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### **Galatians 6:1–10, ESV**

*6 Brothers, 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. <sup>2</sup> Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup> For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. <sup>4</sup> But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. <sup>5</sup> For each will have to bear his own load.*

*<sup>6</sup> Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. <sup>7</sup> Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. <sup>8</sup> For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. <sup>9</sup> And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup> So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

### **The EMT.**

One recent morning, as I arrived at the hospital for my shift, I was told that there was an extremely distraught woman in the chapel and that she was a Christian – and so perhaps I could go comfort her. I walked into our chapel to see a woman of about forty in a massive, extremely high-tech wheelchair. She was crying softly and clearly praying. I am, of course, changing details of this story to protect her privacy. I took her hand and knelt down by her chair. I told her that I am a chaplain and asked if I could please help her. Between sobs, she told me that she

was having a panic attack. The problem, she said, was that coming to a hospital had set off her PTSD, which she said was due to a very serious car accident she had been in years before. She was supposed to get a procedure done, she said; they were trying to diagnose something that was causing her extreme pain. But when she got to the hospital, she was told that she was a day early. The problem was that it had taken all the courage she could find to get into the transport van and come to a hospital. There was no way she could go home and do it all over again the next day. She was simply deathly afraid of hospitals, having at one point spent months in an ICU. She asked me if there was a priest in the hospital, that she was Catholic and would really like to talk to a priest. I told her that no, we didn't have a priest on staff or have a priest currently visiting in the hospital. I told her that I am a Protestant Reverend, however, a Methodist minister. She asked me to pray with her. I of course did, and I offered a prayer of relief from anxiety. I lifted her up to God and asked that God see her through her hospital visit. I asked God to put his hand on her, fill her with healing grace, and guide her through this terrifying experience and bring her to a place of calm.

In truth, I was only able to help her calm down a bit. I got my boss and a nurse involved, and they went off to figure out what could be done for this woman. Could her procedure be done today? Could she be admitted for the

night so that she wouldn't have to go home and come back? In the meantime, I tried to distract her by asking her if she was from Colorado originally. She said no, and then proceeded to tell me her story. She was from Chicago. About ten years before, she had been working as an EMT, an Emergency Medical Technician. Now, when I first started working at the hospital, I began to interact with EMTs for the first time. When I was called in for a full trauma, to help with a frightened patient or anguished family member, it was typically EMTs who would bring in the injured person. It was then that I learned that these people, who are always ready to save our lives, work twelve-hour shifts, and often through the night, typically earn only minimum wage. Indeed, this woman in the chapel, we'll call her Gail, was earning 11 dollars an hour that night. She was on a call, her partner was driving and racing to the scene of an accident, when a drunk young man in an SUV T-boned her ambulance at a very high speed in the passenger door – her door. She was immediately crushed, and the ambulance was shoved into high speed, oncoming traffic. She ended up being trapped in the wrecked ambulance for over four hours. When the firefighters finally cut her out and she was transported to the hospital, she had fallen unconscious. She woke up in the ICU days later to be told that her spine was severed, and that she had had a brain bleed. Now, she had no use of her legs and only minimal use of her arms. She

also had some cognitive problems, often making it difficult for her to think things through. This contributed to her panic, she said. I'll get back to Gail.

Our passage today is from Paul's letter to the Galatians, and it is widely believed that Paul did write this letter. It might be the oldest letter written by Paul that has survived. Galatians is a beautiful, eloquent, and concise introduction to the Christian faith. Galatians first talks about the importance of spreading the Gospel and how the story of Christ lays down the basis of all that we believe. Paul then moves on to the main topic of the letter, and that is justification by faith. We become true Christians simply by having faith in God, in Jesus Christ, in the way that Jesus taught us to live with humility and forgiveness, and not by obeying any religious laws. That is the essence of the New Covenant, the agreement between God and us, as delivered to us by Jesus Christ. Paul also talks about grace, that unearned gift from God. He tells us that through grace, Christ lives within us, directs us, and empowers us to be the hands and mouth of God on earth. We are God's instrument and we are God's ambassadors on this planet. We walk with the Holy Spirit, and we live for the things of God's world, not for the things of the human world.

In our passage, Paul talks about the need for regeneration after we have done something wrong. And when someone else does wrong, we must always

help them return to a state of grace. Indeed, we are to value others before we value ourselves. We are to be modest and never boast. Most importantly, we are to know ourselves, to look into our own hearts and see what is there. Before we criticize someone else, we must make sure that we have the light of true faith within us. Finally, and very critically, we are to remember that we will always reap whatever we plant. A corrupt person will not be rewarded by God and will ultimately fail.

There is one line in this passage that I would like to focus on. It says: *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* I thought of this line as I was listening to Gail's story. There she was, racing in an ambulance, on her way to rescue someone else, apparently to save someone's life after a car accident. What happens? She ends up being the one who is severely injured in an accident. I told Gail that I had tremendous respect for someone who could truly live the way Christ taught us to live and risk her own safety for the sake of others. She told me that even as a small child, she had wanted to help others, to dedicate her life to helping. She became an EMT, she said, because that was a way to truly serve God's people the way Christ taught us to do. The pay was ridiculous, but for her, it didn't matter. It was an opportunity to help people who were in the most desperate situations, and that was all that mattered to her. She said that since

her accident, she had been living on a very small monthly disability payment, but that there was a family in her apartment complex who were very poor, who had even less than her, and that she often bought groceries for them so that their kids wouldn't go hungry.

That's what that line in our Bible passage today is all about. In this church, we talk a lot about giving. But this line goes further. Giving isn't enough. We have to absorb risk. This is a lot more than many Christians want to accept. Our passage says that that we should take on other people's burdens. We are to do more than give our time and assets and emotional energy to help people. We are to take on their pain, their suffering, their deprivation. That is what separates a truly Christ-like life from the life of a Christian giver. And that is what Gail did, in a very literal sense. She took on what is perhaps the most horrific burden that any human can ever face in their life. She sacrificed her health, her daily freedom, her ability to enjoy each day on this earth that God has given us as a temporary home.

They did indeed find a room in the hospital for Gail that day and prepared her for her procedure the next day. I talked to Gail's older brother later that day, and her brother subsequently flew in from Chicago to be with her. As we sat in a waiting room while Gail was having her diagnostic procedure done, he told me that their family had very little money, and that after Gail's accident, she was in a

coma for many weeks. When she eventually left the hospital after her horrific accident, the best they could do for her was place her in the only nursing home that would accept the minimal payments offered by Medicaid and that had space. One day, while he and another sibling were visiting, they quite literally found cockroaches and mouse droppings on the floor under her bed. They were horrified at this and the family got together and decided to do whatever they had to do in order to give Gail a respectable place to live. They started searching all over the country for a better situation for her. It turned out that what Gail wanted the most was a bit of her independence back. The family eventually found a program in Colorado where she could live on her own in a subsidized apartment and be taken care of during the daytime. It was, of course, a program funded entirely by a Christian organization. The only hours she spent alone were when she was asleep, and the rest of the time, there were people to help her.

Here's what our passage today is all about. Paul thinks of a church as an extended family. To be honest, that was one of the first things I noticed about this church – that it is indeed a family. Paul wants members of the Galatian church to see themselves not as competitors battling each other for the blessings of God. We don't fight to see which of us is the most devout Christian and who gives the most of their time and money and emotional support. Rather, we turn

our faith outward. We are brothers and sisters whose love for each other is so strong that we are willing to bear responsibility for each other. We are indeed our brother's and sister's keepers. We don't let each other go astray. As members of that extended faith family, we protect each other. Whenever someone in our family does do wrong, we guide that person back to a life of generosity, kindness, and empathy. We hold each other accountable and we lead each other back to grace. But we do this with humility, knowing that we are likely to be the next person who needs to find his or her way back to the Lord. That is how you bear someone else's burden, because the greatest burden is finding yourself having turned away from God.

Gail ended up needing surgery. The day her surgery was performed – and it turned out just fine – I went into her room to check up on her. She was groggy, but she remembered me. I told her that I was happy that things had gone well for her. She asked me to pray with her again. This time, she asked me to pray for the children of the woman who had been driving the ambulance in which she had been in a wreck. While Gail was paralyzed and suffered a brain injury, she told me, her partner had been killed. She left behind two small children, who subsequently were adopted by their grandparents. I offered a prayer asking God to guide these children to a life of giving like their mother's, a life of taking on

other people's burdens. But keep them safe, let them live long and healthy lives, and may they remain inspired for the rest of their lives by the beautiful example of their mother and Gail. Gail then fell asleep and I left her room, never to see her again, I imagine. Please pray with me.

*God, we are willing to give. We are willing to deprive ourselves so that others may have the necessities of life. We have empathy and love and forgiveness for others. But God, help us take that next step toward a Christ-like life. Let us do what Jesus did – and accept the burdens of others. No, we are not going to be crucified, and no, we are not going to lose our physical mobility like Gail. Let us, however, truly accept the pain, the fear, the loss, and the anxiety that others feel. May we, by doing this, bring them peace. And may we do what Gail did – and that is to refuse to let loss, even very grievous loss, make us embittered or angry. By taking on the burdens of others, may we find ourselves even closer to you. Amen.*