

7 July 2019

Galatians 5.25 – 6.16

Bearing one another's burdens

There is a rule of public speaking that is known as the KISS principle

Keep
It
Simple,
Stupid

It's pretty good advice ... except that life is not always simple, is it? And navigating our way around life is not always an easy and straightforward affair. Life can be complicated.

Indeed to suggest that something is simple when it is not, is misleading and indeed can be irresponsible.

Both Boris Johnson and Jeremy Hunt – but perhaps more so Boris Johnson – are suggesting that re-negotiating a new deal for Brexit before 31 October is possible ... and indeed, will be relatively straightforward. The sheer power of their personality, or their experience as an entrepreneur is going to get this sorted apparently!

Who are they kidding? It is downright irresponsible, with so much at stake, for these people to suggest that something that is simple when it is manifestly complicated. It is selling a lie.

But, of course, things can be both simple and complicated at the same time.

Take the game of football.

At its heart the principle of the game of football is very simple.

One team has to pass the ball to one another by kicking the ball and get the ball into the opponent's net. It's a very simple idea.

But it gets complicated because people are involved.

- kicking a ball is relatively simple, but kicking a ball in the right direction every time and at the right pace every time needs skill and practice
- to do it well you have to work well as a team so that there is always someone to pass to, and we always find teamwork challenging – and you have to know what each other’s strengths and weaknesses are
- and then there is the problem that the other team is trying to stop you, and trying to score past you as well

Put it all together this very simple idea becomes incredibly difficult to put into practice ... and only the very best make it look simple.

But if you lose sight of the essential simplicity of the game – it’s all about passing the ball to one another and scoring goals – you can end up making it altogether too complicated and the spirit and enjoyment of the game is lost.

At the end of his letter to the churches in Galatia, I think Paul wants to leave them with a simple message about what it means to live out their lives being faithful to Jesus, while recognising that in practice this can actually be a complicated affair for us.

At heart, it’s simple; but in practice it can get complicated.

He wants to hold to the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid), but not pull the wool over anyone’s eyes about how complicated this can be in reality.

When it comes to living out the Christian life, the simple principle is this:

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.”
(6.2)

For Paul, living the way that Jesus came to initiate (that’s what he means by ‘fulfilling the law of Christ’), can be summed up very simply – ‘Carry each other’s burdens.’

Now actually, he is pretty much repeating here something that he has already said (and that we were looking at last week when we were exploring the theme of true freedom):

“...Serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” (5.13-14)

Or we might translate this as ‘be slaves of one another in love.’

Paul is simply expressing this in different terms here, because who was it who carried the heavy loads in the Roman household? The slaves!

Let's do the heavy lifting for one another. Let's do the support stuff for one another.

I love the illustration that is used in the Good New Bible to accompany this verse.



- There are people here of all ages – this challenge is all-inclusive. It is addressed to the whole community
- All are carrying their own burdens (no one goes through life without burdens to carry)
- each of the burdens is different (different shape/carried on a different part of the body)
- Each one is helping to carry someone else's burden – even though people have their own burdens to carry, they still help to carry the burdens of others. The community is not divided between those who have burdens and need help and those who don't have burdens and help to carry other's
- Everyone is being helped to carry their burdens – being part of this community is as much letting others help you as you helping others
- No one is carrying everyone's burden – there are some we will be in a position to help, but others will be best helped by someone else. This is a community effort. There are some people that we will be closer to than others, and so are best placed to support them. There are some needs that we are better placed to help with because of our gifts and abilities.

We have talked earlier about what this means in practice ... and of course it is that and more besides.

When we raise money for WaterAid every Lent we are bearing the burdens of those who have to carry water long distances everyday not by helping them to

carry the water, but by providing the resources that are needed to provide a fresh water supply so that they no longer have to carry their burdens.

Today is Tax Justice Sunday – focussing on the need for a fair tax system for all, and for all to contribute fairly to the common tax pot.

The tax justice campaign begins from the belief that in a modern democracy paying tax is a fundamentally good thing. It is our way of bearing one another's burdens by everyone contributing fairly to all of the structures and services that we need to keep society running, and to support the weak, the poor and the disadvantaged among us.

And this includes campaigning to ensure that those who can, do contribute fairly to the common pot – including the rich and the multinational corporations who often find ways of avoiding tax by keeping money in tax havens.

But all of this gets complicated because of who we are. We don't find the simple things easy.

Paul actually leads into this piece of simple advice about carrying one another's burdens, having already given one example of what this might mean in practice.

'If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.'

This helping one another out, can be about supporting each other when we make mistakes, trying to keep one another living lives that in keeping with the ways of Christ.

And be clear about this, Paul intends this to be everyone's responsibility. When he says 'you who are spiritual', he is not singling out a few of the particularly spiritual members of the congregation to take on this responsibility. This is an all inclusive 'you.' He is saying 'you, because you are spiritual, because you are walking in step with the Spirit' this is how we should all be looking after one another.

Now I have to admit that I get very nervous here, because I profoundly dislike judgmentalism in all of its forms. I have seen the damage that it does to people and to churches. Not least because we can get very selective in the kinds of sin that we are willing to name and point out in others, and overlook the sins that are closer to home, but are deeply damaging of community.

But actually I think Paul is well aware of all of that. He knows that in practice this is complicated stuff.

It doesn't help us that the chapter break has been put at this point. Always remember when you are reading the bible that the chapter and verse breaks were added many hundreds of years after these documents were written simply as a matter of convenience. And sometimes they end up breaking the flow of passages that belong together.

All of this comes as part of Paul's encouragement in 5.25 to 'keep in step with the Spirit.' He immediately follows that with the warning, 'not to become conceited, provoking and envying each other.'

For Paul the very antithesis, the very opposite of walking in step with the Spirit is living with an arrogant or conceited heart.

He doesn't then suddenly turn to a totally different subject, rather he gives an example of when conceit or arrogance can poison the community of the church.

So Paul says, 'Let's take the example of when someone is caught in a sin. You should restore him. But because you are in step with the Spirit you should do it with humility.' Gently doesn't quite capture the full meaning of the word that is used here. Because you can be arrogant, but choose to be gentle in the way you deal with people. The word certainly means 'gently', but it also contains the meaning 'with humility' ... and humility rules out arrogance.

When Paul says, 'Watch yourself, or you also may be tempted,' I don't think he is suggesting that we might fall into the same sin as the person we are helping. I think he is saying that in trying to help someone who is making a mistake, the biggest danger that we face is the sin of arrogance.

And notice that the aim of this whole process is not to condemn and to alienate someone, but it is to restore them, to hold them in the community.

And so it all gets a bit complicated.

You don't want to stand back and do nothing when someone seems to be messing up their lives ... and yet who are we to speak? Let him without sin cast the first stone ... How do we say something sensitively and with true humility? How do we stop ourselves from falling into that self-satisfied self-righteousness that is contrary to the ways of Jesus?

And actually, there is a danger that pride and arrogance will always undermine all of our attempts to carry one another's burdens. Because it can all become very condescending.

All of this carrying of one another's burdens has to be done with humility – 'If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself,' says Paul (6.3).

And we are back again to this outlook of being slaves of one another – always look up to those we are seeking to help, never looking down on them.

It's simple ... but when the rubber hits the road, knowing what we are like, this carrying of one another's burdens actually becomes rather complicated and challenging.

But then Paul seems to make things even more complicated.

He has told us to watch out for conceit. He has told us to carry one another's burdens.

But then in v 4 he tells us that we can take pride in ourselves and then in v 5 that each one of us should carry our own load.

So what's going on here?

How do we match these things up?

Let's start with the second part of this first – carrying our own load.

What Paul wants to make clear is that although we are called to carry one another's burdens, there is a limit to what we can do for someone else, and what someone else can do for us.

And it's summed up in the proverb, 'You can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.'

There are certain decisions in life that only I can make for myself ... no one else can make those decisions for me.

However much you may want to help someone else, in the end there are some things that they will have to do for themselves. If someone is caught up in an addiction, you can offer them support and help, but in the end they will have to

make those decisions that are necessary for them to be able to live with their addiction and to prevent their addiction from controlling their life.

So Paul begins v 4 with the words, 'Each one should test his own actions.'

This load that we have to carry ourselves is the invitation to make life-choices –

- to live for self or for others
- to carry one another's burdens or to think oneself too important or too meaningless for that
- to live in step with the Spirit of God or in step with the spirit of the times
- to live for God or for self

And there is a pride that we can take in making these decisions ... but a pride that has more to do with self-respect and a sense of dignity than with the conceit of arrogance. Because this pride that Paul talks of here is not a pride that entails comparing yourself with anyone else, or putting yourself over anyone else. It is that self-respect in being fully yourself before God. A pride that can walk hand in hand with an attitude of humility and a spirit of service.

And that is ultimately because it is a pride that comes not as achievement, but as gift from God.

In verse 14 Paul makes this clear:

'May I never boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.'

Living as followers of Jesus in the world – it is simple –

'Carry each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.'

But at the same time it can get complicated, because life is complicated, and we are complicated ... and it will take a lifetime and more for us to sort out what it means for us.

But however complicated we find it to put into action, never lose the simplicity

–

'Carry each other's burdens.'