

The Gospel *and the* Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gal. 6:1–10, Matt. 18:15–17, 1 Cor. 10:12, Rom. 15:1, John 13:34, Luke 22:3.*

Memory Text: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (*Galatians 6:10, ESV*).

Some farmers decided to save the biggest vegetables for themselves and to plant the smaller ones as seed. After a few disappointing harvests, they discovered that nature had reduced their crops to the size of marbles. Through this disaster, those farmers learned an important law of life.

“They could not have the best things of life for themselves and use the leftovers for seed. The law of life decreed that the harvest would reflect the planting.

“In another sense, planting small [vegetables] is still common practice. We take the big things of life for ourselves and plant the leftovers. We expect that by some crazy twist of spiritual laws, our selfishness will be rewarded with unselfishness.”—*International Student Fellowship Newsletter*, March 2007.

Paul applies this principle in Galatians 6:1–10. Instead of its members “bit[ing] and devour[ing] one another” (*Gal. 5:15*), the church should be a place where the Spirit leads us to put others before ourselves. Understanding that we are saved by grace should make us humble and more patient and compassionate in how we treat others.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 23.

Restoring the Fallen

While Paul has lofty expectations for the nature of the Christian life (*Gal. 5:16*), his counsel to the believers in Galatians 6:1 also is refreshingly realistic. Humans are not perfect, and even the most dedicated Christians are not immune from making mistakes. In Greek, Paul's words in Galatians 5:16 indicate that he is envisioning a situation in which such mistakes might occur. Paul gives the Galatians practical advice on how to deal with such situations when they arise.

How should Christians respond when a fellow believer falls into some sinful behavior? *Gal. 6:1, Matt. 18:15–17.*

To benefit from Paul's advice in Galatians 6:1, we need to understand the precise type of situation that Paul has in mind. The two words used in the first half of the sentence offer clarification. The first word can be translated as *caught* (*ESV*) or *overtaken* (*KJV*). It literally means "to be detected, overtaken, or surprised." The context and different nuances associated with this word suggest that Paul has two aspects in mind. This is because it refers not only to a believer who "catches" another believer in the act of some wrongdoing but also to the process by which a person finds himself "overtaken" by a behavior (*see Prov. 5:22*) that, under the best of circumstances, he would have chosen to avoid.

The likelihood that the wrongdoing Paul is discussing is not deliberate is evident from the terminology he uses. The word translated as "fault" (*KJV*) or "sin" (*NIV*), which comes from the Greek word *parap-toma*, does not refer to a deliberate sin but to a mistake, a stumble, or a false step. The latter makes particular sense in light of Paul's previous comments about "walking" in the Spirit. Although this in no way excuses the person's mistake, it makes clear that Paul is not dealing with a case of defiant sin (*1 Cor. 5:1–5*).

The proper response in such circumstances should not be punishment, condemnation, or disfellowship but restoration. The Greek word translated as "restore" is *katartizo*, and it means "to mend" or "to put in order." In the New Testament it is used to refer to the "mending" of fishnets (*Matt. 4:21*), and it is used as a medical term in Greek literature to describe the process of setting a broken bone. In the same way that we would not abandon a fellow believer who fell and broke a leg, as members of the body of Christ we should gently care for our brothers and sisters in Christ who may stumble and fall as we walk together on the path to God's kingdom.

Instead of practicing Matthew 18:15–17, why do we so often talk badly about the person with whom we're angry, let our anger simmer against the person, or even plan revenge?

Beware of Temptation

“And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man” (2 Sam. 12:7).

The seriousness of Paul’s words in Galatians 6:1—to guard our own lives lest we also follow into temptation—should not be overlooked. An indication of the urgency and personal concern behind Paul’s counsel can be seen in the way he makes his appeal. The word translated as “considering” (*KJV*) or “take care” (*NRSV*) literally means “to look at carefully” or “to pay careful attention to” (*compare Rom. 16:17, Phil. 2:4*). So, what Paul literally is saying is, “Keep a careful eye on yourself” lest sin also takes you by surprise. To highlight this warning, Paul switches from the second person plural (“you all”) in the first half of Galatians 6:1 to the second person singular (“you”) in the last half of the verse. This is no general warning that applies to the whole congregation; it is a personal warning addressed to each individual within the church.

Paul does not explicitly identify the nature of the temptation that he so strongly warns the Galatians against. Perhaps he didn’t have one specific trespass in mind but is simply referring to the danger of committing the *same* sin, whatever it is, from which the Galatians are trying to restore one another. At the same time, his words in Galatians 5:26 against becoming “conceited” (*NKJV*) suggest that he is warning the Galatians against feeling that they are in some way spiritually superior to those they are restoring.

Why would Paul need to warn the Galatians against spiritual pride?

Consider 1 Cor. 10:12, Matt. 26:34, and 2 Sam. 12:1–7.

One of the greatest dangers to the Christian walk is a sense of spiritual pride. Such pride makes us think we are somehow immune from committing certain types of sin. The sobering fact is that we all have the same sinful nature—a nature that is opposed to God. Thus, without the restraining power of God’s Spirit, we could stoop to just about any sin, were the circumstances right. Such an awareness of our true identity outside of Christ can keep us from falling into the sin of self-righteousness, and it also can give us greater sympathy for others who make mistakes.

How many times have you found yourself condemning others (maybe even only in your heart) for doing sins that, at one time, you were guilty of yourself?

Burden Bearing (Gal. 6:2–5)

In addition to restoring the fallen, what other instructions does Paul give to the believers in Galatia? Gal. 6:2–5; see also Rom. 15:1, Matt. 7:12.

The Greek word translated as “burden” in Galatians 6:2 is *baros*. It literally refers to a heavy weight or load that someone had to carry a long distance. Over time, however, it also has become a metaphor for any type of trouble or difficulty, such as the burden of a long day’s work on a hot day (Matt. 20:12). While the immediate context of Paul’s injunction to “bear one another’s burdens” certainly includes the moral lapses of the fellow believers mentioned in the preceding verse, the concept of burden bearing he has in mind is much broader. Paul’s instructions reveal several spiritual insights about the Christian life that should not be overlooked.

First, as Timothy George notes, “All Christians have burdens. Our burdens may differ in size and shape and will vary in kind depending on the providential order of our lives. For some it is the burden of temptation and the consequences of a moral lapse, as in verse 1 here. For others it may be a physical ailment, or a mental disorder, or a family crisis, or lack of employment, or demonic oppression, or a host of other things; but no Christian is exempt from burdens.”—*Galatians*, p. 413.

Second, God does not intend for us to bear *all* our burdens alone. Unfortunately, we often are far more willing to help others to carry their burdens than we are in allowing others to help us shoulder our own. Paul condemns this attitude of self-sufficiency (Gal. 6:3) as human pride, when we refuse to admit that we also have needs and weaknesses. Such pride not only robs us of the comfort of others but also prevents others from fulfilling the ministry that God has called them to perform.

Finally, God calls us to bear the burdens of others because it is through our actions that God’s comfort is made manifest. This concept is built on the fact that the church is the body of Christ. An illustration of this is in Paul’s words, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Cor. 7:6, *ESV*). Notice that God’s comfort was not given to Paul through his private prayer and waiting upon the Lord but through the companionship of a friend and through the good news which he brought.

“Human friendship, in which we bear one another’s burdens, is part of the purpose of God for His people.”—John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, p. 158.

What keeps you from seeking help—pride, shame, a lack of trust, or a sense of self-sufficiency? If in need, why not seek out someone whom you trust and ask this person to share your burdens?

The Law of Christ *(Gal. 6:2–5)*

Paul connects burden bearing with fulfilling the law of Christ. What does he mean by “the law of Christ”? *Gal. 5:14, 6:2, John 13:34, Matt. 22:34–40.*

Paul’s use of the phrase “the law of Christ” (*ton nomon tou Christou*) occurs nowhere else in the Bible, though he uses a similar expression in 1 Corinthians 9:21 (*ennomos Christou*). The uniqueness of this phrase has resulted in a number of different interpretations. Some mistakenly argue that this is evidence that the law of God given at Sinai has been replaced by a different law, the law of Christ. Others claim the word *law* simply means a general “principle” (*see Rom. 7:21*), meaning that in bearing the burdens of others we are following the example of Jesus. While the latter interpretation has some merit, the context and similar terminology with Galatians 5:14 suggest that “fulfil[ling] the law of Christ” is another reference to fulfilling the moral law through love. Paul showed earlier in his letter that the moral law was not annulled with the coming of Christ. Instead, the moral law interpreted by love continues to play an important role in the Christian life. This is the epitome of what Jesus taught during His earthly ministry, as well as practiced throughout His life and even in His death. Thus, in bearing the burdens of others, we are not only following in the footsteps of Jesus but also fulfilling the law.

Another issue that arises in these texts is the apparent contradiction between Galatians 6:2 and 6:5. This problem, however, easily is resolved when one realizes that Paul is using two different words to describe two different situations. As we already have seen, the word for “burden” in verse 2 (*baros*) refers to a heavy load that has to be carried for a long distance. The word *phortion* in verse 5, however, refers to a ship’s cargo, a soldier’s backpack, or even a child in the womb. Whereas the former burdens can be laid aside, the latter cannot. A pregnant mother must carry her own child. As this example suggests, there are some burdens that people can help us bear but others that no human can bear for us, such as the burden of a guilty conscience, suffering, and death. For these, we must rely on God’s help alone (*Matt. 11:28–30*).

While for some burdens you can get help from other people, some you have to take to the Lord alone. How can you learn to give to the Lord the things that you just can’t bear?

Sowing and Reaping (Gal. 6:6–10)

In Galatians 6:7, the word translated as “mocked” (*mukterizo*) occurs only here in the New Testament, though it often appears in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It literally means “to turn up one’s nose in contempt.” In the Old Testament, it typically refers to the despising of God’s prophets (*2 Chron. 36:16, Jer. 20:7*), and it even is used once to describe graphically a rebellious attitude toward God (*Ezek. 8:17*).

Paul’s point is that people may ignore God or even flout His commandments, but they cannot outwit God. He is the ultimate Judge, and in the end they will have to pay the price for their actions.

Read Galatians 6:8. What does Paul mean here? What examples can you find in the Bible of characters sowing to the flesh and sowing to the Spirit? See, for example, Acts 5:1–5, Luke 22:3, Dan. 1:8, and Matt. 4:1.

Paul’s metaphor about sowing and reaping is not unique. It is a fact of life that appears in many ancient proverbial sayings. What is significant, however, is how Paul uses it to highlight his previous comments about the flesh and the Spirit. James D. G. Dunn notes, “A modern equivalent is that we are free to choose, but we are not free to choose the consequences of our choice.”—*Galatians*, p. 330.

Although God does not always deliver us from the earthly consequences of our sins, we should not be overcome with despair for the bad choices we have made. We can rejoice that God has forgiven us of our sins and adopted us as His children. We should capitalize on the opportunities we have now to invest in those things that will yield a heavenly harvest.

Galatians 6:10, meanwhile, illustrates the point that “Christian ethics has a dual focus: one is universal and all-embracing, ‘Let us do good to all people’; the other is particular and specific, ‘especially to those who belong to the family of believers.’ Paul’s universalistic appeal was based on the fact that all persons everywhere are created in the image of God and are thus infinitely precious in his sight. Whenever Christians have forgotten this primary *datum* of biblical revelation, they have inevitably fallen victim to the blinding sins of racism, sexism, tribalism, classism, and a thousand other bigotries that have blighted the human community from Adam and Eve to the present day.”—Timothy George, *Galatians*, pp. 427, 428.

You are sowing right now, either for good or bad. Look at yourself. What kind of harvest are you going to reap?

Further Thought: “The Spirit of God keeps evil under the control of conscience. When man exalts himself above the influence of the Spirit, he reaps a harvest of iniquity. Over such a man the Spirit has less and less influence to restrain him from sowing seeds of disobedience. Warnings have less and less power over him. He gradually loses his fear of God. He sows to the flesh; he will reap corruption. The harvest of the seed that he himself has sown, is ripening. He has a contempt for God’s holy commandments. His heart of flesh becomes a heart of stone. Resistance to truth confirms him in iniquity. It is because men sowed seeds of evil, that lawlessness, crime, and violence prevailed in the antediluvian world.

“All should be intelligent in regard to the agency by which the soul is destroyed. It is not because of any decree that God has sent out against man. He does not make man spiritually blind. God gives sufficient light and evidence to enable man to distinguish truth from error. But He does not force man to receive truth. He leaves him free to choose the good or to choose the evil. If man resists evidence that is sufficient to guide his judgment in the right direction, and chooses evil once, he will do this more readily the second time. The third time he will still more eagerly withdraw himself from God and choose to stand on the side of Satan. And in this course he will continue until he is confirmed in evil, and believes the lie he has cherished as truth. His resistance has produced its harvest (MS 126, 1901).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1112.

Discussion Question:

- 1 In a practical sense, what does it really mean to “restore” a fellow believer who has fallen into sin? In what ways does the nature of the sin committed affect the restoration process? Does restoration mean that everything will be the same as before? Discuss.
- 2 Because there are some burdens that people must bear on their own (*Gal. 6:5*), how does a believer determine if he or she should try to help someone?
- 3 How does your church measure up to Paul’s instructions in Galatians 6? What can you do personally to make a difference?

Summary: The indication of God’s presence among His people is in the Christlike spirit manifest within the church. It can be seen in the way forgiveness and restoration are extended to those who err, in how they help each other in trials, and in intentional acts of kindness shared not only among themselves but also with unbelievers.

Match Made in Heaven: Part 2

The next day Marina brought some material for Sahana to read. As Sahana read the material, she was amazed at how clear Daniel and Revelation became. Later Marina brought her *The Desire of Ages* to read. Sahana read it through swiftly, feeling the Holy Spirit impress her that this was the truth.

Sahana wanted to visit the Seventh-day Adventist church and see for herself whether the church and its members could live up to her expectations. So, when she and Marina both had a Saturday off work, Marina took her to church. When they entered the church, Sahana saw Michael, the man she had met in the hospital. She was surprised to learn that he was the leader of this small congregation.

After church, Sahana confided to her friend, “The people are so friendly and gracious. This church is exactly as you said it would be. I feel as if I have found my spiritual home at last.”

When Sahana returned home after church that day, she eagerly told her parents about her worship experience. Her parents had never heard of Seventh-day Adventists; so, Sahana explained to them some of the basic beliefs and told them about the books she had read. She opened the Bible and read them the Ten Commandments and explained that God had never abolished His law, nor had He changed it. “Jesus and His disciples kept these same laws,” she told them.

Sahana’s parents were glad she was so happy. They encouraged her to follow her new beliefs, but they would continue to attend the church they had attended for years.

Sahana’s year of teaching was almost up, and she began looking for another job. At the same time Sahana’s parents began looking for a husband for her.

“I am worried about the man my parents will choose,” Sahana confided to Marina. “You and your husband came to your faith together, but what if my parents choose a man for me who doesn’t want me to worship as an Adventist? It will be difficult for me to keep my faith if I marry someone who doesn’t share my beliefs.”

To be continued.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Galatians 6:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review the ways in which living in and through Christ instructs the ways in which we relate to others.

Feel: Sense the dangers that spiritual pride carries, especially for Christians who believe themselves safe from temptation.

Do: Love our neighbors as we care for ourselves, thus fulfilling the law of Christ.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Doing Good

A How should Christians relate to their brothers and sisters who have stumbled?

B Why is it especially important to treat others who are burdened as we would like to be treated?

II. Feel: Spiritual Pride

A Why is spiritual pride such a danger to Christians?

B How can we guard against an indifferent, cold, critical spirit?

C Why is a thoughtful self-examination and evaluation important?

D What biblical examples illustrate the perils of thinking too much of our own abilities?

III. Do: The Law of Christ

A How does loving our neighbor fulfill the law of Christ?

B Where do our greatest challenges arise in bearing one another's burdens?

C What family members do we need to serve in this way?

D What gender, racial, tribal, or class prejudices do we carry that need to be eradicated?

► **Summary:** When the law of Christ is fulfilled in our lives, we will care for those who have fallen and who are burdened. We will recognize our own weaknesses and humbly submit to every evidence of truth, lest we become spiritually proud and blind.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God has commissioned the church as His transforming agent upon the earth.

The omnipotent Savior might have bypassed humanity when reaching the lost world. What could sinful, weakened, vacillating humans contribute to this noble enterprise? Dispatch the sinless angelic host, mobilize the faithful creatures from other galaxies, or utilize divine remote controls: the omnipotent, omniscient Creator of the universe had these and thousands of additional options at His disposal. Nevertheless, He included the fellowship of redeemed individuals, the church, as His distributing agency.

Care should be exercised in expressing this truth. The church has the privilege and opportunity of sharing and modeling the gospel before fallen humanity. This sacred responsibility, however, is not proprietary. Humans do not possess *franchise authority*, and they cannot deny access to God. The Holy Spirit is God's primary disseminator of grace with the church, assuming the role of cooperating agency. Rather than denying access to God, the church's work is to expand access. What glorious opportunities! The church works hand in hand with God to evangelize and nurture fallen human beings. Miraculous transformation and reformation occur constantly within this divinely originated and ordained fellowship. Changed lives, restored relationships, guilt-free consciences, and spiritual support form only a portion of the benefits enjoyed through association with God's church.

Opening Activity: Every new day brings renewed hope. Fresh opportunities, coupled with release from the previous day's missteps and mistakes, can make each day a much-anticipated and celebrated event. Share print media articles, newscast downloads, and/or other information about new beginnings from current sources. Discuss why the prospect of something new generates widespread interest and high expectations. Compare the church's role in pointing us to the Lord, who provides release from prior mistakes and a chance to start afresh, forgiven and cleansed.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Scripture proclaims release for captives, release from condemnation, and freedom from dominating propensities. This remains heaven's highest work. Jesus sacrificed everything at Calvary

and then commissioned His representatives (the church), energized through His abiding Spirit, to enlighten a darkened planet with spiritual expectation. That expectation includes forgiveness for every transgression, deliverance from every imaginable temptation, and an increasing intimacy with God through which our lives are continuously transformed and renewed. Believers find meaning through assisting newer believers with encouragement, stimulating the confidence that matures only whenever obstacles have been encountered and overcome successfully.

Bible Commentary

I. Restoring the Fallen (*Review Galatians 6:1 and Matthew 18:15–17 with the class.*)

The church's constant objective is restoration, not condemnation. Many understand the terminology of church discipline punitively. Well-intentioned members, zealous to protect the church's reputation, declare that the erring must be separated in order to avoid contamination. This is a very dangerous approach. The religious leadership of Christ's time was anxious about condemning the adulterous woman in John 8; but were they themselves sinless? Had they no need for forgiveness? Was there no divine condemnation for their hypocrisy? Perhaps the notion of protecting the church's reputation needs reexamination. Compare the work of a hospital. Hospitals exist for the purpose of physical healing and restoration. Does every patient leave the hospital alive? Obviously not. Does the presence of occasional casualties nullify the hospital's mission and purpose? Would your community declare that the local hospital should close because it lost a patient? Should hospitals limit their services to those with common colds and other easily curable diseases in order to enhance their track records and bolster their reputations, turning away trauma patients, cancer victims, and other difficult cases? Rather than dismissing difficult cases, physicians aggressively tackle them, researching new methodologies and techniques to effect healing. Disease is meticulously studied, new therapies are developed, and yesterday's death-sentence diseases become today's miraculous breakthroughs.

Perhaps those who work with spiritual illness should adopt a similar attitude. Thus, discipline would become redemptive rather than punitive, and the church's reputation would rest upon the compassionate and aggressively creative way that believers fight the sin disease. Christians should forcefully battle sin, not sinners. Obviously, some will be lost. But should churches start limiting their ministry to *good citizen types* in order to bolster their *success rate*, their action would

prove that they have forgotten their purpose. Discipline, in Paul's usage, refers to training in righteousness. It is a series of actions or behaviors whose objective is forming a more intimate relationship with God. Far from being punitive, Paul's discipline is restorative and positive. Like fine-tuned triage units, churches become centers for cooperation and accountability in achieving a common goal: the healing of sin-scarred hearts through the life-giving love of God.

Consider This: What should characterize the attitude of those who take up the work of visiting backsliders? How did Jesus approach the fallen? How can Christians safeguard themselves against the temptations from which they would rescue the fallen? What does *sharing one another's burdens* mean?

II. Sowing and Reaping (Review Galatians 6:6–10 with the class.)

In the context of bearing one's burdens or responsibilities, Paul urged the responsibility of supporting the teachers who proclaimed sound doctrine. Using proverbial language familiar to his readers, he urged them to make sound investments because those who expected a bountiful harvest must plant abundantly. While the immediate context regards the material support of teachers, the text enjoys an even wider spiritual application. Spiritual attainments are proportionate with spiritual investments. Those who desire greater spiritual strength must engage in spiritual exercise and avoid spiritual fast food. Little investment equals little advancement. Spiritual profitability arises from investing time with spiritual things.

Consider This: Whenever believers' lives are dominated by secular media—television, radio, Internet, and so on—how can they expect significant spiritual progress? What should dominate the Christian's time should he/she desire intimate fellowship with God? How can Christians invest themselves spiritually in others, especially those who are not yet believers?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Those concerned about their financial future understand the value of investment planning and are willing to expend significant financial resources in order to maximize the return on their investments. Sadly, churches often proceed haphazardly about business that far exceeds finances in importance. Christ's sacrifice was infinitely more valuable than the world's pooled monetary worth; yet, believers randomly, rather than intentionally, approach the work of investing in the lives of nonbelievers. Through

the eyes of the following exercise, seek to cultivate intentionality about spiritual investments that reach the spiritually drifting souls in your community.

Activity: Create a deck of cards from plain 3 x 5 cards (minimum: 10). On each card, list a phrase that expresses one means by which the church can transform society. Focus on methods that your church has employed or those offering the most potential for your community. Have members pick cards at random. They should read the card and express the concept in their own words. Have them evaluate the effectiveness of the concept in terms of the church's work of spiritual transformation using a numerical scale from 0 through 10 (10 being optimal and 0 representing total ineffectiveness). Members should justify their evaluations by offering their reasoning to the entire class, who, in turn, should offer their observations.

Gather the salient points and develop a profile of those characteristics that best prepare the church for its role of spiritual transformation. The list should not be limited to the following assortment of activities and approaches. Use whatever is appropriate and omit the rest. *List:* (1) distributing literature, (2) children's summer camps, (3) parent-sitting the elderly, (4) inviting neighbors to evangelistic meetings, (5) visiting the imprisoned, (6) visiting the homebound, (7) coaching children's baseball, (8) street-corner preaching, (9) door-to-door evangelism, (10) offering health classes, (11) acquiring clothing and basic necessities for the destitute and disadvantaged, (12) forgiving a fellow member for unkind words spoken, (13) mending a child's pants, (14) taking single-parent children picnicking, (15) sharing with neighbors about Sabbath keeping.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: **While planning and committees are valuable tools, the church never transformed a life in a committee meeting (never say *never*, but you understand the point). Merely talking about the gospel's transforming power (as in a Sabbath School discussion) does little to fulfill the gospel commission. Challenge your class to *get outside the walls and into the streets*, making a difference in those ways in which God has uniquely equipped your class.**

Activity: Develop an approach to some community need during the final phase of your Sabbath School that the class commits to carry out. Set actual dates, times, and deadlines for accomplishing various phases of your endeavor.