

Set Free to Be Free

Part 11 – There But for the Grace of God

Galatians 5:26-6:5

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 28, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

¹My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.

²Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵For all must carry their own loads. (Galatians 5:26-6:5, NRSV)

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Simeon the Stylite was a Christian who lived in the 5th century A.D. He was one of the Desert Fathers, a collection of Christian hermits and monks who lived in those days. Around the year 423 Simeon constructed a short pillar on the edge of the Syrian desert, climbed to the top of that pillar, and lived there for the next six years. Out of curiosity, many people came to visit Simeon, wondering if he was out of his mind or if, instead, he had found some secret to the spiritual life. Simeon explained to them that he was simply a Christian who wanted to commune with God in solitude, free from all worldly distractions. This was his way of consecrating his life to God. In fact, he eventually built a column sixty feet high and three feet in diameter, with a crossbar to keep him from falling off when he slept, and remained up there close to God until his death thirty years later!¹

In reflecting on Simeon's example of how a person can truly pursue the spiritual life, one contemporary writer asked, "Is there child-care in the desert?" If you're married with children, it's not feasible to go and spend your life sitting on a pole in the wilderness!

Which all raises this question: What does the spiritual life look like? If you are somebody who is truly walking with God, in step with the Spirit as Paul talks about earlier in Galatians, what does your life look like? Is it

a matter of private devotion, the more time you spend alone in scripture and prayer the closer to God you are? Maybe it's public worship? Those who demonstrate on Sunday mornings a passion in their praise are closest to God. Or maybe the most spiritual among us are those who are most devoted to serving in the church, or those who have had some miraculous healing or deliverance in life? What does the life in step with the Spirit actually look like?

It's the question that Paul has placed before us as he moves towards the conclusion of his letter to the Galatians. For most of the letter he has hammered home the truth that because of our sin we cannot ever merit favor or reward from God. Nevertheless, God, through Christ, has sacrificed everything so that by grace we can receive God's favor, even adoption as his beloved sons and daughters. This is the gospel, and if we receive it in faith the very Spirit of God comes to dwell within us, transforming our lives into the shape of Jesus' life. Then, as Paul says in chapter 5, the Spirit ultimately produces fruit in our lives, qualities like joy, peace, patience, gentleness and, above all, love.

As these qualities in us increase, others will decrease. Specifically, Paul states in vs. 26, "**Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.**" Remember how Jesus taught that the main way the world will be able to identify his followers is by the way they treat one another. Paul's saying the same thing here. When a person is truly Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, it will begin to show in the way they treat others in the church. Specifically, such a person will not be filled with conceit when they relate to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

The original Greek word for conceit here literally means "vain-glorious" or "empty of honor," which gets at true root of conceit, which is always deep insecurity. Think about it, the most conceited person you know is also the most insecure person you know. Right? If you are empty of honor, convinced that you are not somebody who is esteemed, favored, even loved, you will become desperate to fill that emptiness. In fact, your number one priority in life will be to prove yourself to others, to God, and even to yourself. This conceit, this emptiness of honor, this desperation to prove oneself is the natural state of the human heart

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians* (P&R Publishing, 2005), 242.

absent the gospel, absent the assurance that because of Christ we are, by grace alone, highly favored and truly loved.²

Right here in Galatians Paul identifies the fruit of such conceit. There are two kinds Paul says. When you are empty of honor you will either constantly compete with others or you will constantly envy others. Different fruit from the same root. On the one hand, some conceited people feel superior to others and so they are always challenging others because they believe they can come out on top and thus end up feeling better about themselves, more favored, more honored. On the other hand, some conceited people, because they are also honor-starved, feel inferior and so they envy others, either wanting what it is others have or wishing others didn't have it in the first place. As commentator Tim Keller puts it, "Both the superior and the inferior person are self-absorbed. In both cases, you are focusing heavily on how the other person makes you look and feel instead of how you make him or her look or feel."³

Is any of this hitting close to home for anybody? It does for me. All of us struggle with conceit because all of us, as Paul has reminded us over and over again in this letter, have strived to gain favor and honor by our own merit and effort and the pursuit has been ultimately in vain. So in spite of our efforts, we find ourselves empty of honor, thirsty in our hearts to find the favor and love we know we were made for. In one way or another, therefore, even those of us in the church can end up striving to quench that thirst for honor and favor from either a place of superiority or inferiority, sometimes even bouncing back and forth between the two.

Keller poses some excellent questions to help us think about which is our tendency. As I read these questions, don't apply them to your neighbor, as tempting as that is to do. Instead, hold them up as a mirror to yourself and let them reveal how conceit exists in your life. To find out if your conceit naturally leads towards competing or envying, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I have a tendency to "blow up" or do I tend to "clam up?"
- Do I tend to pick arguments with people or do I completely avoid confrontation?
- Do I tend to get very down on certain individuals or groups or am I more often

embarrassed and intimidated around certain classes or kinds of people?

- When criticized, do I get very angry and very judgmental – and simply attack right back? Or do I get very discouraged and very defensive – make lots of excuses, or give right in?
- Do I often think, "I would never, ever do what this person has done", or do I often look at people and say, "I could never, ever accomplish what this person does"?⁴

Think of all the areas of our lives where conceit, where our emptiness of honor, enslaves us and leads us either to compete or envy. In our bodies, the way we look. In our homes, or cars, or other possessions. In our careers, the kind of work we do or the level of our advancement. In the success of our children or grandchildren. In our performance in the classroom or on the playing field. Even in the practice of our faith. All the time we are tempted to look sideways at one another from a place of superiority or inferiority, competing or envying. But either way it's the same root. We have become conceited, self-focused, honor-starved, because we have forgotten, or we have never come to know in the first place, the favor and honor that God has bestowed on us by grace through his Son, Jesus Christ.

This is why the gospel changes everything! If you are a basketball player and Michael Jordan watches you play and afterwards tells you that you are an incredible athlete on the court, one of the best he's ever seen, what do you then care what the other kids on the playground say about your game? If you are a physicist and somehow Albert Einstein, after reviewing your work, declares that you one of the most brilliant scientific minds alive today, what does it matter what grade your high school science teacher gave you?

In an infinitely greater sense, if the holy and righteous creator of the universe has declared that, by grace, you are the apple of his divine eye, beloved in his sight just as you are, favored as a daughter or son to the same extent that Christ himself is favored, how is it that conceited competition or envy has any place in your life? Instead of competition there ought to be humility – how is it that one like me could be given such a place of honor? And instead of envy there ought to be boldness – I don't need to worry what others think of me because I can simply live in the freedom of the favor of the only one whose opinion of me really matters! This, again, is the true mark of the Spirit-filled life, one who lives in relation to others with a beautiful

² Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 160.

³ Keller, 160.

⁴ Keller, 161-162.

combination of humility and boldness that is rooted in the gracious favor of God through Christ.

Now, to flesh this out, Paul begins chapter 6 of Galatians with two concrete examples of what this looks like in the everyday life of church. First he writes, **“My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”**

One of the ways we see evidence of a humility and boldness of a Spirit-filled life is in the way we relate to the sin of others in the church.

To be clear, Paul isn't talking here about all sin. The word “detected” is a word that has the sense of one who has been overtaken by sin. The verb is in the passive voice. In other words, this isn't the person who is willfully and defiantly thumbing their nose at God and God's ways. Rather, this is the person in the church who has genuinely set out to follow Christ but along the way some obstacle or challenge has tripped them up, even overtaken them and held them captive. This is the man whose nagging habit or addiction has finally gotten the better of him. This is the woman who has been betrayed by a friend and now refuses to forgive and finds herself caught in a place of bitter resentment. This is sin that ensnares when temptation or discouragement or doubt finally overwhelms.

So how do you respond when you see another brother or sister in the church who is caught up by sin in this way? Think about it. Imagine that you learn that somebody you know well in the church has allowed themselves to be overcome by some sinful behavior or attitude that is doing damage to their relationship with God, with others, even with themselves? How do you respond?

If you are a person of conceit, a person who is empty of honor, a person who does not know the saving grace of God in Christ that leads to a Spirit-filled life, you will respond either from the superior place of a competitor or from the inferior place of an envier. Either way, your response will be selfish at its core. As a superior person you will look down at that brother or sister, eagerly pointing out their faults - in your mind, to others, or even to their face - as a way of making yourself feel better. As an inferior person you will likely say nothing at all, even to them, afraid that the approval you crave from them to make you feel more honored will evaporate if you do confront them.

Here, however, is the response of the Spirit-filled person to the brother or sister caught in sin. In Paul's words, such a person will **“restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”** The Greek word here for

gentleness was a word used in the ancient world to describe what a person needed to have a dislocated bone set back in place. Have any of you ever had to have a dislocated shoulder, knee or finger set back into place. Was that fun? Not at all! But hopefully you had somebody, ideally somebody with medical training, who did so in a spirit of gentleness.

In terms of gently restoring a brother or sister caught in sin we must be bold. That means first doing the obvious, acknowledging that there is a problem. That bone in your shoulder is not in the right place! It needs to be corrected. But while it's easy to point out a dislocated bone, it's harder for most of us to point out a heart, or attitude, or behavior that is out of joint. Let me ask you, are bold enough to gently point out the sin you recognize in others in the church, to say to another, “You are not honoring your wife as you need to honor her”, or “It's clear to me that you are letting money get too tight a grip on your life”, or “The way you are always gossiping about people is not healthy for anybody”? Saying these things, even to close friends in the church, is not easy. It takes boldness, a boldness that says, “I care about you even more than I care about our friendship and so if speaking the truth will cost me this friendship but be a help to you in the end then I'm willing to make that sacrifice.”

Do you have anybody in the church who is honor-filled enough, assured enough in their place as a beloved child of God, that they are willing to boldly speak truth to you about the sin in your life? We all desperately need to be this for one another.

But along with boldness must come humility. Paul warns in the same verse, **“Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.”** Part of his warning here certainly has to do making sure we don't end up being ensnared by the same sin in the life of the person we are trying to restore. If you have a past of abusing alcohol it's probably part of your calling to try to help other alcoholics, but probably not by hanging out in bars with them.

But part of Paul's warning is also about guarding against conceit, because how easy it is to begin to feel self-righteous when you are trying to help correct somebody else's sin? It is so easy to trick yourself into thinking that someone like yourself could never get caught in the same way. But you're wrong, of course. And if you think this way you will end up causing more destruction than restoration. Nobody is open to correction from somebody who approaches with a self-righteous attitude. It's why Jesus warned that we ought to always make sure we remove the big old plank from our eye before we set out to help our neighbor

remove the speck from her eye.⁵ My sinful failures and tendencies may be different from yours, but they are just as damaging and just as contrary to God's desires. So as I help you out of your sin I must do so both with the boldness *and* humility that are rooted in a Spirit-filled life.

A second concrete example Paul gives of how the Spirit-filled person is led to relate with humility and boldness to others in the church comes in verse 2: **“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”** As a reminder, the law of Christ is simply that we love others as we have first been loved by Christ, and love in the same way as Christ loved us, willing to give of ourselves completely for the sake of others.⁶ Of course, only the person freed from the glory-empty place of conceit is free enough to love like this. And one way that happens is through the bearing of the burdens of others.

By the way, the word “burden” here refers to an extraordinarily heavy load. This isn’t a backpack so loaded down that it’s difficult to carry but is instead the weight of cargo being loaded on to a freighter. In other words, Paul has in mind people in the church who are weighed down by some crushing burden that they cannot possibly carry on their own – the devastating grief over the tragic loss of a loved one, a financial hole so deep that the light of day has been completely extinguished by darkness, an abusive relationship out of which there seems no possible escape. There are people sitting in this room today who are living under these sorts of crushing burdens. It took every ounce of willpower, along with a generous helping of God’s grace, just to get you here this morning. Many others like you didn’t make it.

When a church is inhabited by Spirit-filled people, those people will constantly be looking out to see how they can help shoulder the weight of one another’s burdens. And notice that Paul’s language suggests that this is a mandate for us all. One of the things I love about this congregation is that you understand that bearing burdens is not the job a few professional people-helpers or super-saints but the job of every Christian.⁷

In his book *Love One Another*, Jerry Sittser tells the story of Marie, a mother of eight, who at one point early in life lost her husband to alcoholism and was left to try and raise her young children on a very small income. It was a difficult life but Marie’s faith, and her

community around her, helped her make it day by day. Then she met Sally, a friend of one of her daughters, who was unmarried, alone, and searching for somebody to help her through an unwanted pregnancy. Sally eventually decided that she wanted to keep the baby but had no idea of how she could move forward in life. It was a crushing burden that left Sally in desperate tears as she poured out her story to Marie.

Well, moved by the Spirit, Marie had an idea. She invited Sally to move into her house, crowded as it already was, until she could get back on her feet. For the next four years that’s exactly what she did. Marie redecorated a room for Sally and her expected baby, helped her apply for Medicaid, arranged for her to see a Christian counselor, and helped her find a job. She was Sally’s coach during the delivery and often cared for the baby when Sally was at work. When the time was right she invited Sally to become a part of her church, which she did, eventually even becoming a Sunday school teacher and volunteering in a crisis pregnancy center. In fact, it was in the church where Sally was introduced to a new set of friends, one of whom eventually became her husband.⁸

Now granted, not all stories like this have such happy endings and not all examples of bearing burdens require such radical commitment. Still, in Marie’s sacrifice we see what Spirit-led burden bearing in the church looks like. For one, it always involves coming close to the person bearing the burden. You can’t help somebody shoulder the weight of a burden from a distance. You have to stand next to them, right in the midst of the mess of their life, and get to know the burden well enough so that you can get up under it with them to share the load together. This takes boldness, of course, a willingness to give of ourselves freely because we believe that the Spirit which dwells within us is the generous provider of infinite resources and strength.

But burden-bearing is never a solo job. There are, of course, limits to the weight you can put on your own shoulders and even times when the burdens you are carrying don’t enable you to help shoulder those of others. Even Marie had help from lots of other people – her whole church, in fact – as she came alongside Sally. It’s also a two way street, which is what I love about Marie’s example. There was a time in her life when she found herself under a crushing burden, having lost her husband to then face raising so many kids on so little money. I can only assume that there were others in her life at the time, probably from her church, who helped bear her burdens in the same way she and others eventually helped bear Sally’s burden. This is true for

⁵ See Matthew 7:1-5.

⁶ I John 4:7-21 summarizes this beautifully.

⁷ I’m stealing language here from Gerald Sittser, *Love One Another*, (InterVarsity Press, 2008), 137.

⁸ Sittser, 130-131.

all of us. Sometimes you're on the stretcher and sometimes you're the one helping to carry the stretcher which bears another.

I think it's what Paul is getting at when he states, "**For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.**" You see, humility, along with boldness, is also required as we bear one another's burdens, for the moment you imagine that you are too good, too smart, too righteous, too young, too strong, too whatever to someday find yourself under a similar burden is the very moment you have deceived yourself. It was allegedly the 16th century English protestant reformer John Bradford who first said, after watching a group of prisoners being led to their execution, "There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford."

You know, it wouldn't be a bad idea for each of us to make this our prayer every time we come across a brother or sister crushed under a heavy burden or overwhelmed by a sinful attitude or behavior – "There but for the grace of God go I." Our dangerous tendency will always be toward conceit because there is something in us which is always forgetting, or rejecting as the case may be, the grace of God in favor of a striving to earn our own merit. But it never works and always leaves us honor-starved, ensuring that we will either compete with others or envy others in an endless and vain effort to make ourselves worthy.

So here is my prayer for the church, for *this church, for me!* It's as heartfelt a prayer as I will ever have for us all and it has nothing to do with us building towers out in the desert to show our true devotion. First, I pray that by God's grace we would believe the gospel, genuinely trusting in our hearts that our sin is forgiven and our eternal favor has already been won solely by the sacrifice of Christ. Second, I pray that by God's grace we would then no longer be honor-starved but honor-satisfied as beloved sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, and that the Spirit in our lives would then lead us, with humility and boldness both, to do whatever we can to make sure no brother or sister in the church remains stuck and unassisted in their sin and also that no brother or sister has to carry any heavy load on their own.

That is my prayer. I urge you to make it yours as well.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the text from Galatians 5:26-6:5 again. What immediately stands out to you here?
2. What do you think about the idea that conceit is really an emptiness of honor or glory, that the most self-centered person in the room is really the most insecure person in the room? Have you seen this in your own life?
3. Thinking back to the questions in the sermon about conceit, does your conceit tend to show up more in how you compete with others or how you envy with others? What does this teach you about yourself?
4. How does the gospel, the good news that it is by *grace alone* that we find favor and honor before God, deal with our conceit? How has it dealt with your conceit?
5. Do you know people in the church who would be willing to boldly but humbly confront you about some sinful behavior or attitude in your life? Are you somebody who is willing to do that for others?
6. When is a time when somebody (or group of people) came along side you and helped you carry a burden you simply could not carry on your own?
7. What opportunity has God given you right now to come alongside somebody else and help carry his/her burden?
8. "There but for the grace of God go I." How might this prayer, prayed regularly, transform our hearts and lives?

Table to Table Question *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why do we always compare ourselves to other people, ending up feeling either better or worse about ourselves when we do? Why does God want us to stop doing this?