

## Others' Burdens *versus* our Own Loads

<sup>1</sup>Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. <sup>2</sup>Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup>If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. <sup>4</sup>Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, <sup>5</sup>for each one should carry his own load. – Galatians 5:1-5

The whole passage is rich, but some have questioned, "Is the message mixed?" We are to carry each other's "burdens", but each person must carry his own "load". Paul wrote distinct things in distinct letters to distinct churches with distinct needs that can seem to contradict one another. This compels us to study the context of each distinct remark. Eventually, we are able to rightly divide God's Word and harmonize the distinct teachings to the end that our preparation for practical Christian living is enriched. But, how unique can the context of two remarks be that are only separated by two verses of Scripture?

*"If you are looking for contradictions from the pen of the apostle, you might expect them to take place in different letters ten years apart, but you don't expect to find them in the same book or chapter..." - R. C. Sproul*

Not surprisingly, Paul's meanings are easily distinguished in a brief glance at the two terms he used. "Burden" is represented by a word which always connotes heaviness. "Load" is represented by a word which speaks of a relatively light burden such as a soldier's pack. Paul's meaning becomes quite clear. Some burdens diminish people. They cannot be borne alone nor should they be. There are other responsibilities that we must assume for ourselves lest we be diminished in our Christian character. In fact, if we do not bear these lesser loads, and those around us do not hold us accountable for doing so, the whole community is diminished as well.

If a troop of Boy Scouts goes on a hike, should the scoutmaster carry all their packs for them? That would be more of a disservice to the youngsters than a service. Should the chubby kid that breaks his leg be expected to drag himself back to camp? Should the bony-legged kid paired up with him *via* "the buddy system" be held solely responsible for carrying him? Or, should the community of scouts figure out a way to share the burden?

In the Christian life, what "burdens" are shared and what "loads" are individually borne? The context gives us clues. Verse one speaks of sin in which people are "caught". Such people are to be restored gently. Restoration involves not only helping them to break away from the sinful practice itself, but also support through the process of recovery. That may include prayer, counsel, accountability and physical help as consequences are mopped up now; as well as into the future. These are areas where people need help from others with hearts to help. Personal crises are also such areas. Physical and emotional illnesses can constitute such "burdens".

What is the “load” that each man must carry to the extent of sinning if he does not? These are areas against which a man must “test his own actions” and find satisfaction “without comparing himself to anyone else”. Each man is responsible to provide for and to train his family. He is responsible to earn the bread he eats. He is responsible for how he wields authority where God has given him authority. He is responsible for how he embraces submission in the appropriate relationships. He is responsible for what he says and how he says it. He is responsible for serving Christ and others in the Body of Christ according to whatever equipping for service he has received from God. In short, each believer is responsible for his or her own obedience to God’s Word.

Believers must hold one another responsible for the right things, but they must also share burdens in the appropriate areas. On the one hand, we do not want to become heartless and irrelevant in the lives of those who most need our help. On the other hand, we do not want to become mere “enablers” in the lives of others who need to grow up in Christ by taking responsibility for their own lives, actions and maturity. Neither extreme is the way of love.

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