

Watching out for yourself

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[0 : 00] Those of you who were here two weeks ago will remember that we were looking at the first couple of verses of Galatians chapter 6. And it's all about practical walking in the Spirit.

And our title then was Watch Out for One Another. Tonight it's the counterpart, Watch Out for Yourself. We saw that Paul is, in these verses, beginning to apply in detail the command that comes all through chapter 5.

Walk in the Spirit. Live by the Spirit. Keep in step with the Spirit. And in chapter 5 he's made that very clear what it's all about.

But in general terms it's a stark choice between either the fruit of the Spirit on the one hand or the works of the flesh on the other. That means in verse 25 it's either keeping in step with the Spirit or it's verse 26 being conceited and provoking and envying one another.

And with 26 there, verse 26, Paul is beginning to nail down in the nitty gritty of real life exactly what he's talking about for the avoidance of all doubt.

[1 : 18] I'm getting quite fond of that lawyer's phrase. For the avoidance of all doubt. And that's what he's doing here. He's saying, let me spell this out in terms of daily living in your life and in the church's life.

And he does that. He has to do that, obviously, because he feels that we need to have it rammed home. We need ramming home in our consciousness what it really means in the nitty gritty of life together as the church and with one another as Christians.

Take, for example, the situation that I often find speaking with new Christians. They're full of joy, full of the new life that they found in Christ.

And when they come into the church, they think they've found heaven. And then the reality begins to sink in.

They start to see what other Christians in the church do and say. And sometimes they're quite shocked. They become quite disillusioned.

[2 : 29] Very disappointed. Can Christians really behave like this? But then, of course, what begins to happen is they begin to see what they're still really like, too.

And what disappointments they find in their own life. And they're coming to terms with the reality that Paul is wanting us to come to terms with here.

That we are in a fight. We are in a struggle. We are in a battle for the new creation life that we've been born into through the gospel. And to grasp that is a necessary truth for all of us.

It's a liberating truth. It's essential if we're to have any kind of useful Christian life at all. It's realism. It's not fantasy and naivety that is the foundation for all true Christian discipleship.

Paul tells us in chapter 5 verse 17 that there is a real war between the spirit and the flesh in every believer right till the end.

[3 : 33] Do you see that? The desires of the flesh are against the spirit. The desires of the spirit against the flesh. Opposed to each other. It's a war.

But we're not to think of it as a war that we're going to lose all the time. We're not to be in despair. We're not called to passive acceptance of that.

We're not called to expect nothing but failure and stasis in our Christian life as though we're never to make any progress. No. Paul says we fight to win. Look at verse 16 of chapter 5.

It's a promise. Walk by the spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. And that is a promise. Of course it's not a glib promise.

It's not magic. It really is a fight to the death that is both decisive and at the same time an ongoing one.

[4 : 32] Day by day by day. It's a life of decisive repentance. And that's what Paul graphically sums up. Do you see in verse 24 and verse 25.

It's a life he says of crucifying the flesh on the one hand and walking in the spirit on the other. That's what a life of discipleship of repentance means.

Let me quote to you from John Stott on this battle of ongoing repentance. He's exceptionally good on this. The first great secret of holiness lies in the degree and the decisiveness of our repentance. If besetting sins persistently plague us, it's either because we've never truly repented or because having repented, we haven't maintained our repentance. It's as if having nailed our old nature to the cross, we keep wistfully returning to the scene of its execution.

We begin to fuddle it, to caress it, to long for its release, even to try to take it down again from the cross. We need to learn to leave it there.

[5 : 37] When some jealous or proud or malicious or impure thought invades our mind, we must kick it out at once. It's fatal to begin to examine it and consider whether we're going to give in to it or not.

We've declared war on it. We are not going to resume negotiations. We've settled the issue for good. We are not going to reopen it. We've crucified the flesh. We are never going to draw the nails. That kind of radical, single-minded determination, that battle to keep the flesh on the cross and to keep the Holy Spirit of God as our pacemaker in life, that battle is a battle fought not just in our personal lives as Christians, but also in our corporate life as the church.

We can't separate, as we said last time, we can't separate personal holiness from practical ecclesiology. We can't separate our life from the church's life or the church's life from our life. And that's why we have great responsibilities, not just for ourselves, but for one another. Just what we were seeing this morning in Matthew chapter 18. Now last time in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 6, we saw what this teaching looks like when the rubber hits the road in the realities of church life.

[7 : 05] Spirit-filled living is not about personal mystical experiences. No, it's rather about the practical relationships of love that we have within the church. Walking in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, means taking seriously the responsibilities that we have to one another.

And we focused on that in verses 1 and 2. It's all about our responsibilities to God that we have for one another. We're to watch out for one another in love.

When somebody is trapped in a sin, we're to restore them. Again, shades of Matthew 18. We shouldn't be surprised that Paul and Jesus say the same thing. We're to be patient and loving. We're to be doing it in a spirit of gentleness. That's what he said. Verse 2, he says, We're to be like slaves bearing the burdens of others, bearing the burdens of their sin, in order that the redeeming, restoring love of Christ flows through us to others.

That's what Christian life is all about. We're to watch out for one another. But tonight, Paul goes on, in verses 3 to 5, to see the other side of it.

[8 : 19] We have to see also that we have a responsibility, not just for others, but a responsibility to ourselves. Not only are we to watch out for one another, we're to watch out for ourselves. If true spirit-filled living means that we're to watch out for one another in love, in a spirit of gentleness and mercy and not judgment, bearing the burdens of their sin, then we're also to look out for ourselves, but in a very different way.

Not with gentleness and mercy on our own sin, but rather with testing and penetrating judgment of ourselves. Paul says we're to be merciful in dealing with other people's sins, but we're to be merciless in dealing with our own sins.

And isn't it usually the other way around in our practice? Paul's point is clear. He's saying that we will not be people who are able to be merciful in other sins if we are not first people who have learned to examine ourselves.

That's why verses 1 and 2 are connected to verses 3 to 5 by that word for. Do you see that at the beginning of verse 3? We're to be restorers in gentleness. We're to be bearers of sins of others. Therefore, if anyone thinks he's something when he's nothing, he deceives himself. See, the implication is that the thing that will stop us serving one another is that we think we're something, and therefore we're above such a thing.

[9 : 57] I don't have to do that. I'm much too important to have to bother with that. I'll never forget when I was training in ministry in Aberdeen and I was attached with a church, and the minister was asking somebody in the congregation if they would do something.

It was a job, a job of service that needed to be done. The person he was asking looked at him incredulously and said, I can't do that sort of thing. I'm a deacon.

A member of the congregational board in our terms. I can't do that. I'm a deacon. He didn't seem to appreciate the irony of what he was saying. The very word deacon means servant.

I can't serve. I'm a deacon. What he meant was, his view of being a deacon was not serving the church, but was being looked up to by the church.

He wanted people to consult him and ask for his opinion and look to him, but he didn't want to do anything. It reminded me of my father's quote when he said that the church is full of people who want to serve God, but usually only in an advisory capacity.

[11 : 08] But you see, it's very, very easy, isn't it? For a service mentality to become a status mentality in the church.

We think we're something. But you see, what Paul's saying here is that there is a time to look at others, but there's also a time not to look at others.

We're to look out to others, to serve them, to bear their burdens, to help them, but not to compare ourselves with them. Either to despise them or gloat over them if they're in sin, or to puff ourselves up by comparison.

So in verses 1 and 2, he says we're to look out continually to others and for others with sensitivity, with grace, with gentleness, not being naive about ourselves because we too can be tempted.

But in verses 3 to 5, he says we're also to look continually at ourselves very realistically, not to deceive ourselves about ourselves.

[12 : 14] Rather, we're to be the kind of people who reflect the mind and the heart of God in the way we serve our brothers. And if we're to be people who truly walk in the Spirit, we must be, first of all, people who honestly look at ourselves, who have a realistic appraisal of ourselves in relation to God and what God has called us from and what God called us to.

In other words, it's just another way of saying we must be people who truly understand the dynamics of the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith, which is what this whole letter is all about.

And that means that we have a right understanding of sin with regard to ourselves and a right understanding of God's grace in relation to ourselves and a right understanding of the service that God has called us to.

So let's look at verses 3 to 5 under these headings. First, a right view of sin in our own lives, verse 3. We need a true view of sin in all of our life.

That is, what we've been saved from, what we once were, and what we are still struggling with.

Only if we've grasped that, only if we've been humbled by that, can we be the kind of people who will restore others, who will bear other people's burdens.

[13 : 44] Paul's warning us in verse 3 about the huge danger of spiritual delusion, of thinking that we're something when the reality is that we are nothing. And this spiritual delusion about our status, our worthiness, is part of a universal virus that affects humankind.

It's not just epidemic, it's not just pandemic, it's far, far worse. It's an H5N1 or anything like that. It is absolutely endemic in the human heart.

It is everywhere. It's the conceit that Paul speaks about, the vain glory. That's what keeps tens of thousands of people from coming to the Lord Jesus Christ and finding salvation in Him.

It's the offense of the cross. It's the offensiveness of coming to terms with our own impotence and our own insignificance and unimportance and inability to do anything to impress God.

And that's more than most of us can bear. It's an assault to our pride. It's a stumbling block and that is the stumbling block of the cross.

[14 : 58] But you see, chapter 5, verse 26 makes clear that that virus is still in the bloodstream of many believing Christians.

It's a post-viral conceit, if you like, that is a danger to all of us. And Paul here in verse 3 is ramming home the same question of verse 26 in a very personal way, in a very powerful way.

Because pride is probably the greatest danger to our spiritual health. And that's true in our personal life and it's true in the life of the church. It's pride, isn't it, that leads us to look down on others, to scorn the weakness of another, to scorn the sin that somebody else has got trapped in.

It's pride that causes us to judge others. It's pride that causes us to refuse to help them bear their burdens when that's what they need us to do.

Isn't that true? Aren't other people's sins and misfortunes and muck-ups great temptations to us to think, well, at least I'm not that bad?

[16:13] Well, I find it is. But Paul says, you are just like that. Indeed, you're far less than that. You are nothing. Everything that, everything that you have, everything that makes you something in God's eyes is by God's grace alone.

It's by the gift of God's Spirit alone. Not by the flesh. It's through the Spirit, by faith. Everything that you are. Without that, you're nothing. You're just like the brother or sister that you're looking down on.

That's the message of this whole letter. It's all by grace through faith. And if you haven't grasped that, then you've never yet grasped the gospel at all. If you think you're something on your own by the flesh, what you are saying is what Paul says you're saying in chapter 2, verse 21.

Christ died for nothing, for no purpose. because he didn't need to die for you really. You're spitting in the face of Christ, your Savior, if that's what you think.

You're deceived by self-conceit, by pride, by vain and empty self-glory. You are denying the gospel if that's the way you're thinking.

[17:33] But we find it hard to believe. We say, surely not. Surely, surely I can't be like that, full of pride. Well, we need to ask ourselves honestly, don't we?

Are we really and truly people who are marked by gentle, merciful restoration from sin? Does that mean?

Am I really and truly, if I'm honest, a willing bearer of the burdens of others? Even when they sin and they muck up and it causes me a lot of hassle.

Is that really me? You see, these false teachers, these Judaizing teachers that came into the church in Galatia, they were so taken up with making sure that everybody was dotting every I and crossing every T of the Mosaic law.

They had no time for those who are sinners, who are weaklings. They wrote them off. And of course, that kind of attitude just provoked worse sin. Sin in themselves, pride and conceit and so on, looking down on them.

[18:36] But no doubt worse sin in those they perceive to be sinners because there's nothing worse than sanctimonious hypocrites telling you you're a sinner to make you want to sin more. Isn't that right? Just for effect.

So we've got to be very careful, haven't we? We must have a right view, a realistic view of ourselves and our own sin, what Christ saved me from and the reality of the sins that I still struggle with if I'm going to be a helper to my brother or sister.

And we've got to be careful. Friends, it's very, very easy for zeal, for godly living and for purity to lead to a harshness in our spirit, to lead to an unfeeling attitude to others who fall.

But Paul says, look at yourself. Look at your own holiness. Be taken up with that, not passing judgment on others.

It's so easy for a zeal for right doctrine to lead to pride and conceit. It's good to be zealous for right doctrine. We must be. But here's the truth.

[19:52] I often find that it is among people who are so concerned for the truth of the doctrines of grace that often seem to show least grace evident in their life in the way they treat people.

Very little mercy for sinners. You know that terrible poem by Robert Burns, Holy Willys Prayer, which is a mockery of the Reformed faith in Scotland.

But the tragedy is there's more than a hint of truth in that sometimes about us. Paul says, we need to have a realistic view of sin in our own life.

We need to have a realistic appraisal of what we are. We need to have true humility, not self-deceiving pride. It's so hard, isn't it? Because we're all like that.

It's a virus. Don't you ever find yourself thinking, well, I don't get the recognition and respect that I deserve in this church. Don't you sometimes think that?

[20:58] Don't you find yourself sometimes saying, well, why wasn't I consulted on this? After all, I'm such and such. Of course, we're not to treat people wrongly.

Of course, we should probably be taking much more notice of others and thanking them much more often than we do. But we must also be aware of thinking more, thinking that we are more of a something than we really are.

Maybe, maybe we just haven't actually earned all that respect that we think we deserve. Could it perhaps be also that my opinion isn't quite as highly valued as maybe I think it is? Those are hard things, aren't they? But Paul says, we need to have a realistic view of ourselves and the true status of our own sinfulness. Because the truth is that all that we have, all that is ours, is ours through the Holy Spirit by faith alone. And if we understand that, we must be humble. We can't be haughty, can we? It's a great, great liberation, my brothers and sisters, a great liberation to be able to leave all evaluation to God alone. [22 : 26] Rest in content that He sees it all and He knows it all and He will judge us with perfection. And it doesn't matter what others' valuation of us is.

That leads us to the second thing which is a right view of grace. In verse 4, Paul turns from a wrong kind of pride to a very different kind of pride indeed.

Do you see? Let each one test his own work and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not by comparison with his neighbor. Instead of boasting about our position as compared to others and seeing ourselves as better than them, we're to boast, he says, in ourselves alone.

Having tested and tried the evidence in our own life and seen what's going on there. At first, you may think there's a contradiction here. Surely pride is pride.

Surely boasting is boasting and that's all wrong. But no. Paul here is talking about two very different alternatives. Look down to verse 13 and 14 of chapter 6.

[23 : 33] He's talking here about a boasting in the flesh. That's what the false teachers wanted to do. Boast in the things that we do that make us superior. Do you see? They desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

But Paul is talking about boasting in the cross alone and being proud that we of ourselves are nothing but Christ has given us everything. Verse 14. Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

Do you see? The first of those is conceit. It's vain glory. It's looking at ourselves with pride saying Christ died for no purpose really. But the second is true glory.

It boasts in the cross. It looks at itself with humility and with repentance and it looks at Christ and it sees Him as the only thing that counts. And verse 4 is telling us that the only way to a true view of ourselves is to see ourselves in relation to God's grace to us.

To see His work for us on the cross. When we look at ourselves honestly when we have a true view of our own sin our only boast can be in God's grace to us in Christ who stooped so low to save us from what we once were.

[24 : 58] And when we look at ourselves and when we see what we are now when we examine and test our own work and we see what God has done in us and through us despite what we know ourselves to be by nature then we boast all the more because we can see that it's God who's done this even with the pathetic raw material that He had to work with just what we were.

Isn't that right? A true view of grace both humbles us and lifts us up rejoicing exalting in God's goodness to us. Listen to John Newton the hymn writer.

He says I'm not what I ought to be ah how imperfect and deficient I'm not what I wish to be I'm not what I hope to be but I can truly say I'm not what I once was and by the grace of God I am what I am.

You see there's a man who's got a true grasp of sin and what he once was and what he is and a true grip on the grace of God in his own life.

And it's only that kind of person Paul is saying that can be a burden bearer with other sinners. Only that kind of person that can be a restorer to a brother or sister who falls.

[26 : 24] And only that kind of person can know the true liberation of boasting only in the grace that sets us free from bondage to the flesh sets us free from the world's evaluation and our evaluation of ourselves.

The bondage that comes from the comparison always comparing and judging ourselves by others always comparing ourselves to our neighbours No says Paul Don't look to them look to yourself see your sin but see the grace of God and what he's done for you.

Looking to others to compare ourselves only ever does one of two things either it crushes us we feel feeble we feel failures we feel weak by comparison isn't that what you feel when you look around brothers and sisters I'm not as clever as that person oh I could never speak like so and so oh I can't do that I can't be that kind of gifted person I can't contribute anything here but the gospel

says get a hold of grace see what Christ has done for you yes for you he loved you he went to the cross for you either comparison crushes us like that or it puffs us up doesn't it oh I'm a long standing church man I've been in this church for 50 years you know I'm a senior elder by the way I've been here there I've done this and I've done that I'm a minister you know lots of training study the bible I deserve respect but the gospel says no get a hold of grace get a hold of the cost of grace look what Christ had to do for you because you were nothing he had to go to the cross look how low he had to stoop to bring you out of the pit that you were in because you were nothing see that's real boasting so Paul says let's examine ourselves let's test ourselves and see see the sin and see the grace both in how we're saved from sin by the cross but also like John Newton rejoicing in what we are now that we were once something else but Christ has made us new let's see the grace that is at work in us even now changing us shaping us isn't it a wonderful thing when we can look at ourselves and rejoice knowing that God has changed us and is changing us because we know that it's not us it's Christ such an encouragement to us isn't it when we know that he's at work in our lives we're liberated to rejoice in what we see because we know it's God it can't be us just to give you an example of experience

I had myself a couple of years ago I was at a meeting a conference with a group of people one of whom I'd had a very very difficult relationship with and had major doubts about all sorts of things about him and yet when we met at this time sometime later he excelled in all kinds of ways in his language in his behaviour in his teaching and all kinds of things and I went away from that meeting absolutely rejoicing that there was such a change in this fellow and yet as I thought about it I rejoiced even more that I was able to rejoice about this given the history that we'd had because I could see that it wasn't a natural thing my natural feeling was to despise this person but only God and his grace had enabled me to have that attitude see that's John Newton by grace I am what I am and that's what I can boast in but finally verse 5

[30 : 31] Paul says that when instead of looking at others we test and examine ourselves and when we get a true view of sin and what we've been saved from and a true view of grace and how we're saved through Christ that will lead us also to a right view of service what we're saved for and the reality is he says that each of us will have to bear his own load we're called in fellowship to bear one another's burdens of sin and their need we must watch out for one another we must do that we have a real responsibility for one another but we also each bear responsibility for our own load our calling and service for which each of us will have to give account to God and no one else can bear that responsibility J.B. Phillips translates this each man must shoulder his own pack the word can be used for a soldier's backpack and that's very helpful because what he's saying is each of us is called to shoulder the mission that God has given us and that's where our focus and that's where our attention should be not evaluating our life by comparison with others but rather devoting ourselves to the race that God has set before us and running that race with perseverance knowing that we are men and women who will give account to God knowing that we have a responsibility to God for our lives of service not to one another and that too is a great great comfort isn't it

God doesn't judge you and your service with respect to somebody else but rather with reference to what he's called you to do with your life we're not to eye each other and judge ourselves by that either that just gives us a false pride and self-deception or it will give us nothing but depression and envy no we're not to be like Peter who said to Jesus of the beloved disciple what about him Jesus said look to yourself and that's what you will answer for that's what I will answer for it's a great comfort but it is also a challenge isn't it we will answer for it remember 1st Corinthians 3 Paul says the day will declare and make manifest our work the fire will try it whether we've built with gold and silver things that will last or with wood and hay and stubble that won't but on that day the standard of judgment will not be comparison to others it will be absolute it will be the gold standard of what God has called us for by the grace of Jesus

Christ so somebody who has a right understanding of himself and a right grasp of the gospel will have a right understanding of the gospel's implications they'll be living for that judgment now isn't that right full of desire to fulfill the calling for which God has called us heavenwards Paul in Philippians chapter 3 says I'm straining forward to what lies ahead that's surely the attitude if we've understood the gospel straining to what is our destiny the home of righteousness where we will fulfill perfectly at last the law of love where we will perfectly forever serve one another in love see it all comes back as always to whether we've really come to grips with the size and the scope of the gospel of Christ and the magnitude of its implications if we think if we think that the gospel is really

just a part of our life and our

Christian faith is just a part of our life to be fitted in alongside our career or our family or our leisure or our money or our appetites whatever it is then those things will be the things that are really important to us we'll still be very taken up with ourselves with our status with our comparison with others but if we've really understood what Paul's saying and we've understood that the only thing that counts is the gospel of the new creation then we know that all of these other things could disappear in a moment in an earthquake in a robbery in an accident in an explosion and we wouldn't have lost anything of substance because what we eagerly await is the hope of righteousness the full flowering of the new creation and if that's really true if that's really true Paul says the only thing that will count now is serving one another in love is faith working through love that is what

Paul says is the true sign that we are living for that day now that's the true sign that we've understood our life of service of what the gospel has called us to so we have to ask ourselves don't we are we are we walking in the spirit are we a spirit filled church well the message of Galatians is that we'll never be a spirit filled people unless we're a gospel filled people for Paul walking in the spirit is walking in the truth of the gospel and he's telling us here it's a very obvious walk it's one you can spot a mile off it's walked by people who are undeceived by their own self importance but rather full of the truth of what they were and are it's people full of rejoicing in the grace that stooped so low but lifted them so high it's people living wholeheartedly for the new creation now taken up with the future now and determined to do all that they can to serve in love now that's what it means Paul says to be the church to be a gospel people that's what we are and that's the part we must live and walk if we live by the spirit let us also walk by the spirit let us not become conceited provoking one another envying one another brothers if anyone's caught in any transgression you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness keep watch on yourselves lest you too be tempted bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of

[37 : 13] Christ for if anyone thinks he's something when he's nothing he deceives himself but let each one test his own work then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not by comparison to his neighbor for each will have to bear his own load that's what it means practically to walk in the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ well let's pray together Lord when your gospel confronts us we see that often we're not running or skipping along or even walking straight but so much of the time we're limping help us we pray to see and to understand what it truly means to be your people teach us every day the truth about ourselves what we have been saved from and what we are still being saved from as we walk in your spirit fill our minds and our hearts full of the depths of the wonder of your grace which stoops so low for us and fill us we pray with a desire to live so as to fulfill all that you have called us to be in our own lives and as a church that we might walk in the truth of the gospel of Jesus

Christ and walk in his spirit day by day for Jesus sake amen