

Gently, gently

Galatians 6:1-5

July 4, 2010

My friends, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing ...

How would you finish that sentence?

If someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing ... I hope he gets what's coming to him!

If someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing ... whatever happens is her own darn fault for getting caught!

If someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing ... I just pray, pray it's not me!

What would you say?

What do you say? What do you do?

What do you do when a friend is caught cheating on his wife? Do you put him on your "do not call" list? Do you cut him off, cut him out of your life? Or do you try to understand what may have led him to do it: stress, conflict in his marriage, a relationship that was already on life support? Do you pity him, pity his weakness, pity his poor judgment, pity the grief he will have to endure? Or are you angry? Are you bitter about his stupidity, his insensitivity, his betrayal of trust? Do you hope he falls flat on his face?

What do you do when you see someone lose her temper? Do you make a mental note to stay out of her way? Or, at least, to make sure you stay on her good side? Do you make excuses for her? She had a hard day. They just pushed her too far. Somebody had to say something, and I'm glad she finally did. Or do you wait and hope for the day when someone will give her a good dose of her own medicine?

What do you do when someone is being a bully: pushy and demanding and insensitive? Do you just take him with a grain of salt and say, "That's just who he is?" Do you push back, trading barb for barb, cut for cut, letting her know you're not one to mess with? Or do you keep your cool, saving your resentment to be shared with people who will sympathize and take your side and agree with you that she is indeed a most disagreeable woman?

What do you say when they don't show up, when they don't come to church, when they don't do their part, when you can't count on them to be there? Nothing? Do you say, "It's their loss?" Do you say, "I would never do that. I would never join a church and disappear. I keep my commitments."

What do you do when you catch someone lying to you? Drop him like a hot potato? Read him the riot act? Think of a way to get even?

What do you say, what do you do, when someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing? This is what Paul said. This is how he finished the sentence.

My friends, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right.

Those of us who are spiritual will set him right!

O Paul! You didn't just say what I think you said, did you? This is a recipe for disaster! Isn't this just the image of the church we have been trying so hard to shed: the church as a group of better-than-thou busybodies acting like the morality police, pointing out the error in everybody else's ways? No. Paul, we don't want to go there!

But, wait a minute. Before we get too excited, let's go back and review what we do say and do when someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing. We cut them off or excuse them or hope they get what's coming to them or think how glad we are we are not like them, but we don't try, or rarely try, to set them right. We keep our distance. We watch them rise and fall -- maybe with pity, maybe with sympathy, maybe with anger, maybe with resentment -- but always from a distance. They will rise or fall, on their own, with no help from me.

But Paul paints a very different picture. Those who are spiritual, that is, those who are filled with the Spirit, those who are blessed with the Spirit's gifts of love and joy and peace and faithfulness and goodness and self-control -- not those who are better than the rest, but those who embrace and reap the benefits of God's grace -- those who are spiritual should set him ... right!

Why? So he may be right!

Paul envisions a church full of people engaged in each other's lives, caring about each other's well-being, bearing each other's burdens.

Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ.

One of the helpful features of the Good News Bible are the Annie Vallotton line drawings that illustrate the text. Look at the drawing for this verse. It's on page 1407.

We like the picture. Bearing each other's burdens is something we do feel called to do. But let's be clear! The burdens we are called to bear are each other's sins! We are called to get involved in dealing with the burden and pain and crippling effects of each other's sins. Whoa!

And what are these sins? Pride and envy and anger and greed, gluttony and sloth and lust, sins that touch each and every one of us! Paul declares that -- for the good of the church, for the good of each of us, for the good of that brother or sister who is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, that brother or sister who is knocked off course by the influence of the sin still holding sway in them -- we should do what we can, whatever we can, to try to set them right, to restore them to health and wholeness, spiritual health, personal wholeness.

But we should do it gently. Gently, gently!

My friends, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way.

We should do it gently, because we are frail too. Because we are vulnerable too to the effects and influences of those same sins, all of us!

And we should do it gently because we are, each of us, one single member of the body, one single member of the family, one single member of the circle.

Look again at the line drawing. What happens if you leave the line? What happens if you stand aside and watch from a distance? What happens if you believe you are somehow different from those who are carrying such heavy loads?

This is what Paul said ...

If you think you are something when you really are nothing, you are only deceiving yourself. You should each judge your own conduct. If it is good, then you can be proud of what you yourself have done, without having to compare it with what someone has done. For each of you have to carry your own load.

That's the key: humbly, gently.

For our brother's sake, for our sister's sake, we engage them. We do not step back or watch from a distance or let them rise and fall on their own. We engage them, get involved in their lives, share a stake in their well-being, confront them in their wrongdoing, with courage and commitment and healing intent, but gently, gently. Because we are in this together.

I think we're ready now to hear the Scripture lesson in its entirety!

My friends, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted, too. Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ. If you think you are something when you really are nothing, you are only deceiving yourself. You should each judge your own conduct. If it is good, then you can be proud of what you yourself have done, without having to compare it with what someone else has done. For each of you have to carry your own load.

Did you notice that in the space of this single paragraph Paul makes two seemingly contradictory statements?

Help carry one another's burdens ...

Each of you have to carry your own load ...

So which is it? Do we help each other carry our burdens or do we carry our own loads? Both! We must do both!

Look again at the line drawing. Is each person carrying their own load? Is each one helping another person carry theirs?

This is how it works ...

You alone are accountable to God for what you do and for what you do not do. It is to God and to God alone that you are answerable. It is useless to compare yourself to anybody else or to try to justify yourself to anybody else. You have to carry your own load.

And -- and -- you are accountable to God for your neighbor. You are your brother's keeper. You will answer to God for what you did or did not do to help set him right. It is our job to help carry one another's burdens.