humble obedience to God. To fulfil the law then, Paul would urge his readers to live like this. So often my old nature seeks to exert its influence. Take it easy, get ahead, think of yourself for once ... Christ would have me to bear one another's burdens. I am not to occupy my life with myself but constantly to look for ways to ease the lives of others. As a child at home, my mother used to have a poem in her kitchen that ran as follows:

*Each day's a precious gift of time for us to use,
Hours waiting to be filled in any way we choose.
Each morning brings a quiet hope that rises with the sun,
Each evening brings the sweet content that comes with work well done.*

One of the few things that unite the whole human race is that we all have the same amount of time, just 24 hours each day. Do I choose to use that gift from God to bear one another's burdens or are those hours filled satisfying my own wants? In a busy world, am I ready to make myself busier so that someone else's life is a little easier? Jesus would still say to me "Who are you living for?"

But Paul also says that "each one shall bear his own load." When considering service, we are to look to bear each other's burdens. When we consider our responsibility to God then we are fully accountable only for ourselves. How many times has every parent heard the cry, "But what's so-and so doing?" Peter was guilty of the same fault. In John 21:21-22, Peter could ask, "But Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me." I am not responsible for how someone else fills their 24 hours, but I am responsible for how I live. We are so prone to let the actions of others influence what we do. Did Shammah, in 2 Samuel 23, say, "Well nobody else is here, so I too will run from the Philistines"? Did Mary, in John 12, think to herself that "because nobody else seems to be giving, I will not give the whole jar of perfume"? No, these giants of the Bible are giants because alone they did what was right. They knew their Master would not accept excuses from them, but He would accept their service. Let us not look to what others are doing, but let us stand firm and do what we have been called to do, alone if necessary.

A Divine Promise

Paul then goes on to give a divine promise. Christianity is not meant to be a solo event; it is a team sport. We are to pass on the good that we have received so that others may benefit. I should always make it my business to look for opportunities to thank someone for their service. What a ministry of encouragement this would be!

Very often we lose sight of the end we, as Christians, have to look forward to. In verses 8-9 Paul writes "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Our eyes only take in the span of time and miss the horizon of eternity. God is not mocked. There are consequences to our actions that cannot be escaped from. This is often true naturally. The man who ignores God's word and drinks himself into oblivion each night cannot be surprised when their health breaks down. It is always true spiritually. If my mind is full of wrong thoughts and my time spent in wrong actions, then I will have nothing to give Him when I stand before Him at the Judgement Seat of Christ. By contrast, the more I read His word, spend time in prayer and then depend upon His Spirit to guide my daily actions, the more I will become like Him. The phrase "reap everlasting life" suggests an enjoyment of the fullness of that life that will only be for those who have lived for Him now.

Paul then comes to the promise of future benefit. It is worth just reading the words together again: "And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart." We live in an instant society, which expects results yesterday! Sometimes we become discouraged when we do not see the results that we want. In an age of self-fulfilment, is there any point in continuing with something that does not bring personal reward now? Oh yes, a thousand times yes! We have the absolute guarantee that all that we do for the Lord will receive its reward, a reward of eternal dimensions. But it is in due season!

My youngest son grew some carrots last summer. He eagerly planted them, rather thickly. It wasn't long before the green shoots came up and you could just see the orange top poking through the soil. In his eagerness he couldn't wait to pick some for tea. Of course, when he did they were just tiny buttons, and had to be supplemented in the pan by some furtively added frozen carrots. Later on, however, those that were left ripened and we ended up having to give some away; there were too many for us. This surely has something to say to us. So often I am just like my son, looking for spiritual fruit before it has had time to grow, and thereby lessening the harvest. Let none of us underestimate the difficulties in serving the Lord, but having counted the cost, then let us graciously persevere.

In a poem called "*The Pilgrim*", a conversation is held between the pilgrim, who finds that the Christian life is hard, and the Father. Two verses, in particular, have always impressed me.

*"The way is long My child! But it shall be
Not one step longer than is good for thee.
And thou shalt know at last, when thou shalt stand
Close to the gate, how I did take thy hand
And quick and straight
Lead to heaven's gate,
My child.*

*The path is rough my child! But oh! How sweet
Will be the rest for weary pilgrim's meet
When thou shalt reach the border of that land
To which I lead thee as I take thy hand.
And safe and blest
With Me shall rest,
My child."*

A Divine Principle in Paul's Life

We must move on now to see a divine principle in Paul's life. In the first century, writing was a specialist work. Only a matter of the utmost importance would cause someone, even of Paul's training, personally to write a letter. Replacing faith by the law was just such a matter. So in verse 11 Paul says that he, himself, has written to them. There is perhaps a suggestion too, of an eyesight problem which some have suggested that Paul had. It was vital to Paul that his readers recognised that in the flesh, that is to say, without faith, there is nothing to please God. No sacrifice, no ritual can ever compensate for a real and living relationship with a risen Saviour. Nothing we do, even as believers, if it is not prompted by faith, is worth celebrating. The only thing we have, and it is more than enough, that deserves our boasting, is the cross of Christ. Therefore in verse 14 Paul writes, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Everything I am through faith is due to what He has done for me. At the cross, Jesus established a sure and righteous basis for my blessing. Nothing I do can add to that in any way. So then the only boast I can have, the only ground for satisfaction, lies in the cross. And what does the cross mean to me? It means that the world is dead to me. In its politics, in its materialism, in its morality, there is nothing in this world that can feed my new life and bring me closer to Him. There is nothing left in the world that will do me spiritual good. If this first statement is not hard enough to live out in practice, the second is even harder. For the cross has crucified me to the world. I may, in a degree of self-righteousness, reject the world but am I ready for the world to reject me? I may not care to run with the world, in all its excesses, but the flesh in me still wants the world to listen to me, to hear my point of view. They didn't listen to the living Word, but hung Him on the cross! The world would still put Him there. So what can I share with the world as I enjoy the new life that comes through faith alone? There is a statement that runs, "Most Christians have enough of the world in them to spoil Christ, and enough of Christ to spoil the world." There must come a time in each of our lives, and maybe we have to return to it, when we make up our minds for whom we are going to live. The cross sums up everything that God has to say about the world, about His love for man, about His hatred of sin. The cross also sums up everything that the world thinks about God. We cannot serve two masters. Joshua could challenge the Israelites to choose this day whom they were going to serve. Does that choice still need to be made in my life?

The Divine Peace

Finally, then, let us think about the divine peace. Paul concludes the epistle to the Galatians by praying for peace for his readers. Those Gentile believers who would now live by this rule, i.e. faith in Christ alone is sufficient for salvation, as well as those Jews who had believed in Jesus as the Saviour, the Israel of God, would come under this blessing. God alone is the only source of lasting peace. In a world that knows very little of peace, in the family, as a nation, or internationally, God would have His children know true peace. Man offers peace as a cessation of external causes of trouble. God gives genuine peace by starting on the inside. There is a tremendous sense of calm in knowing that God is for us. As we recognise that all that could come between God and us has been dealt with at the cross, then, and only then, are we able to recognise who we truly are. This should then enable us to view one another in a proper manner. If only mankind had lived out a real relationship with a risen Saviour, rather than a state religion, how different the course of history would have been!

Paul himself had been the recipient of religious intolerance. So in verse 17 he can say that he bears in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 11, we get a summary of some of the sufferings that Paul had endured for his Lord. Whilst his contemporaries might boast in material gain, or keeping this law or that, Paul would give thanks

that he had been privileged to suffer for Jesus. We can hardly begin to imagine how precious those marks will be to Jesus! What a turn around there had been in the life of this man. Paul, who had started off by hearing those words, "Why are you persecuting Me?", now bore the scars of his own faith. In 21st century Britain we may not face the prospect of physical persecution that our 1st century sisters and brothers faced, but the difficulties that we face, and the scars that they may leave, are no less real. The sacrifices that we are called to make are likewise precious to the Lord Jesus.

The letter closes as Paul reminds the Galatians of the grace of the Lord Jesus. It was this grace that could give up untold riches for unimaginable poverty that had sustained Paul in his service. It is the same grace that is sufficient for each one of us today. And it is His grace that is able to lead us in a life that is pleasing to Him. No amount of law keeping, no amount of moral self-righteousness, can ever satisfy a holy God. He would have each one of us to live in total dependence upon His word and His Spirit, to live a life that is well pleasing to Him. As we finish our study of the letter to the Galatians let us close by taking the blessing that Paul desired for his readers, and making it our own: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen."

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