

BEARING ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

By Walton Weaver

If you have ever injured a member of your body (and who hasn't, in one way or another?), did you notice how quickly and unconsciously other members of your body came to the aid of the injured part? I once mashed my index finger on my left hand with a hammer when attempting to butt two landscape timbers together. In addition to being a quite painful injury, it cost me my fingernail and required a few stitches to patch it up. But what I remember more than anything else is how my right hand immediately, automatically, and tenderly grabbed the injured finger. My legs and feet began to move me around in a circular fashion across the yard, and my back bent my body over into a stooped position as I moved about. And although I don't remember what I said to my finger, I do recall that my voice also attempted to help as it began to utter comforting words to the hurting member of my body.

Paul shows this is how it ought to be in the body of Christ, when he says, "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). There are other ways that this same thought is brought out in the New Testament. In describing the Christian vocation Paul says that Christians, among other things, should be "forbearing one another in love" (Eph. 4:1-2), and to the Galatians, he says, "bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

"Bearing with" someone may be thought of as a prerequisite to helping one bear a burden. These two things are not the same, but they belong together, and the work of forbearing one another is essential if we are to be successful in helping others bear their burdens.

When "Forbearing" And "Burden Bearing" Is Needed

To "bear with" another person is to make some allowances for a person who is facing a particular difficulty. It is not, however, simply to "put up with" another person, as some suppose. Nor does it mean to look another way when one has sinned, or to overlook the faults in a person's life.

It would appear that in both of these statements Paul has in mind how we are to help one who has been overtaken in some sin, but he is now in the process of working his way out of it. This is true of both "bearing with" another person and helping one "bear a burden." In Colossians 3:13, immediately after saying, "forbearing one another," Paul adds, "and forgiving one another." And just before he said, "bear ye one another's burdens," in Galatians 6:2, he said, "if

a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1).

The question is, therefore, how is one to work with a brother or sister in the body of Christ who has acknowledged some sin and is now in the process of coming out of it? Paul's answer is that we are to help him by "bearing with him," and by helping him "bear his burden."

Essential Qualities That Help

There are a number of other things mentioned along with "forbearing one another" in both Ephesians 4:2 and Colossians 3:12-13. They are in fact listed in such a way that one can tell that Paul means for them to be taken as belonging to the work of "forbearing one another in love."

First, we are to forbear with one another "with all lowliness." Humility is the first key to success. This quality helps one approach another who needs his support with the attitude that he is not altogether free from sin in his own life (he falls short of the perfect standard himself), and he must depend upon God's strength to bring him through his own failures.

Second, one needs "meekness" if he is to be successful. This word conveys the idea of submissiveness to God's will. Unless we are first able to receive instruction ourselves, how can we expect others to receive guidance from us?

Third, one must be "longsuffering." We must be able to put ourselves in the other person's place, to really hurt with the person who is "caught" or trapped in some terrible sin. To be of real help we may need to commit our self to this person for a long period of time. One who is longsuffering will "be there" when needed.

Finally, "love" is essential if we are to be successful in the good work of "bearing with" another. Paul says, "forbearing one another *in love*." The list of things that love does as expressed in 1 Corinthians 13 should help us see what Paul means by this statement. As it relates to forbearing, probably the most important of these things is that love "bears all things" and it "believes all things" (v. 7).

No matter how terrible the sin may be, or how difficult it may be for one to overcome it (such as addiction to drugs or alcohol, marital infidelity, etc.). If we are to be of help in this situation, the person who needs us so desperately at this particular time must be able to see that we believe in the one we are trying to help. This means that we must be optimistic about his or her willingness to change, as well as God's ability to make such a change possible. Is this not how

“love hopes all things” (v. 7)? This person must believe in us, and such confidence must begin by his seeing that we believe in him.

Helping Another Bear His Burden

The “burden” of Galatians 6:2 is a spiritual burden. This is suggested by the fact that Paul instructs those who are “spiritual” to help *restore* such a person. Once he has been restored and is in the process of turning from his sin he then needs the help of all of those who are in the spiritual body of Christ to help him bear the burden of spiritual oppression that has been brought upon him by his sin. Such oppression separates one from others, and also from God. God does not want one to try to handle this kind of burden alone. Helping one bear this kind of burden by being forbearing toward him is something that all who are in the body can do and must do.

It is true that there is a “burden” that one must bear alone (v. 5). But this is a different kind of burden. Paul uses a different word for “burden” in this verse. This burden has to do with one’s own *work* as a Christian. Every Christian must work out his own salvation (Phil. 2:12). Each person has his own work to do. Work that no one else can do for him, or help him do. But when it comes to the burden of sin that Paul is discussing in Galatians 6:2 God knows that brother must lean on brother, and this is what fellowship in the body of Christ is all about.