

“Care Taking Care”

Galatians 6:1-10

New Revised Standard Version

The gospel good news of Jesus is not a “pep-talk” to make the life we are living now, better. The gospel good news of Jesus is a blueprint to build a whole new life altogether. The early Christians struggled with this distinction just as we do today. They wanted to sprinkle some Jesus onto their lives and call themselves “well-seasoned in the faith.” They had yet to see that Jesus must be the main ingredient that is kneaded into life each and every day in order to be truly fed and transformed in faith.

As we’ve seen over the past few weeks, Paul’s letter to the Galatians doesn’t quite have what we might call “the pastoral touch.” He’s upset with them; they’ve fallen back into their old habits and ways and have been enforcing the Jewish rules and regulations onto new Gentile believers. While these regulations may have helped Jews fulfill the law to love God and love neighbor – Paul (and the whole Council of leaders in Acts 15) passionately believed they were

not necessary or required for everyone. Jesus didn’t ask people to be Jewish, confess a creed, go to Temple more often. But he did ask people to repent and check their own motives and actions. He asked people to help those in need. To stand up against power that corrupts. To be more childlike and curious, less judgmental. Jesus put people above rules, inclusion above exclusion. All this to say, for five chapters, Paul has been telling the Galatians that in focusing on circumcision as the sign as to whether one is “good with God” they are actually not focusing on the life and message of Jesus, but rather just on what they know, which is, of course, what makes them comfortable.

In chapter 6, with a much gentler tone, Paul leaves the Galatians with some very practical advice on how to heal their divisions and get back on track with their faith: focus on caring, rather than condemning or critiquing. Freedom in Christ looks like caring for people, not putting them in categories

based on certain beliefs or behaviors. Think about it: when you are in the act of caring, you cannot simultaneously be in the act of condemning or criticizing...it's just not possible...and that goes for caring for others OR for yourself!

As Paul spells out what this kind of caring looks like, he weaves together both corporate responsibilities to the community and an individual's personal accountability before God.¹ They're two sides of the same coin. We are to be Caretakers of One Another while also Taking Care to make sure we are in a strong relationship with God so that we have what we need to be able to continue to be Caretakers of One Another. It's a cycle or a continuum, not a linear path or destination.

Notice how Paul talks about our responsibility to others or our Care Taking of others in Verse 1: "*we are to restore in a spirit of gentleness*" someone

else who is struggling with an ongoing behavior that is unhealthy or detrimental to themselves or those around them. While in the same verse he warns us to Take Care of ourselves, by "*ensuring we do not fall astray*" while helping another. The more we are grounded in God, the more we can be a stabilizing presence for another. Care Taking of others while Taking Care of ourselves.

Then in verse two Paul says: "*bear one another's burdens*" – communal responsibility; we need to be there for each other through the peaks and valleys in life, but especially when someone else is in a valley we need to go the extra mile for them. But then in verse 5 he says we need "*to make sure we're carrying our own load and not relying on the community in ways that are selfish.*" Bear the burdens of others. And also carry your own load. So how does that work? Well, figure out what is yours to do, take care of that, and let go of what isn't yours to

¹ "Freedom to Fulfill Responsibilities," Intervarsity Press Commentary on Biblegateway.com (accessed on May 30, 2021 at

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Gal/Freedom-Fulfill.>)

do so that you have enough space and strength and energy and availability left to be able to help others when a need in the community comes up that is really important.²

Then in verse 6, Paul speaks to generosity, in what could be called a gentle stewardship plea for his salary – give back to the one who has given to you. And then he says in verses 7 and 8, *“don’t be deceived; remember you reap whatever you sow.”* Be responsible of what you have that is yours. Take Care of where you are putting your energy and resources, make sure it’s into worthwhile endeavors. Again, it’s a balance of Care Taking of others, and Taking Care of yourself.

And finally, in verse 10, Paul says, *“let us work for the good of all, especially those in the community of faith”* – there’s the Care Taking again, which balances out what he says in verse 9: *“let us not grow weary in doing what is right, let’s not give up,”* which speaks to how

we have to Take Care of our own energy and reserves and remember the WHY behind our WHAT, the purpose behind our plans.

You could say that what Paul is doing here at the end of Galatians is giving us a practical theology for how to live a free life in Christ and for how to live in Christian community together not just for a day or for a season but for the long haul. It’s a practical theology I’m calling “Care Taking Care.” Because it’s not just Caretaking or serving the world. Nor is it just Taking Care of self or what we might call “self care.” It’s both – at one and the same time.

And by being simultaneously focused on others and on ourselves we guard ourselves against all the pitfalls of burnout and weariness which happens when you only focus on others AND we guard against the pitfalls of selfishness or self-absorption – which happens when you focus

² Suzanne Stabile, *The Enneagram Journey* Podcast (repeated quote from multiple shows), 2019-2021.

only on yourself and your own needs.

And look, Paul knows the Galatians are weary; they are weary of trying to form this new community of faith together; they are weary of trying to figure out whether Gentiles have to be circumcised like Jews; weary of fighting with one another; weary of leaders leading them astray; weary of a theological debate that leads none of them fulfilled. Paul knows that the antidote to their weariness and fighting among themselves is to refocus on others. To point them again to the inclusiveness of the gospel, and say “y’all are making this too hard. Jesus welcomes all. No rites or rituals required. The only law to follow is the law of loving God and loving others and believe it or not – when you are Caretaking for one another – you *are* fulfilling that law.

But, I also think by his tone in this letter, that Paul is pretty weary himself. Weary of people not understanding that Jesus came to show us a new way of

living in community together. Weary of having to teach the same thing again and again. Weary of making a few friends, starting these communities, and then having to move to a new place to do it all over again – never having a “home church” that supports him. Weary of the loneliness of leadership. Weary of being persecuted and imprisoned for his faith. Weary of the baggage and weight of his own sinful past – no matter how much he believed he was forgiven, he had to have struggled with the fact that he killed so many people and inflicted so much pain. And in many ways, I think Paul knows the antidote to *his* weariness is that maybe, from time to time, he needs to stop his Caretaking of others and zealous evangelizing and Take Care to ensure he is not falling into habits or destructive behaviors that don’t actually help him spread the gospel. He definitely knows he has it in him to go down a path of harm and not one of help or healing. So he has to guard against that and make sure he’s sowing behaviors and ministry that will

yield a healthy crop, if you will. He must have doubted his capability at this from time to time, as all these communities he started kept struggling with understanding the message of Jesus and implementing it into communities that actually loved and cared for one another. I'm sure he had days that felt more like failure than faithfulness.

So we know the Galatians struggled with this balance of CareTaking and Taking Care. And Paul struggled with it too. What about you?

Where do you land in the continuum of Caretaking and Taking Care? Are you swaying evenly back and forth? Or are you leaning so far one way you're about to fall over? Most of us tend to do the latter, especially in times of stress or transition.

Perhaps you are in a season of life where circumstances have put you into the role of Care Taker or Care Giver...for a spouse, a partner, a parent, a child, an organization, a community in need that you

serve through volunteer work (yes this could include your church!), or patients at this hospital where you work, or students at the school where you teach, or colleagues at any workplace. There are many ways we find ourselves in CareTaking roles. And it's easy to get maxed out on the CareTaking of others. You may not even realize that you are, thinking you can handle it, but little signs that might show that you are at your limit include:

- getting angry or resentful if someone asks you do something (*don't you know all that I do!*)
- avoiding answering the phone or checking email because you'll be afraid you're being asked to do something
- doing something that helps you numb out and disconnect from real people like scrolling through social media or binging on Netflix
- getting short or snippy with the person or persons you are Caretaking for
- thinking about (all the time) – ruminating about – why

this is your life and why things have to be this way?!

- continually grieving a former way of life or the life you thought your future would be before you found yourself in this role of Care Taking that has taken over your life
- feeling trapped, not free; like you don't have choices or agency; or losing your sense of purpose and meaning in what you're doing; just going through the motions to survive
- after a lot of activism for others or causes you feel are just, you start to feel the weight of the never ending injustices and violence – and wonder if your voice and actions even make a difference and you become disillusioned with the hope for change.

Now *any* and *all* of these things are very normal things to feel and think and be processing. No matter your family situation or career or job or advocacy or volunteer work. The question is – if any of these feelings or thoughts become so dominating

that this role of Care Taking of others prevents you from having a chance to explore other parts of your life and identity; or when you stop having time to do things you enjoy that have nothing to do with the person or people you care for, when you start to feel disconnected from God or from yourself or those you love – that's when we need to really pay attention to see if we are burned out.

I think a lot of us have found ourselves in this position throughout the past 15 months of this pandemic. Maybe we're at home and constantly caring for a loved one – parent, spouse, children – without outside help (or while we're also trying to work and figure out zoom school!) OR maybe our career and job – whatever it may be – has been turned upside down, has required much more of us than we were prepared to give, or maybe has even been pulled out from under us altogether – and it's left us little opportunity for anything else but to be a Care

Taker for all the people who are depending on us.

If that is you – then the spiritual practice or antidote to this is to find time and space and meaning in Taking Care of yourself. Whatever that looks like for you. Getting away for a weekend. Stepping away from your job for a few days. Asking a friend to watch your loved one or seeing if friends or grandparents can watch your kids (if that feels safe) – I know COVID has stripped so many of these available tools of self-care from us. And so if you are struggling to find a way to find time to Take Care of yourself – then ask someone to help you (a friend, a pastor, a therapist, a family member). And by Taking Care of yourself – that could be physically doing things that help you feel healthy, or emotionally/ spiritually/psychologically doing things that help you feel sane and whole and less alone...you might start to find some of that balance and equilibrium again; it might help you make space in your life to hear God speak, to find again

what it is that brings you joy, or allows you to see and appreciate beauty.

On the OTHER end of things, perhaps you are in a season of life where you have been Taking Care of yourself even been hyper focused on yourself and what's going on in your orbit. This could look like a number of things:

- trying to make it through school, grieving all you have missed out on because of the pandemic and now after being in survival mode of just trying to graduate, wondering what to do with you life...what is the next step?
- Or maybe you live alone, and because of the pandemic have had little to no social contact – you've worked all the puzzles, done all the zoom calls, read all the books, but just feel kind of lost without the routines of relationships and people structuring your life.
- Or maybe you had a significant loss this year – of a loved one or a job – or have moved – and are

feeling that unmoored, ungrounded feeling of your life being up in the air and like your anchor is gone – and this has caused you to be hyper focused on your heart and your mind, your own thoughts and feelings and grief and it's all you can do each day to wake up and focus on yourself enough to get dressed and out of bed and eat something.

- Or maybe all you've done in recent months is focus on your path forward, revamping your career or how you want your life to be different, dreaming of what could be, but maybe not involving those closest to you in that dreaming or thinking about how it will affect them.
- Or maybe you're sucked into the unending news cycle, continually obsessing over politics or economics and how that's affecting your life, your values, your 401K, your rights.

Again – these are all normal feelings and experiences – and there is nothing wrong with

being in a season of Taking Care of yourself. But when we are in these hyper-self-focused seasons, and when it starts to feel like our thoughts are spiraling or we are getting stuck, Paul suggests that an antidote to this could be finding a way to get involved in Care Taking of others – of someone else or a group of someone else's – even if that means volunteering for one hour a month somewhere or even just reading an article in the news from a different voice or perspective. Give your brain and heart a break from thinking about your life as you have been, and allow it to focus on other people's lives and situations for just a bit. Not because comparing your life with theirs will make you feel better about yourself – but because just the interruption of our thought spirals can help our brain create new pathways. And in my experience, it actually does help to view the world through the lens of other people – that's when growth happens, perspectives shift.

This is a very simple message today. It's nothing you do not know or have not heard before. But it's an important reminder – Care Taking and Taking Care go hand and hand. Perhaps this is why the golden rule is “love your neighbor as you love yourself” – it's a balance of others and self...and both have to be loved and cared for well. If you love God and want to live your life rooted in that love, you cannot love neighbor while neglecting self nor can you love self and neglect neighbor.

All of this is good wisdom at any time in our lives, but especially as the world begins to open up again and many of us are emerging from 15 months of pandemic life.

Some of us are so excited to be out and about and are aready to hug the world. And others of us are anxious in social settings and are already missing a slower pace of life without as many people and places to be. And while we might feel one way one day, the next day we might feel the other way.

Even though we have lived through the collective trauma of a pandemic together – we've lived it differently, and that means healing will look different. And so I encourage all of us to be good Care Takers of one another through this by respecting other people's decisions and safety measures and also by Taking Care to self-assess where we are – be open and honest about our own comfort levels with people. That's one reason we're doing the RED-YELLOW-GREEN sticker system here at Calvary starting next week (Red – 6 feet please, Yellow – Elbows Only, Green – Hugs/ Handshakes Okay). Choosing a sticker first causes us to really ask ourselves what we are comfortable with and then seeing another person's sticker gives us the opportunity to care for others as they need by respecting their sticker. It's a small gesture – but really as I've been thinking about it this week, these stickers are symbolic of a larger spiritual practice that would be good for us to be doing much more often

in all areas of our life: Taking Care, or taking time, to know ourselves and what we need, and Care Taking, taking time and interest, in asking what others need or are okay with – without assuming that what we need is what they would need or how we are feeling must be how they would feel in that same situation.

One of the most important spiritual practices we can learn from these ten verses in Paul's letter to the Galatians is this combination balance of Caretaking and Taking Care – or “Care Taking Care” as I'm calling it – because the two cannot be separated. They are one practice that must be integrated together. Imagine the harvest we would sow if we planted ourselves not in the field of burnout nor in the field of self-absorption but in the field of “Care Taking Care!” I think it would not only keep us from getting weary and fatigued, but I think it would actually help keep a sense of wonder and faith about us – bringing us together across our

differences in the love and Spirit of Christ.

And you know, throughout COVID we've had a chance to break old habits and form new ones – in almost all areas of our lives. As we reconvene, it's a great time to do a temperature check of ourselves before gathering back together – what new habits do we want to keep? Because God never calls us to just rely on the comfort levels of what we have known, but rather God draws us into a future based on the adventurous leading of Christ. And who knows where Christ will take us this year!

Paul criticized the Galatians for falling back into old belief patterns and ways of being; may we do our best not to do the same. May we draw closer as a community while also drawing our community out into the world. May we feel free in Christ. Not locked into the past, but letting go and looking forward for whatever the future holds.

Amen.