

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 9, 2008**

ONE ANOTHER

Galatians 6:1-10

INTRODUCTION

The Session of Faith, as I mentioned two Sundays ago, recently identified three priorities for the ministry of our church in 2009. Let me restate them this morning, in case you missed it or, like me, are having trouble with your memory. Here they are: In addition to our ongoing commitment to support the establishment of Redeemer as a full-fledged “particular church” in the EPC, ministering to people in the Lorton and Woodbridge communities in the name of Christ, and in addition to our desire to develop effective ministries to children and their families, the elders have affirmed these three priorities for our life and ministry together:

1. To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to live an evangelistic life.
2. To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to minister to and disciple one another.
3. To care for the poor and hurting in the church and the world.

Two weeks ago, we began to think together about what it means to live an evangelistic life. I said that an evangelistic life flows out of an evangelistic heart, and we focused on three qualities of an evangelistic heart:

- A heart for God: A heart that is passionately and joyfully committed to the work of God, the will of God, the Word of God and the glory of God.
- A heart for people: A heart of compassion (just like the heart of Jesus) for people who matter so much to God that He sent His Son into the world to die for us. A heart that is devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12:10).
- A heart for prayer: A heart that sees prayer as the means by which we connect ourselves to the engine of God’s power. A heart that intentionally and continually seeks the face of God and the outworking of His gracious plan for the salvation of sinners like us.

These are the qualities of an evangelistic heart. To live an evangelistic life, we must not keep the evangel – the message of the gospel – to ourselves, or try to absolve ourselves of the calling to share it with the people God has placed in our lives. As the young monk said in the story two weeks ago, those who know (that’s us!) are to tell those who don’t.

We want to see every person who is part of the family of Faith and Redeemer both equipped with the tools and inspired with a holy passion to live an evangelistic life, to the praise and glory of God.

Today I invite you to think with me about the second of these three priorities: To equip and inspire every member to minister to and disciple one another. We'll focus specifically this morning on our mission as members of God's family to minister to one another.

Let's turn together to God's Word, as we read today from Galatians 6:1-10.

WHAT ALL OF US NEED

Do you know who Maureen McCormick is? Some of you are way too young to have known her when she was America's teenage heartthrob in her role as Marcia Brady on the TV show "The Brady Bunch." She has recently written a book in which she reveals the stark contrast between the cheery character she played on TV and the much darker reality of her life off-screen.

Writing in Newsweek magazine this week, she said:

"For most of my life people have expected me to be perfect. That's because I played the role of Marcia Brady from 1969 to 1974. She was perky, well-balanced and, above all, always happy. It was an image I portrayed on screen from the age of 12 until I turned 17, but one I would battle the rest of my life.

"To start with," she writes, "my family was not the Brady Bunch." In the early '70s, her older brother was battling a heroin addiction and her father was involved in an extramarital affair, both of which devastated her family. She also had a younger brother with special needs, which proved to be another challenge. There were other family problems, too, which contributed to feelings of fear and depression.

"Things only got worse when 'The Brady Bunch' stopped filming in 1974." The next year, Maureen got involved with a boyfriend who introduced her to cocaine, and she got hooked. "I was addicted for the next five years," she says, "and would do anything to get my hands on the drug." And, the truth is, she did almost anything you can think of to get it.

Everywhere she went, people continued to identify her by the role she had played as a teen. People saw her as Marcia Brady, not for who she really was. In the early '80s, an actor she worked with on a TV series called "The Brady Brides" invited her to go to church with him. "It was an amazing thing for me," she says. "I totally reconnected with God." It was there (at church) that she met her husband. She says: "I started praying that if God was really there, He would come into my life, because I felt totally dead spiritually. It was the start of me getting clean."

Though she received support and guidance from the church, Maureen continued to struggle with bouts of anger and depression. With the aid of medication for depression, she has now come to a place of peace and joy in her life. "I've been sober for 27 years," she says, "and I'm going on 24 years of marriage with the most wonderful man in the

entire world. For the first time in my life, I feel like it's OK to be imperfect and it's OK to tell my story... This is what life is all about: sharing our stories and mistakes, learning from each other and helping each other to get better."

What Maureen McCormick needed – and still needs – are caring Christian friends to rally around her, to come alongside her, to love and accept her just as she is (not for her image as Marcia Brady), to point her to Jesus, to give her support and encouragement in difficult times, and to help her get better. Which is what we all need, isn't it, when our burden is heavy or our circumstances overwhelm us.

Did you know that in the New Testament there are more than 50 "one another" or "each other" statements? We are instructed to honor one another above ourselves (Romans 12:10), to live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16; 1 Peter 3:8), to accept one another just as Christ accepted us (Romans 15:7), to be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32), to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21), to forgive one another (Colossians 3:13), to teach and admonish one another with the teaching of God's Word (Colossians 3:16), to encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13 and 10:25), to bear with each other (Colossians 3:13), to offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9), to confess our sins to each other and to pray for each other (James 5:16), to greet one another with a "holy kiss" (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; cf. 1 Peter 5:14), and the list goes on. Above all, we are to love one another, which is the new commandment Jesus gave His disciples the night before His death on the cross for us. The Bible says we are to serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13), bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2), love one another deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22), and to spur one another on to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

There are more than 50 of them in the New Testament! That should be a clue to us that our relationships with one another in the church and with family members, neighbors, friends, and co-workers outside the church are pretty important to our Heavenly Father.

As we consider our calling to minister to one another in the body of Christ, I want to focus on this "each other" saying in Galatians 6:2:

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

Another translation reads:

Bear one another's burdens...

Let's consider four basic questions to help us better understand what this means.

1. WHOSE BURDENS ARE WE TO CARRY?

First, whose burdens are we to carry? There are actually two different but complementary answers given in our text.

The first answer, of course, is in verse 2. We are to carry each other's burdens. The “each other” or “one another” in this verse refers specifically to our Christian brothers and sisters, the members of our spiritual family through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The basic truth behind this mandate is that we all have burdens of one kind or another, and God doesn't intend for us to have to carry them alone (though some people try to, because they have believed the lie that it is a sign of weakness to admit that you have a problem and need help). You don't have to be perfect. It's OK to be imperfect, as Maureen McCormick is learning. Everybody has burdens. We don't all have the same burden(s), but everybody's got one. So, when Paul tells us to carry each other's burdens, the “each other” he is talking about includes the person sitting in front of you and the person sitting behind you. It includes the person sitting beside you. It includes the person to your right and the person to your left. And it includes the person who may not be here this morning. It includes any member of Christ's church, any follower of Christ who has a need or a problem. It includes any member of the fellowship of believers who is going through a hard time. Anyone.

It especially includes those who are most vulnerable among us. Remember what it says in James 1:27 about the essence of true religion? James says:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this:
To look after orphans and widows in their distress
and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

The ones whose burdens we are to help carry has to include children deprived of their parents and those who have lost their spouse.

It includes those who are struggling financially in the economic turmoil of these days. It includes those who have lost a job, or fear their job may be eliminated. It includes those who are dealing with major health problems, and those who lovingly, sacrificially care for them. It includes those who are concerned for the well-being of their aging parents. It includes those who daily face the challenges of a special needs child. It includes those who are pulled down by disappointments in life.

Whose burdens are we to help carry? Each other's. Yours and mine.

The second answer to the question is found in verse 10. There, after urging us in verse 9 not to grow weary in doing good, Paul says:

As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people,
but especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

It starts here. It begins with our sisters and brothers in Christ in the church family. But it doesn't end here. We are to do good to all people – to everybody – as God gives us the opportunity. But we are to be especially attentive and responsive to the needs and burdens of one another in the body of Christ.

Why? Because we belong to each other. In Romans 12:5, Paul says:

In Christ we who are many form one body,
and each member belongs to all the others.

I belong to you. You belong to me. We belong to each other. So it makes sense that we should be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12:10).

But our love for one another and our service to one another cannot be to the exclusion of people outside the family of believers who have burdens too heavy to carry alone. By coming alongside and incarnating the love of Christ, we may be used by God to impact their lives spiritually.

So, while we are to give preference to fellow believers because “we’re family,” we must not ignore the needs and burdens of “our neighbors,” whoever they are. As God gives us opportunity – and He may give us increasing opportunities in today’s economic climate – we are to do good and to help carry the burdens of others, both inside the body of Christ and out.

2. WHAT KINDS OF BURDENS ARE WE TO CARRY?

The simple answer to the second question is: Whatever kinds of burdens or problems people are experiencing.

Maybe it is grief over the loss of a loved one.

It may be a relationship that has brought hurt and disappointment.

It may be the heartache that results from a loved one’s bad choices.

It may be a health crisis, or a financial crisis, or a family crisis.

It may be an addiction of some kind that has taken control of someone’s life.

It may be the pain of loneliness.

It may be an emotional burden brought on by depression or discouragement.

It may be a spiritual problem that has a brother or sister in Christ trapped in some sin. Or a temptation that just won’t go away.

What kinds of burdens are we to carry? Whatever kinds of burdens or problems people experience in life.

There are, however, some things we are meant to carry ourselves. Notice what Paul says in verse 5:

Each one should carry his own load.

Doesn’t that contradict what it says in verse 2? No. The word translated “burdens” in verse 2 and the word translated “load” in verse 5 are two different words with two different meanings. The idea in verse 5 is that each of us is to carry our own backpack. There are some things in life for which we and we alone are responsible. And we are not

to ask or expect someone else to do for us what we ourselves are responsible to do. We have to carry our own load, because we are accountable to God for our stewardship of the gifts, abilities, resources, responsibilities and opportunities He gives us.

3. WHAT CAN WE DO TO BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS?

How do we go about doing it? In a myriad of ways, depending on what is needed.

Romans 12:15 tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to mourn with those who mourn. In times of loss, then, in times of grief and sadness, we can help carry another's burden just by being there and mourning with them.

Sometimes just being there is what is most needed. When I was in 8th grade, the mother of my best friend died unexpectedly. It was the first time in my life that someone close to me had experienced the death of a loved one. What do you say in a time like that? I had no clue. But do you know what I did? My parents took me to the funeral home and I sat with my friend. I didn't know what else to do. But I think, as I look back on it, it was enough. Sometimes just being there for a friend, for a member of your family, for a sister or brother in Christ, is what they need most.

We can help carry each other's burdens by offering comfort and hope in times of loss. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1, we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (1:3-4).

We can help carry each other's burdens by sharing what we have with those in need. Maybe it is money to help in a financial crunch. Maybe it is the loan or gift of a car. It doesn't get much more practical than this.

It can be as simple as providing a meal in a time of stress (or distress), or helping with a transportation need. It can be as simple – and as important – as taking time to listen or offering words of encouragement. It can be as simple – and as powerful – as praying for and praying with someone who is feeling the weight of a heavy burden. It sometimes amazes me how God can use my simple, halting, inadequate prayers to encourage others and lighten their load. If God can use my prayers in this way, He can certainly use yours.

4. WHY SHOULD WE DO IT?

Why should we care so much about ministering to one another? Why should we invest ourselves in the burdens of our fellow believers? If for no other reason than that we are commanded to do so by our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not simply a good idea. It is a biblical imperative. As Paul says in verse 2, to bear one another's burdens is to fulfill the law of Christ.

What is the law of Christ? It is the law of love – the law Jesus gave to His disciples in John 13:34:

A new command I give you: Love one another.
As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

This is the law of Christ which is to govern all our relationships. Love one another. Love one another in the same way and with the same kind of love that Jesus loved (and loves) you. One way to do that, one way to minister to one another, is to carry one another's burdens.

Burden bearing, then, is an act of love, not a duty to be done because we're supposed to. It is an act and an expression of love. And love is a debt we owe that we can never fully repay. Romans 13:8 says:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another,
for the one who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.

When you love others, it says in *The Message*, you complete what the law has been after all along.

Why carry each other's burdens? Why should we do it?

Out of obedience and gratitude to Christ, who has carried our burdens, taking even the burden of our sin upon Himself when He went to the cross.

And out of love. Love for our brothers and sisters in the family of Christ's followers. And love for people outside the family who have not yet come to know the saving love of Jesus.

That's why we do it.

I want to close today with a song written years ago by Bill Withers. (I'm not going to sing it. I'm just going to read the lyrics to you.) I don't know if Bill Withers is a Christian. I hope he is. This song gets at the heart of what it means to minister to one another and to carry each other's burdens.

Sometimes, in our lives
We all have pain, we all have sorrow
But, if we are wise
We know that there's always tomorrow

Lean on me, when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on
For, it won't be long
Til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on.

Please swallow your pride
If I have things you need to borrow

For no one can fill
Those of your needs that you won't let show

You just call on me brother when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on
I just might have a problem that you'll understand
We all need somebody to lean on

Lean on me, when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on
For, it won't be long
Til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on.

You just call on me brother when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on
I just might have a problem that you'll understand
We all need somebody to lean on.

If there is a load
You have to bear, that you can't carry
I'm right up the road
I'll share your load if you just call me

Call me if you need a friend
Call me...

It's true, dear friends. Maureen McCormick found out. Sooner or later, we all need somebody to lean on. And God calls us to be "somebody" for our brothers and sisters and neighbors to lean on.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.