

## **Galatians 6:1-6**

1Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. 5For each will have to bear his own load. 6Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.

## **Luke 10:1-11**

1After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. 2And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. 3Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. 4Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. 5Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!' 6And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you. 7And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house. 8Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. 9Heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' 10But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, 11'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless, know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.'

Lately, I've been hearing a lot about love. I am freshly back from a week at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary where I am a Doctor of Ministry student. I spent a week with about 34 of my peers. All have theological degrees, of course, and almost all are currently serving as pastors or chaplains. Many of them were Presbyterian, though some other denominations were represented.

Woven through our time there, especially in light of current events that developed as our time together went on, was a call and a push for love. If only people were more loving. If only the church was more loving. If only pastors were more loving. In fact, a great number of my colleagues now wear t-shirts which talk about just how loving they are. I apparently had missed this memo and found myself wearing a boring t-shirt from my Greek language class. Clearly, I am one of the pastors that is not loving enough, because my t-shirt does not say so.

I believe that I serve a God of abundant, limitless love. I believe my primary calling is to love God and to love God's people, and to help them better love one another. Yet within my group we had very different ideas of what it meant to love God's people.

I think modern America has much the same question. I'm not sure we all understand love the same way. There seems to be an understanding in today's society that love means you want someone to be happy, and anything that makes them happy must be good. Love has become synonymous with radical acceptance.

This modern idea of love, however, is very different than what Scripture teaches us. Scripture shows us a God that loves us so much God would die for us, but that same God never condones our sins and never compromises on what is right and good and holy. Galatians tells us that if anyone commits a transgression, we, as that person's brothers and sisters in Christ, should gently and lovingly seek that person's restoration. Our spiritual state, our relationship with God, is more important than fleeting happiness. To ignore a transgression when someone might be gently restored and guided into a deeper relationship with God is not love. Love as God teaches us is not always easy, or comfortable. Sometimes, it must even correct.

In the book *What's So Amazing About Grace* by Phillip Yancy, there is a story of a young man named Daniel, who meets Yancy for a meal. Daniel explained that he wanted to leave his wife and three kids for another young woman he had met. He used all the excuses you can imagine, he didn't feel in love, he adored this new interest so much, and etc. Finally, he got to the purpose of the meeting. He wanted to ask Yancy if God would forgive him for leaving his family for his affair partner. Yancy took a long drink of coffee to think. Actually, three cups worth of

coffee. By the way, this is why we pastors like to meet you for coffee, so that if you ask us a really hard question we can hide behind our coffee. So Yancy takes a long, long, long swig of his coffee and I'm guessing probably ran out, so he had no choice but to answer the question. He responded yes, of course; God forgives all who repent of their sins but would the young man want it after he had committed his sin?

Sin is not without consequences, even now. Yes, we are forgiven and we are clean, but sin harms our soul and our relationship with God, even with the forgiveness we are given by God, and God's quickness to welcome us back with open arms. Would this young man still want forgiveness after he committed such a willful act? Imagine, now that Yancy who clearly loved this young man, had not spoken the truth with love, but had instead said of course God would forgive him full stop, or maybe even encouraged him to leave his wife if he was unhappy. Yancy would have been encouraging Daniel to harm his own soul and his relationship with God. This is not love as the writer of Galatians knows it.

Yancy spoke with love, love which wants not happiness, but the highest good for the other person, even if that can be uncomfortable at times. And if you're wondering, the young man did indeed break up his marriage for his affair partner. He found his faith no longer mattered to him afterwards and abandoned it. I like to think God brought back the lost sheep eventually, but I don't know. Galatians tells us what many parents know instinctively. Love cannot seek to sacrifice one's highest good for happiness. It would give my children a great deal of happiness to eat sour gummies and chocolate for breakfast, but I don't allow them to, because their momentary happiness is not worth sacrificing the higher good of their health and wellbeing, and because I am not about to deal with that sugar crash.

Now, please do not think I want you to start going around and telling each what you're doing wrong. That's not at all what I think Paul wanted the church at Galatia to do. Instead, I think he was encouraging them to address brothers and sisters with love who were in serious trouble, the ones about to make a tragic mistake, or the ones suffering from a terrible addiction, or the ones who had a serious theological misunderstanding. I think he wanted those people restored and cared for in love. I don't think he would've tolerated the people running about yelling at each other over every curse word, especially since Paul said a few

choice words himself. If we start looking for sawdust, we're bound to start whacking each other with planks.

I do think, however, the most loving thing we can do is try to help those in obvious distress or error. But Paul's instructions do not end there. He instructs us to keep watch over ourselves lest we too be tempted. This is the other danger of a love that seeks only happiness and the highest good; soon we may find ourselves forsaking truth and justifying sin in the name of love.

We hear a lot about how hateful Christians are these days, and certainly there are a few that are. I will never forget when a notorious group picketed a local church with horrible signs and slogans. But for the most part, I think the idea that Christians are hateful is a fundamental misunderstanding of love.

God calls us to a certain way of life, the life of discipleship to Jesus Christ. We might disagree on some of the details of that walk, but most of the larger things are fairly clear. It is not hateful to hold these beliefs, or to trust that they are God's best for our lives. God loved us enough to die for us, but God's love did not stop even there. God revealed some of God's will for our lives, and what is good for us and what will cause us harm. Sin harms us, even though we are forgiven. When we condone sin out of love, we are harming that person, and ourselves.

Some people will twist themselves into pretzels trying to make their beliefs and their love fit together. Others will begin chipping away at either their love or at their beliefs until one gives away enough to justify the other. I knew a pastor once who tended to enrage their leaders with outrageous sermons. In exasperation one leader asked, is there anything Jesus said that you agree with? Very little, the pastor responded. This pastor could not hold both their faith and their understanding of love together, and so one had to go. Unfortunately, it was Scripture which was chiseled out and cast aside.

But we were never meant for all this. God calls us to discipleship and to love, but a love that is unlike the world's understanding of love. We are called to love with a heart from God, a heart that would lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters, but would never, ever compromise on the true or make apologies for it.

When Jesus sent out the seventy-two, He instructed them to go and preach the Gospel. They were to pray and heal and speak peace and of the Kingdom of God, and most of all to love God's people. But if the people rejected them, they were

not to water down the message, or to condone or accept sinful and harmful behavior, they were not to begin striking passages from Scripture to fit the favored signs of the people. They were called to love as God loves, desiring for the highest good of that person, not radical acceptance of self-destructive behaviors. Jesus tells them that if they are rejected, they are to leave behind what is not for them, leave behind the compromises and the justifications, wipe even the dust from your feet, because that is not for you, you have loved without compromise, seeking the highest good for these people, and declaring the truth whether the people accepted it or not.

Love as the world understands it seeks only happiness. We called to seek so much more, the restoration of one's soul and relationship with the living God. If you are seeking the highest good for your neighbor, seeking to stand for the truth you have received through Jesus Christ, holding your faith and your principles without compromise, trusting in the God whose way is perfect, let no one tell you that this is not love. This is how you love truly, with the heart of God, not with the heart of the world. May we all learn to love truly and boldly, not as the world does, but as Christ does, sharing the Gospel calling our neighbors to a life of discipleship as we walk ever closer with our Lord.

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