



WORKING OUT FREEDOM IN COMMUNITY

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 5:26–6:6
Eighteenth Message
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Most people spend their days interacting with others. We are all involved in community, whether with family members, roommates, fellow workers, in home fellowships, at school, or on the sidelines of sporting events. Each day our lives touch the lives of others.

The theme of community is foremost in the mind of the apostle Paul in the final chapter of his letter to the Galatians. We begin today with verse 26 of chapter 5, where we take up our studies once more.

Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load.

And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches. (Gal 5:26-6:6, NASB)

We can point to four things to demonstrate that Christian community was uppermost in the mind of the apostle as he wrote these verses.

First, Paul gives two warnings, in 5:15, 26, with respect to community life. These warnings could be considered book-ends to the section that comes between, the apostle's discourse on the fruit of the Spirit. Second, the term "one another" is repeated five times from verses 5:13-6:2, as follows: v. 13: "through love serve one another"; v. 15: "take care lest you be consumed by one another"; v. 26: "challenging one another, envying one another"; v. 2: "bear one another's burdens." Third, chapter 6 begins with an address to brethren, indicating that Christians are responsible to one another because they are brothers and sisters. Fourth, the summary verse 6:10 draws attention to the household of faith, i.e. it is addressed to the family of God: "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith."

As we have already seen, the book of Galatians is all about living freely in contrast to living under the law. This is how a Spirit-controlled community lives. Freedom is not to be used for our own private benefit, but rather that we might love one another. It is the Spirit of God who enables Christians to have healthy relationships. Christian freedom, therefore, is authenticated by relationships which are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit rather than the deeds of the flesh; and communities and families are the

arenas where these things are fleshed out and practiced.

Cultivating community, loving one another and forming healthy relationships, is not an easy thing, however. We don't always get to choose the people we have to interact with. (If we did, I'm sure many of us would make some changes!) Oftentimes the most draining, confusing and disrupting influences in life are the very people we must be around all day. People disappoint, irritate and hurt us. They fail to live up to our expectations. Instead of loving one another we respond by pushing each other's buttons. We take our hurt and anger out on one another. We punch and bully and fight. In Paul's words, we "bite and devour one another" (5:15), and, as a result, we consume one another.

This is clear evidence that our emotions are affected and oftentimes controlled by our relationships. But we must remember that we are living under law when we look to others for our sense of approval and value—and unhealthy relationships are the result of this lifestyle. Christian freedom, however, is the state of joy that arises from becoming emotionally detached from the negative influences of others, with the result that we are not seeking to control people emotionally and we are not responding to the threat of being controlled. The key to freedom is our sonship in Christ; and it is the Spirit who enables us to demonstrate love in our relationships, instead of biting and devouring one another.

In these verses the apostle offers practical advice about how freedom is worked out in community. The text reveals first, the prerequisite to love, and second, four ways in which Christians demonstrate love in the community of believers.

First, the prerequisite to love: "Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another" (5:26). In order to love one another, we need to have a proper view of ourselves in relation to others. The exhortation is to "not become boastful." This command is the opposite bookend to 5:15; it completes the paragraph on walking in the Spirit in 5:16-25. The fact that Paul warns the Galatians not to bite and devour or to become boastful indicates that that was the very thing that was happening within the Galatian church. The word "boastful" describes someone who has an opinion of himself which is empty, vain, or false. Our conduct toward others is determined by our opinion of ourselves. When relationships with others deteriorate, conceit is almost invariably the basic cause.

The problem with boasting, of course, is that it demonstrates our need to compare and measure ourselves against others. We achieve a sense of worth by considering ourselves better than them, so we compete in every area of life. We want to be first in line. We want the biggest piece of cake. We compete in school, in athletics, at work and on

the freeways. We even use our children to compete; their ability to outperform other children brings us a sense of satisfaction. The Bay Area in particular seems to breed this kind of competitive spirit. But when our lives are controlled by this kind of competitive behavior, we are never free to love.

Now conceit and boasting by Christians are manifested in one of two ways: we either challenge one another or we envy one another. When we challenge others, the implication is that we are so sure of our superiority we want to demonstrate it. And when we feel unaccepted or unapproved, we gain a sense of value by challenging someone we know we can best.

Challenging is what makes us an active controller. I learned this at a young age. My brother Larry is ten years older than me. When I was a boy, we played tennis once, and he thrashed me. I didn't like it. Even a trip to the root beer stand afterwards failed to console me. Years later, I finally was able to turn the tables on him. We would often go jogging together, and at the end of our jog, we'd have a sprint. This was where my ten-year advantage in years paid off. I was much faster than him, and I'd never let him get ahead of me no matter how many times we exercised together. But as Christians we must not do this, challenging one another and seeking to outdo one another.

A second way Christians manifest boasting or conceit is by "envying one another." This happens when we become jealous of one another's gifts or achievements. It implies that we are so sure of our inferiority, we cannot possibly compete with them. We respond by becoming resentful. We gossip about them, seeking to find fault with them; we become angry at them. This kind of response is what turns us into passive controllers. In the story of the prodigal son, the elder son demonstrated resentment and jealousy based upon a wrong view of himself. People tend to imitate others by comparing themselves with them. If we feel either superior or inferior, our attitude is due to conceit, to our having such an unrealistic opinion of ourselves that we cannot bear rivals.

This quote from author Henri Nouwen has been helpful to me:

In a world that constantly compares people, ranking them as more or less intelligent, more or less attractive, more or less successful, it is not easy to really believe in a love that does not do the same. When I hear someone praised, it is hard not to think of myself as less praiseworthy; when I read about the goodness and kindness of other people, it is hard not to wonder whether I myself am as good and kind as they; and when I see trophies, rewards, and prizes being handed out to special people, I cannot avoid asking myself why that didn't happen to me.

The world in which I have grown up is a world so full of grades, scores, and statistics that, consciously or unconsciously, I always try to take my measure against all the others. Much sadness and gladness in my life flows directly from my comparing, and most, if not all, of this comparing is useless and a terrible waste of time and energy (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 103).

The solution to this problem of competing and comparing ourselves with others is found in having a proper view

of ourselves in relation to others. If we have this proper view, then we can love and serve people and not insist on competing with them. The key to this is our identity as sons of God. When we clearly see our value as sons of God, then we will stop comparing ourselves with others and we will find joy in all our relationships. We will be free to see others too as sons and daughters of God, having the same standing as ourselves. We will begin to see that God loves others just as he loves us. We will see them with the eyes of the Father and we will highly value them. We will be joyful, not resentful, when someone else experiences the love of God. We must be careful, however, to not confuse low-self esteem with virtue. If we feel worthless and inferior, that is a sign that we are not experiencing sonship. We need to see ourselves as just as valuable as anyone else. Then, as sons of God, we can love others as we love ourselves.

This was brought home to me recently on the baseball diamond. I have coached many basketball, baseball and football teams, and I have to admit that I have always been very competitive. This year, however, I am not nearly as competitive as I was in earlier years, and I am having a wonderful time coaching a 15- and 16-year-old boys baseball team. One boy came out for the first game and it was obvious he was trying very hard to do well. I put him in to pitch, but I had to take him out because he was having a problem throwing strikes. He became very worked up about this and I had to have a chat with him. I told him to try to relax and not to strive so hard. He said he was anxious because he was used to being yelled at by his coaches at school. I told him that I would not do that with him, that he was a good ballplayer and a valuable part of our team. The following week he played very well, and he has been getting better with every game we play. I was gratified also to see some growth in my own demeanor, which enabled me to care more about my players than I do about winning. I now feel free to love, to watch kids blossom and succeed, instead of challenging them and becoming boastful.

John Stott articulates the attitude we should have as Christians in these words: "Truly Christian relationships are governed not by rivalry but by service. The correct attitude to other people is not 'I'm better than you and I'll prove it,' nor 'You're better than I and I resent it,' but 'You are a person of importance in your own right (because God made you in His own image and Christ died for you) and it is my joy and privilege to serve you'" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 157).

Paul now goes on to identify four ways in which Christians can demonstrate love for their brethren. The first way has to do with restoration and forgiveness, as we see in 6:1: "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted."

The one who takes this action of love is the "spiritual one"—the mature Christian who is walking in the Spirit. The word "trespass" implies that there is sin involved; we must not do this with someone merely because we don't like the way he or she dresses. The goal of love in this case is to restore the one who is caught in sin. "Restore" means to put in order, to restore to its former condition. This was a medical term used in secular Greek for setting a fractured or dislocated bone (it is applied to mending nets in

Mark 1:19).

If we live under law we are always trying to catch people in sin so that we can criticize them. We turn someone else's sin into fodder for gossip and a reason for boasting about our own perceived righteousness. If we find someone caught in a trespass, we can stand by and do nothing, on the pretext that it is none of our business, or we can despise and condemn them in our hearts, even report them to the pastor. If they suffer as a result, we say that it serves them right. But love deals with sin in a godly and purposeful way. We must hate the sin but love the sinner. We must not be alarmed by the fact that someone has sinned, but to even use sin as an occasion to love. Since we know that God has been gracious and faithful with us in dealing with our sin, we have the capacity and freedom to treat others the same way.

We must approach someone caught in sin in a spirit of gentleness. This is how Abigail, the wife of Nabal, approached David, when David was going to take Nabal's life (1 Samuel 25). Gentleness is one of the fruits of the Spirit; it is a characteristic of true spirituality. The caution is to look to ourselves lest we also be tempted by sin. We must never think we are safe from sinning or that we are above failing. Gentleness is born of a sense of our own weakness and proneness to sin.

As a young Christian, I was involved in something that was quite unhealthy spiritually, and a certain brother came to me and harshly condemned me. Of course, I wasn't very receptive. I defended myself. Some time later, another brother came to me. Gently, he asked me, "John, what do you think about this matter?" I told him he was right, and I immediately stopped involving myself in what I had been doing. I was restored by the gentle word of a brother. John Stott comments, "if we obeyed this apostolic instruction as we should, much unkind gossip would be avoided, more serious backsliding prevented, the good of the church advanced, and the name of Christ glorified" (*Galatians*, 162). The question we must ask ourselves is this: Are we committed enough to want to help restore others in the body to a healthy relationship with God?

The second way we are called to love in community is by bearing one another's burdens. Paul writes, "Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). "Bear" means to carry; "burdens" implies heavy loads. The assumption is that we cannot bear everything by ourselves. Even though we cast our burdens on God, we are not to look to him alone; we are to live in community with brothers and sisters in Christ. Bearing burdens implies that we are responsible to help others with their heavy loads, and that we are willing to give up our own burdens when they become too much for us. Bearing burdens is helping a mother with three children and fourteen suitcases make her way through the airport by carrying some of her luggage and helping her. In the Yucatan this year, we got to know a woman who had had twelve children, nine of whom died in infancy. One of the three survivors was unable to walk, and some of our young singles ministered to that child, taking her on bike rides and sharing their resources with the family. This kind of burden bearing is a natural outflow of living in community.

The result of this bearing of burdens, according to Paul, is "you will fulfill the law of Christ." The law of Christ is the law of love, as stated in chapter 5:14: "For the whole

Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" We should extend to others the same kind of care we would like to receive. To love our neighbor, then, is equivalent to bearing one another's burdens, which is equivalent to fulfilling the law.

Paul adds a warning to his exhortation so that we are not deceived: "For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (6:3). This kind of mindset interferes with bearing burdens. This verse relates back to 5:26, implying that bearing burdens stands in direct contrast to being conceited. If we think we are something, we will not bear another's burdens because we think we are above it. We will become independent and self-sufficient, and our conduct toward others will be governed by our inflated opinion of ourselves.

When we live under law, we impose the law as a burden upon others. When we live in freedom, we lift the burdens off others and thus fulfill the law of Christ. Bearing burdens, therefore, is a manifestation of a Spirit-controlled community. Luther said, "Christians must have strong shoulders and mighty bones."

A third way we allow for love in the community is by evaluating ourselves properly and not using the Christian community in an unhealthy way. Verses 4-5: "But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load." The exhortation is that we should test our own work. This implies minding our business, not comparing ourselves to others and scrutinizing our neighbor; not challenging, envying and being conceited. Rather than boasting in another we boast in ourselves. Bearing burdens does not give us permission to insert ourselves in an unhealthy way into the lives of others and use people in the community for our own self promotion. This is what characterized the agitators in the Galatian churches. Testing our own work allows us to focus on our own relationship with God and walk with him.

The reasons we are to test our own work is that we must carry our own load. This might seem like a contradiction to verse 2, but Paul uses a different word for burden in verse 5 compared to verse 2. "Burdens" in verse 2 are heavy, and the word is plural; "load" in verse 5 refers to a common term for a man's pack—a day pack. Therefore we are responsible for ourselves before God; there is a certain amount of weight that each of us must carry. If you go backpacking with a group, every person carries a pack. No one is completely free to carry nothing.

At certain times, the burdens of life are crushing. That is when we need the help of others. But we must not forget that the pressures of everyday life are sometimes burdensome. We must learn to carry our load and let others carry theirs. On occasion people in the body use burden-bearing as an excuse to be involved in an unhealthy way in the lives of others, helping others in order to feel better about themselves. By doing so find worth and approval, or we use this as a way of escaping our own struggles and pain. A character in a John Fowles novel commented on this type of person, "I think she's trying to solve the world's problems as a substitute for facing one or two of her own" (quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 170).

The final way Christians demonstrate love in community has to do with pastors. Verse 6, “And let each one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches.” Pastors need love, too, just like everyone else in the body. They are not superior or inferior to others. They are not to be put on pedestals for their spirituality, or chastened for their inability to meet every perceived need. Pastors are simply people whom God has set aside to study and teach God’s Word. And the one being taught shares all good things with the one who teaches. The word for “share” is the word for fellowship— *koinonia*. A pastor may expect to be supported by the congregation if people benefit spiritually from his or her work. The pastor sows the good seed of God’s Word and reaps a livelihood. He shares spiritual things with the flock, and they share material things with him.

Pastors are not to control the body, and the body is not to control the pastor. Sadly, these unhealthy emotional patterns are present in many churches. The reason freedom and love is so important between pastors and the flock is so that the Word of God might have its proper effect in the lives of the community. Legalism interferes with the centrality and power of teaching and preaching. The way love manifests itself in the community is by people valuing the Word of God by supporting those who teach. I myself have been greatly helped by some special people in this body—and not just materially. They love me for who I am—a brother who is in a mess a lot of the time.

What is striking about this is the value of the Word of God. Churches can easily become self-oriented, need-oriented or program-oriented. The flock can look to the pastor to do everything so that he is left with no time to study and prepare for teaching. I am grateful for the legacy that we have here in this church. We have always highly valued the Word of God and made it central to our worship. This is what attracted me to our church in the first place. I began to experience the power of the Word of God

through preaching, and to observe how it could transform lives. The elders at PBC have always encouraged the pastors to study so that when they teach they have something to say. At times this means that we are not always efficient, nevertheless it is the right priority.

So these are some of the ways that Christians are called to love in the community: restoring others, bearing burdens, self-evaluation, and recognizing the centrality of the Word of God. And this is how God is calling us to love one another at PBC. Loving others is not easy, living in community is not easy, but this is what God has called us to. Don’t look for the perfect Christian community; it doesn’t exist. The call is to put a stake in the ground, stop comparing, and begin loving. This is where we begin to work out our freedom in Christ. There is a great deal at risk, but there is a great deal to gain, too. As we live in community with one another we experience the life of God. We begin to have a taste of heaven, and we partake together of the fruit of the Spirit. Freedom is not self-sufficiency; it is a shared life. The goal is a Spirit-controlled community that is committed to honest and healthy biblical relationships.

I want to close this morning with these words about love from the pen of C.S. Lewis:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping your heart intact—you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safely in the casket of your selfishness. And in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers of love is in hell.

May God grant us the freedom to love one another in the ways the apostle has described in these very practical guidelines for Christian community.

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