

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: Anyone here ever in marching band? Do you remember what you learned first, back in junior high band? Keeping in step. Left, right, left right. (No, the other left.) Listen to the 4-beat of the drums. Left is on 1 and 3. *Left, right, left, right.* Do you remember how tricky it is to get *back* into step; that little skip you have to do? How about doing a show on the football field? Straight lines, looking sideways without moving your head. And how do march from one yard line to the next, five yards away, and stay in a straight line? Eight steps to five yards. That means each step is 22 ½ inches. And lift your legs! Knees high!
- B. I couldn't help but think of that when I read **Gal 5:25**, "*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*" **To keep in step with the Spirit is to walk closely with Jesus.** The Holy Spirit, who lives within us, is taking us places. He's leading us on paths of righteousness, so we need to be in step—in synch—with him.
- C. **Do you know what his highest priority is?** Gal. 5:6, "*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*" **V.13-14**, "*Serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*" And in **v.22** the first and primary "*fruit of the Spirit is love...*" It all goes back to what Jesus taught in **John 13:34-35**, "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*" Turn to **Gal 5**.
- D. The point of our text today is, to love one another we must step with the Holy Spirit into the messiness of our relationships with one another.

V.26 dives right into the problem: “*Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*”

I. WE FALL OUT OF STEP WHEN WE BECOME CONCEITED (5:26)

- A. The Greek word behind this word *conceit* means *empty glory*. Like someone who proudly wears a Christian uniform with all kinds of medals, but inside there’s no love, humility, joy, or peace. **John Stott** wrote, “*Our conduct to others is determined by our opinion of ourselves.*” When I am full of myself I fall out of step with the Spirit.
- B. Conceit has two spoiled-child habits: provoking and envying. When we value ourselves above others we will challenge—*provoke*—anyone who doesn’t treat us as we think we deserve or we will turn a sickly green with grasping, critical envy. Either way, when conceit enters a relationship the fur flies. “*If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*”
- C. Neither your conceit nor mine can keep our provoking or envying thoughts to itself. Conceit always has the blurts! **This is where churches are most vulnerable and least vigilant**. Someone called it “*extending the right fist of fellowship.*” Nothing is so likely to undermine our obedience to Jesus’ command as our pride. Our defense is to keep in step with the Spirit. But the Spirit doesn’t just steer us away from trouble. He also marches us into messes.

II. STEP WITH THE SPIRIT INTO THE MESSINESS OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER (6:1-6)

- A. **V.1**, “*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.*” I’m not sure there is any command we would be

more reluctant to obey than this one. Here is a brother who is often harsh with his family, or someone who gossips. Here is a man given to suggestive jokes or comments (“just kiddin’,” of course). Parents who ignore their children. Someone who is often contentious in a Growth Group or a board meeting. Someone who doesn’t keep promises or commitments. Those aren’t just annoying habits. They’re sins. But who wants to step into messes like that? **But to love one another is to “restore that person gently.”**

“If someone is caught in a sin...” Sin ambushes people. They are entrapped or oblivious or unwilling to repent. Left alone, that sin festers. It poisons and stinks.

Note, too, that we’re talking about a sin, not some irritation or aggravation, not some slight or careless word. The Spirit will walk you through those things too but that’s not the point here.

But if it is a sinful pattern—if your brother or sister is crossing one of God’s boundaries—then “you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.” This Greek word for *restore* was used elsewhere for setting a bone. It’s a word with a white uniform and a red cross, a word with a thermometer and bandages in its pocket. It isn’t a painless word. Setting a broken bone hurts and sometimes so does restoring a sin-trapped sibling. But it is a gentle word, a word with a nurse’s hands and heart. That’s the persona we bring to this difficult service.

*Yes, but isn’t this a job for professionals? For the pastor or elders, or a counselor, or somebody? No, every Christian has this responsibility. But I wouldn’t know what to say. I mean, who am I to talk to someone about their sin? Who are you? **You are their brother or sister, and, yes, you are your brother’s keeper.***

Illus.: A Christian brother and I had a conflict some years ago. Our little group had an opportunity to do a good thing but he surprised me with his unwillingness. I challenged him and he left our group angry. Then he wrote an email saying he wouldn't be back. Ticked me off! I spun a whole web of responses. But I also knew that God wasn't pleased with what happened, even if I hadn't done anything wrong. I just didn't know what to do about it. **I saw how bad things were rising up in me**—self-righteousness, impatience and a lurking willingness to just wash my hands of the whole mess. I prayed a great deal about it. I didn't know what to do. **Even though I didn't feel I'd done a wrong thing I sensed that there was a right thing left to do and I wasn't sure of what it was.** I prayed and other brothers prayed. Some time passed. I knew I had to do something to reach out, so I sat down and wrote a letter.

The game changer is in that phrase, “*you who live by the Spirit.*” The worst thing you can do is try this alone! It isn't you that will bring restoration. It's the Spirit working through you, through your love and truth and grace. Yes, it is hard. We have no promise that the other person will respond well, though God will certainly prepare them. But it is your *relationship* with them and your *Spirit-led* timing and words that what makes this powerful. *This* is what humble, loving Christian service looks like.

Sin, left unattended, is so terribly dangerous! It infects a person's life and then their relationships. People get hurt. The church family suffers. Take someone who is “biting and devouring” others in their family or church through contentiousness, gossip, or control. What's going to happen if we don't *restore them*? **V.15** says, “*You will be destroyed by each other.*” That's what kills churches!

The text says to do it gently; literally, in a spirit of meekness. Imagine how hard it will be for them. Take on smallness, quietness. If the other person gets a whiff of pride from you—of conceit—things will only get worse. Humble yourself. Embrace the sense of inadequacy you feel and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in how *you* can help them get back on their feet with Jesus.

You go to meet your brother or sister. Maybe bring another person, too. **But the Holy Spirit is the one who brings a divine finesse that both convicts and graces our brother or sister.** He gives us God’s own touch and timing; the Spirit helps us see just how to bring Scripture to bear in this hard thing.

But be careful. The rest of v.1 says, “*But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.*” **In helping a fellow believer, humbly keep guard over your own heart.** Conceit can easily get the better of us, tempting us to scold or lay down the law instead of administering grace.

B. **V.2** says, “*Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*” This, of course, is a broad principle of Christian love. “*Carry each other’s burdens.*” This is why we pray for each other when we get word of a need. This is why we take time for someone even when we’re busy, why we bring a meal or offer to help with the kids, why we invite someone new and lonely to our home. This is why we listen.

Of all the burdens that Christians carry, none is so heavy as the dead weight of sin. We cannot keep up with the Spirit, nor do we much care. Our conceit clears its throat and finds its voice. The claws come out. Being with other believers becomes theater, or we just avoid them altogether. It is a crushing burden and we need help.

What does he mean by, “*and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*”? **What is the law of Christ? Love one another.** “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*” **Sometimes, obeying Christ’s law requires us to gently step up to the crushing load of a fellow believer’s sin and help them take it to Jesus.**

- C. **Vv.3-5:** “*If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load.*” Again, we’re warned about the danger inherent in this Christian duty. Of course, we’re always susceptible to thinking we’re “*something when we’re not,*” but in this context we’re especially vulnerable.

The real risk in these situations is not that they will be angry with us, but that we will “*think we are something.*” God didn’t make you or me the boss of them. He made us loving *servants* with the Spirit-led ability to restore them to fellowship with Jesus and with us.

“***Each one should test their own actions...***” Here’s God’s antidote to our tendency to conceit. *Scrutinize your own actions* (not your *intentions*). Where you find sin or carelessness, repent and get back in step with the Spirit. **But you will also find successes** where you *have* been patient instead of complaining. You *have* changed your language or behavior thanks to the Spirit working in your life. Take joy in that. Be grateful. He even says we “*can take pride*” in those things because along with the Spirit you worked at that, and God is pleased with you.

V.5 finishes the thought: “for each one should carry their own load.” At first, this sounds like a contradiction of the verse above that says, “*Carry each other’s burdens.*” But that verse speaks of a weight too heavy for one person, while this second reference is more like a backpack. We each carry the responsibility for hiking with the Holy Spirit. We can’t do that for each other. You can’t keep in step with the Spirit for me, nor can I do that for you.

V.6 says, “*Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor.*” Given the context, “*the one who receives instruction in the word*” is the fellow believer you’ve gone to and “*their instructor*” in the word is you. When we go to someone we are only as strong as what we can show them from Scripture. The outcome of this reconciliation is not one-upsmanship, but two richer believers. Two who “*share all good things.*” *Illus.:* I am so grateful for a courageous brother who came into my office a few years ago and said, “*Lee, I’ve been praying about this and I need to tell you something. You’re depressed and you’re angry and you need to do something about it.*” Imagine how hard that was for him—to confront the pastor! But I needed that help to be restored to a healthy relationship with Jesus and others.

Conclusion

I summarized those six verses this way: **Step with the Spirit into the messiness of our relationships with one another.** I suspect there are people here who cannot imagine that they’d ever do what the Bible says here. For one thing, some of you aren’t close enough to any other Christians to carry their burdens of any kind. Would you make *connecting* with other believers here a goal?

But some of you can’t imagine doing this because you might simply want to avoid the mess at all costs. We all get that, but sometimes this is the duty of love for one another.

Illus.: So I wrote a long and thoughtful letter to the Christian brother who had walked away from our group. When I went to my phone to get his address I pushed *Talk* by accident. *No!!* I couldn't just hang up because he'd see it was my call. *Shoot!!* And I knew right then that the Holy Spirit had taken over things. It was awkward.

"Hi. This is Lee. Uh, I think we should probably talk." When we finally sat down, you'll never guess what I found out. He thought *I* had been in the wrong! And as he explained, I saw his point. And he saw mine. We each apologized and meant it. We were both restored and our group was reunited.

I wrote to tell our group the good news and my friend wrote also. This is what he said (I share it with his permission):

Indeed. I think it is safe to say we both gained in understanding which so often leads to moving towards one another in relationship rather than apart. The curse of our human particularism is that we each view the same experience with very different sets of eyes which are back-loaded with our own experiences, convictions, fears and poor comprehension. And so we come away with decidedly different interpretations. Are we wrong or are we just seeing things so differently?

But the goodness of the gospel enables us to have footing to move towards rather than ultimately apart. Thank you Lee.

It is not always easy to "*serve one another humbly in love.*" But when we do, there is no home, no church family, so safe, so strong, or so close to heaven itself. Let's be that kind of church.