

## **Biblical Change – 8 – The Church and Change**

*Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*

*2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*

*4 But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. 5 For each one shall bear his own load. (Gal 6:1-5)*

I think everyone of us has met someone who claims to be a Christian but says he is fed up with church, it is full of hypocrites, and he does just fine at home. He has enough access to good sermons online, he meets Christians when it suits him for a bit of encouragement, and he feels good that he is rolling his own at home without the bother and interruption of pesky, problematic people at church. But without fail, such a person reaches a certain place of spiritual maturity and does not progress past that. He might keep growing in head-knowledge, but he is avoiding one of the crucial areas for spiritual growth and health. It is not like someone who say doesn't like carrots and skips them out of his diet. It is like someone who chooses to never use his legs. He will run into serious health problems before he knows it.

Biblical change is not something we can do entirely on our own. Much as you might like to be able to keep the change in your life private, that's not the way you were made, and it is not the way God designed the church. God knew that our sinfulness would not be something that we would each be able to conquer alone. For that reason, among many others, He instituted the church.

The church does many things: it worships corporately, it evangelises the world, it defends and propagates the truth. But very importantly, the church is there to uphold and promote and provoke biblical change in one another.

But it is possible to be just like that man, even though you come to church. The only difference is that instead of a canned, recorded sermon, you want a live one. So you go to a live performance every Sunday, but that's where it ends: no involvement in the Body, no connections with anyone else, no place of service within the church, no use of your gifts in the life of other believers. You pop in, smile a few friendly hellos, get your sermon, and pop out. That approach, while marginally better than the man who avoids church altogether will produce pretty much the same spiritual results.

For as we find out in Galatians 6, we need one another for biblical change. We need the body to grow. Wherever you end up in the world, you have to root yourself in as biblical a local church as you can find, plug in, and begin actively serving, loving, and being used by God in the lives of other believers. Fail to do that, you will stunt your growth.

What part should we play in the biblical change of others? These verses in Galatians 6 provide us with a beautiful balance of when and how to be involved, while making sure you are working on your own heart.

### **I. Restore the Fallen**

*Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*

Verse 1 tells us what believers are to do for one another. This is something you do for someone else, and something someone else does for you. The action of verse 1 is entirely a one another action.

You cannot do this for yourself, and you cannot do it to yourself. It must be done to you, and you must do it to and for someone else.

This verse tells us what we are to do, when we are to do it, who is to do it, and how it is to be done.

What must believers do for one another? The main verb in the verse is **restore**. The idea of the word in the original is to put something back to its place, to repair, to mend what is out of joint and put it back. The idea is to get something back to its former condition. Believers are to do this to other believers, to get them back into their right position, mend them, to pull them out of a place where they ought not to be, and get them back to the place they should be.

That means that restoring is always done with the Word of God. Because only the Word of God can tell Christians where they ought to be. The Bible alone can set the standard to which we must all conform. You can only tell a Christian he or she is out of order, by comparing beliefs and behaviour to the Word of God. Second Timothy 3:16 tells us what that looks like:

*16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (2Ti 3:16)*

Four things there show us how we are restored. Doctrine tells us what God's standard is. Doctrine means teaching: God teaches us what He wants. Reproof is God telling us when we have done wrong – how we have fallen from the standard. Correction is how to put right what has gone wrong, how to fix what is broken. Instruction in righteousness is how to keep things right – the training or disciplines we need to maintain obedience. In other words, God's Word tells us what is right, what is wrong, how to put it right, and how to keep it right. Restoring another Christian is using the Word of God to show him what God expects, what has gone wrong in his life, how to put it right, and how to keep it right.

So that immediately leads us to the when question? When would this have to be done? When do we need to restore someone? The beginning of the verse tells us: “, if a man is overtaken in any trespass” Here is the situation in which the Bible commands (not suggests) you act to restore another Christian: when that Christian is overtaken in any trespass. What does that look like? The word for *overtaken* means to be caught, as if a sin has overwhelmed and tripped up your brother. This is when a sin, and notice Paul says any trespass, has gotten a hold on a Christian to where he can no longer get past it. It is not simply a sin he must confess and forsake, the sin is getting him out of joint, out of place. He is no longer effective, fruitful. He is losing his joy. He is not as faithful to church anymore.

When a sin has become a habit that the Christian feels he cannot beat.

When a sin is so dominating his conscience that he feels defiled and distant from God.

When a sin is capturing so much of his thought life that he feels he is becoming enslaved.

And the important thing is, even though this Christian began fighting the sin at the beginning, he is clearly losing the battle. He is discouraged, feeling defeated, giving in more than he is resisting. He is weary, down, and part disheartened, and part rebellious. And left to himself, he is not coming back to where he needs to be.

How would you know if a brother and sister has been caught or trapped in a sin? Start with the outward. Some very obvious things are the first sign: going missing from fellowship, becoming less frequent, backing away from accountability, showing less interest in spiritual things, becoming more suspicious and hostile towards other members.

These don't always mean someone is trapped in a sin, but they are good enough reasons to lovingly enquire, to find out how he or she is doing.

So who has to do this? Your text very clearly tells you: the man you pay to be your professional preacher is responsible to do this. No. The text is very clear who bears this responsibility: you who are spiritual. The word for you is plural – you all who are spiritual. You spiritual ones. This does not fall on the shoulders of one man. Indeed, no church could ever afford to pay all the professionals it would need to do all the ministry that needs to happen in one week. Biblically, a church pays for trainers: shepherds who coach the rest of the body to minister to one another.

Now before you say, “Phew, I'm glad that's not me,” let me explain the term *spiritual*. Just a few verses earlier in chapter five, Paul was contrasting the Spirit and the flesh.

*16 I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. (Gal 5:16)*

*22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.*

*(Gal 5:22-23)*

*25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Gal 5:25)*

Those who are spiritual are those who choosing to not live according to the flesh. Any and every Christian who is seeking to walk in the Spirit, that is, take in the Word, and dependently obey it for God's glory, is spiritual. Scripture is confident that every Christian can do this:

*14 Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another. (Rom 15:14)*

The only Christian who is excluded here is the Christian who is as a pattern walking in the flesh, and not according to the Spirit. And do you know why he is excluded? Because he is the one in the ditch, needing to be restored!

So how do you go about it? Galatians 6:1 gives you the attitude:

*in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted*

You are to do your restoring with humility and caution. Humility comes at this with a gentle, patient spirit. You know that the other one may get defensive, hostile. You know she may start blaming and bringing up irrelevant things. You know he may start accusing you of being holier-than-thou, and bringing up your faults. So you go, willing to endure that, because you are like a doctor wanting to restore a broken bone. You will not be rough, while understanding they may be rough. You will speak and act gently, while knowing they may not speak back to you gently. That's what you do when you restore. And the most successful restoration attempts occur when you are already involved in that person's life: you have shown care, commitment, friendship and kindness to them. You have earned the right to restore because in other ways, you have shown Christian love. When you barely know another Christian, and you take it upon yourself to do this, it can feel almost violent. How would you feel if a perfect stranger came up to you and said, “Look, you have a problem with pride, and you need to repent!”

This doesn't get us off the hook, by the way if we are not involved with any other Christians. We should be. Scripture assumes that we will be.

And you do it with caution, remembering that you are a sinner, as vulnerable to temptation as this fallen sinner. That not only gives you humility to say, I could have done the same thing, but it gives you the caution to say, I could fall into this myself now. I do not want to so sympathise with the

sinner that I get dragged into the sin. How often has one Christian gone to restore someone who was gripped by bitterness and resentment towards the church, only to find that instead of restoring her, she was dragged into the same pit of gossip and discontent? You find the man supposedly helping a brother out of impurity does not guard his heart and curiosity, and finds himself pulled into the sin that he was supposed to rescue his brother out of.

Someone says, "What if it doesn't work?" Well, there's no Scripture saying you are only allowed one attempt. You can keep doing this. Only if and when it becomes clear that this Christian is stubbornly resisting, then Scripture has another means: church discipline.

But the Bible suggests that if you do it with the motive of restoration, and with the method of humble gentleness, you will be successful. And once the person has been restored, there comes a second step.

## **II. Refresh the Restored**

*2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*

Once a Christian is restored, and indeed, when any other Christian is walking as he or she should be, the Bible commands us to do a continual kind of maintenance. Bear one another's burdens. What does that mean? It means, contrary to what some people will tell you, no one can 'manage'. The word for *burdens* means excessive load, things too heavy to carry. Life, and particularly the Christian life has many, many roles and responsibilities, and there comes a point when the load is more than one person can bear.

Like a weightlifter who is holding the bar, and you keep adding one small weight after another. Eventually, he will simply drop it.

What Scripture says is, be available to other believers to support, encourage, strengthen, assist, serve, help in whatever ways will lighten the burdens of other believers.

What's this got to do with biblical change? When Christians have freshly come out of a sin they were overtaken in, they are unsteady, wobbly, and need extra support. When any Christian is under severe pressure, unsupportable burdens, he becomes unsteady, wobbly, and prone to fall, prone to sin, prone to give up or give in. So what all Christians are supposed to do with one another, whether the person has just been restored, or whether the person is simply going on but carrying burdens, we are to go to one another and bear some of that burden, lighten the load.

Scripture tells us this, because there is a perverse and evil attitude in the human heart that wants to do the opposite. Look at verse 3: *3 For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*

Scripture knows that the temptation of our human hearts is to proudly think we have it together and look to see if or how others will fail.

So you see people treating a Christian, just recently restored, just raw and barely on his feet, and some Christians have this attitude, "Let's see if this will last. Let's see if this is for real. He always goes back to his old ways." And sadly, they are secretly happy when he does. It's a kind of perverse pride that puts people on probation, and watches them from the lofty place of having arrived and being perfect successful Christians, looking down on these ones to see if they are really serious. That's just pride. That's just thinking yourself to be something when you are not.

Or it is like the attitude that sees someone struggling, and sees them battling, and maybe even sees them giving in, and shakes its head, and says, “Yup, I knew it. I knew you didn't have what it takes. I could see it coming. I wondered when it would all cave in. I guess you just are not as committed or serious or sacrificial as I am.”

That is a very ungodly, and very proud attitude. It comes from a very pharisaical heart that is not so much seeking to restore and refresh others, as much as it is trying to use other people's failures to affirm itself. Every time someone else falls, it is a notch in his belt – another one who has fallen while he is still standing. Every time someone collapses, he feels affirmed – I am doing something right, while that person did not.

The godly man is so aware of his own weakness and proneness to fall, that he loves to strengthen and refresh and maintain and encourage wherever and whenever he can. He grieves to see others failing or flagging.

The book of Hebrews says *Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, (Heb 12:12)*

If more Christians did more refreshing of one another, and more maintaining of one another, there would be less people needing to be altogether restored.

This is the simple phone call, email, SMS to say hello, to remember someone else. It is the lunch with another believer. It is the words after church, asking “How are you?” and meaning it, and waiting for the answer. It is the shared Scripture. It is praising, affirming, and thanking another believer for what is strong in his or her life, thanking her for her service, telling someone you are encouraged by his or her example. It is the offer to help in practical ways: transport, financially, medically, babysitting, cleaning, running errands. It is the visit, the gift, the meal, the praying together, the offers to take some of the load this Christian is bearing at church.

These are the ways in which we say, I too am a sinner in need of change, overburdened. Let me lighten yours. We do not say, “I have found the secret key to carrying my burdens alone. Clearly you haven't found it yet!” No, we find all kinds of ways to bear the excess burdens of believers we are in covenant with.

But this restoring and refreshing requires one more ingredient.

### **III. Retain Your Own Spiritual Health**

*4 But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. 5 For each one shall bear his own load. (Gal 6:1-5)*

Here we come across what looks like a contradiction. We're told in verse 2 to bear one another's burdens, but now in verse 5 we're told that each one shall bear his own load. In fact, these two are not contradictions, but perfect, balancing partners, so that if you don't have the one, you won't have the other.

In verse 2 we learn that each of us carries excessive burdens, some of it caused by our sin, some of it not. We need others. We need the Body of Christ to support us, to be in our lives and help us with our burden. But in verse 5 we're told something that is the only way verse 2 could work, each individual is responsible to carry his own share of responsibility. Each Christian is responsible for his or her spiritual health. If you do not carry your own share, not only will you be unable to bear anyone else's burdens, but you will become far more of a burden to others than you were meant to

be. Others will be carrying not the heavy load that was on your back, they will be carrying you, because your spiritual legs refuse to work. And this causes a malfunction in God's church, because people are trying to restore someone who doesn't really want to be restored, he wants to be carried.

This is what happens to Christians who allow self-pity to consume them. They get it into their heads that others should be doing more for them, or helping them more, or strengthening them more. And that may or may not be true. But as they keep meditating on that, they become less active, less responsible, more drawn into apathy, listlessness, laziness, despair. Everything now seems harder, more tiring, more difficult, and it's the fault of those who won't help me.

Now you have a Christian who is not fulfilling his own obligations: He is not meditating on the Word, he is not in prayer, he is not in regular fellowship with other believers, he is not seeking biblical change, he is not being at all spiritually disciplined. That's his own load. No one can carry it for him. But the more he drops his own load, the more problems come into his life, the more sin he picks up, and soon he is a prime case to be restored. Only, he doesn't want to be restored to a faithful walk, he wants to be carried for the rest of his Christian life. Because even if other Christians come and pick him up, his legs collapse under him, because he doesn't want to carry his own load of seeking after God, of praying, of pursuing holiness.

And that's not how it works. If you become a Christian who is inconsolable, permanently discontent, permanently confused, no one can help you. Because the help you want is not the help God is going to give you in His people. The help God will give is help to strengthen you to carry your part of the Christian life. It is not help to live the Christian life for you. It is not help to prop you up when you are supposed to stand on your own two feet.

A healthy church is one where Christians examine their own works, and find adequate rejoicing in their own spiritual progress. But they and their fellow Christians sometimes get overburdened, and need others to lighten the load – the load they are committed to carrying. Occasionally, one is overtaken, and others are there to restore humbly, using the Word, and to refresh and sustain that one once restored.

An unhealthy church is one where few carry their own load, so there are collapsed believers everywhere. The few that are on their feet are trying to pick up these ones who don't want to stand. And in their efforts to do so, they are eventually overburdened and cast down.

Mature Christians carry their own load, and work to lighten the excess burdens of others, knowing that others will do it for them. And when needed they are there to pull another out of that ditch.

Change is a community project. Restoring, refreshing, and retaining are its keys.