

God-Shaped Community: Part Two
Galatians 6:1-10

Last week, we kicked off this brief topical series on ‘stewardship’ with a focus on optimizing the ministry skills and opportunities that Jesus gives us (in traditional language, ‘our spiritual gifts’). As the apostle Peter explains, God graciously gives us various skills and abilities so that we can serve others effectively. More strongly put, as we serve, God actually ministers through us. We become conduits of his grace, channels of his ministry (1 Peter 4:10): our words are his words; our ministry, his ministering (1 Peter 4:11).

But we do more than steward the grace and spiritual talents which God gives us; we also steward the *people* whom God gives us. Whatever Cain meant by his original question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9), the New Testament clearly affirms that *we* are one another’s keepers. Ultimately, we each bear responsibility for our own decisions and lives. At the same time, God calls us to look after each other. This week we consider more of what that entails, examining this text in reverse order.

Day 1: Galatians 6:7-8 “Whatever a man sows, this is what he reaps.”

One of the most foolish and widespread errors among Christians – and even among some Christian authors who should know better – is that provided we pray to receive Christ and believe in him, we need not live for God in order to get into heaven. As though, because Christ died for our sins, holiness is nonetheless optional, not essential for salvation. As though, because Christ died for our sins, we can remain in them without risk. The apostle Paul will have none of this. To his mind, there’s only two ways to live: satisfying the flesh (lower instincts), or satisfying the Spirit. Those who live for the flesh will reap destruction; those who live for the Spirit will reap eternal life. Paul is resolutely committed to this fundamental correspondence: to deny it, he affirms, is to be deceived; to think that you can get around it is to attempt to mock God. It ain’t gonna happen.

Oddly, though, in the 1990s, several famous Christian pastors and authors fell over themselves publishing books to assure people that provided they prayed to receive Christ, and truly believed in him, then they would get to heaven, pretty much regardless of how they lived. It ain’t gonna happen. Don’t be deceived. God cannot be mocked. What you sow, this you will also reap. Maybe not just a momentary or occasional stumble into sin, but a headlong pursuit of it, a pattern of life, will prove disastrous.

We need to be careful here: Paul is not affirming that we earn our salvation,

much less that we cannot enter heaven unless our good deeds outnumber (and outweigh) our bad. But he is affirming that those who are truly people of God have the Spirit within, who transforms them and leads them in God's ways. Where a life is characterized by flagrant sin, this is evidence that Spirit does not indwell, that Christ is not present. If your life is characterized by flagrant sin, Paul's words are an urgent call to repent.

Day 2: Galatians 5:19-21 Which sins fall under such warning?

If flagrant, recurring sin makes us susceptible to divine judgment, it is desperately important that we know which sins put us at such risk. Paul provides lists of these sins in several of his letters, including here, in Galatians 5. The items on the various lists differ somewhat; no single list attempts to be comprehensive. But they are all 'big-ticket' items, not, 'Let me peer deeply into my heart to see whether or not I might have ever thought about doing this sometime.'

Many of these sins are encouraged by our culture: sexual immorality, wild partying, worship of other gods, drunkenness... Others of the sins are widespread, even if not culturally encouraged: hatred, discord, jealousy, rage, excessive personal ambition, conflict, factionalism, and envy. We do well to heed Paul's insistence that those who engage in such practices do not enter the kingdom of God (5:21). Do any of these sins characterize your life currently?

Day 3: Galatians 5:22-25 But isn't this salvation by works, rather than by faith? We've discussed this before – it comes up often in Paul's writings – but it is so widely ignored or misunderstood today that we do well to review it again. Christ does not merely die for us; salvation is not simply '*outside*' of us; Christ also lives *inside* us, by his Spirit. Or, as Paul puts it elsewhere, it is not just Christ who died and rose; in union with him, we also die and rise (Romans 6:1-10). He writes in similar vein here: "Those who belong to [the crucified] Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (5:24). Or, in terms of the third member of the Trinity, "We live [i.e., we have been raised from the dead and transformed to new life] by the Spirit" (5:25a).

Paul draws out the application for his readers and for us, and does so twice. 'The fruit of the Spirit is ...'; i.e., if the Spirit lives within, then our outward behavior will look accordingly: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (5:22-23). "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (5:25). Where the Spirit leads, we follow; we walk in his steps. So this is not salvation by works. It's simply to affirm that those whom Jesus saves, he also indwells; those whom he justifies,

he also transforms. So the conduct of our lives does not save us; it reflects God's prior work in saving us. And, of course, these theological truths are also exhortations, reminding us that God's work within us comes to expression through our lifestyles. Are there obvious ways in which your current lifestyle does not reflect Christ who indwells you, and the Spirit who enlivens you?

Day 4: Galatians 6:1a But what happens when life does not go as it should?

We take our stand on biblical truth, including its affirmation that God crucifies us to sin, and resurrects us for holiness. Still, we recognize that sin is notoriously resistant to dying, and we are notoriously prone to moral failure. Is there no hope for us? Christ dies to free us from the penalty of sin; the Spirit indwells us to free us from the power of sin. Theoretically, one might think this enough to ensure our holiness, but practically, it often does not end up that way. So God also gives us community. "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual [i.e., you who are not currently caught in sin], mend him, set him right" (6:1).

This is remarkable, when you think about it. God does not tell us to leave a lapsed or sinning Christian alone, that it does not matter because Christ died for his sin, or that we need not be involved because the Spirit indwells him and has everything under control. Instead, Scripture calls us, in a sense, to co-work with God, with Christ, and with the Spirit. We do not merely pray for the lapsed or sinning Christian. We engage with them. We seek them out. We urge them to return to God. We help them mend the torn fabric of their spiritual lives. We set them on the right path. Of course, none of this works unless we have a prior relationship with them. This is a core purpose of our small groups, our home groups, and our fellowship groups. Not just to provide a social network, nor even to celebrate successes. But also to help each other overcome failures.

If you are not in a small group, join one. This is God's will for your life. And if you are in a fellowship group, but never get beyond superficialities, crack open that protective shell. This is God's will for your group.

Day 5: Galatians 6:1b Those who are 'spiritual'

One of the reasons people often give for not sharing their lives – and their sins – openly is that others may gossip. Let's face it ... often that's just an excuse. People often just want to preserve face, and avoid embarrassment. Rather than admit to self-centered motives, they cast aspersions on others. And what's loss of face, compared to loss of life: if shame causes us to repent and reform, and thus saves our lives, it's more than worth it.

Still, recognizing the vulnerability of those who confess sin, Scripture lays down several guidelines for their protection. For one, if we are involved in the confrontation, repentance, and restoration process, Scripture calls us to be gentle, not fierce (6:1). And we do well not to be arrogant: we ourselves are not beyond temptation and sin. (In fact, the process of hearing confession and restoring the repentant can, in a twisted way, feed the imagination and tempt its lusts.) So, even though we may not have fallen into similar sin, we do well not to be haughty or smug, but recognize our own vulnerability to sin. We avoid overconfidence; we watch themselves, lest we too be tempted (6:1b).

Day 6: Galatians 6:2 Fulfilling the will of God

In an important sense, we are each responsible for ourselves: “Each one should carry his own load” (6:5). If we fall away from God or into sin, we cannot blame other people. We bear responsibility for our own conduct and choices.

At the same time, we also provide spiritual care and nurture for those around us: “Carry each other’s burdens” (6:2). As Paul exhorts the Romans, we are to “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (12:15). As Jude writes, “Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh” (22-23). We are responsible for one another. This is not optional. It is obligatory. It is the law of Christ, the essential requirement that he lays upon his followers: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2).

Are you spiritually responsible for anyone else in this community?

Well, of course you are, if you are a believer in this community. What I mean is, Who in particular are you actively and intentionally caring for spiritually? How are they doing? How often do you check in with them? Are you comfortable sharing your stuff with them? Are they comfortable being reasonably transparently with you? If you do not have such a relationship with a small group of people, I invite you to e-mail me, and we can identify others who might join you in such a relationship. This is not optional; it is the calling of God, and ‘the law of Christ.’