

FIRST LESSON: Proverbs 16:23-25

SECOND LESSON: Galatians 6:1-6

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“Offering Real Help”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

One of the things I learned growing up is that lecturing is a terrible way to try to get through to your kids when they are doing something wrong. My father used the “reach them with logic” approach. Never worked. Kids don’t care about logic. My mother adopted the “rant until you’ve got it out of your system” approach. It may have made her feel better but we had her figured out. Generally speaking, she was good for 30 to 40 minutes of pure angry lecture, UNLESS you happened to say something in your defense. One word got you an extra ten minutes. A full sentence added another half hour. A few sentences, a full additional hour. I know; I tested it out just to see. It simply wasn’t worth it. The best policy was to let her wear herself out and ignore everything she said.

The reason why lecturing doesn’t work, even when we add in the terrible possible consequences, is that the human ego refuses to take in information that it is wrong, and the average teenager is absolutely invincible. None of those things will ever happen to them. You just don’t understand. But what people of all ages can see, despite our highly developed prickly defense systems, is the example of others. The good examples and the bad examples both have an impact even if lectures do not. What also helps when someone has messed up is to try to get alongside them in a way that is supportive and compassionate.

When it comes to our kids we have to intervene if we see them getting into trouble. We have no choice. But when it comes to other adults the rules change. And there are extremes we need to avoid. No one likes a self-appointed busy body who will come and tell you exactly what you’re doing wrong and then proceed to give instructions on what to do next. Rude gestures come to mind. But most of us are in far more danger of going to the other extreme—the “it’s not my business” extreme. At its worst we have situations like the woman who was assaulted on the subway and not one person intervened. We are our sister and brother’s keeper. It IS our business. When we see another human being struggling we are supposed to offer help! Of course, help could be refused, but it is less likely to be refused if instead of looking down on the person in need, we walk alongside them.

I believe that one reason why 12 step programs are so successful is that there are no “you shoulds.” It is all about example. It is all about, “this happened to me . . . this works for me . . .” People in recovery don’t tell each

other what to do. The only inventory to take is one's own. This is not to say that to a lesser extent criticism never happens because people are people, but it is so fundamentally opposed to the ethos of a 12 step program that it doesn't happen nearly as often as it does everywhere else. In recovery everyone knows that they are equally vulnerable, and if someone relapses they are always welcomed back with words of encouragement. Christians who have become familiar with 12 step programs have often lamented, why can't we have a Sinner's Anonymous? Why can't that level of compassion apply in the Church? The Church should be the most compassionate forgiving place ever! But as someone **else** once said, the church is the only army in the world that shoots its wounded.

Paul recognized that people are going to mess up at times. The morality and values of wider pagan society were vastly different from the body of Christ, and someone converting to Christianity could face a lot of peer pressure to do what everyone else was doing. The same is true today. When some people come to faith they have to create a whole new friend network. Just like a person new in recovery needs to avoid "people, places and things" that would endanger their sobriety, not all peer groups are helpful! Family members, of course, are always trickier to deal with. But the "sins" we fall into don't have to be scandalous. We don't have to be talking about promiscuity or drinking or taking drugs. Anyone could have a problem with anger, or gossip. Anyone could habitually lie in order to avoid conflict. Anyone could stop trusting God and start hoarding money and things. There are many kinds of sin and many ways to fall into it.

Paul says, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently." The word Paul uses for "restore" was actually used as a medical term at the time for setting a broken bone. It was also used to describe mending nets. Basically, it means to put everything back the way it should be in perfect working order. But we are to help restore a person who has gotten themselves into trouble gently. That word is *praus*. Matthew's gospel uses the word to describe Jesus. Jesus is "*praus* and lowly in heart" (11:29). Jesus is a king, "*praus*, and mounted on a donkey" (21:5).

When we exercise *praus* we are gentle, firm and in control of ourselves. We are humble. The desire is to help not to judge, and to help in such a way that does not make matters worse. There is no place for arrogance, no room for being judgmental. And once that restoration is complete the slate is clean. This is not a situation in which we have misjudged a person or their actions. What God asks of us is much harder. God asks us to not judge when **we're right**. God asks us to not judge when that sister or brother of ours has totally screwed up and done something wrong. If we're feeling judgmental and compassion has taken a vacation, however, there is a way to get to where we need to be. To achieve *praus* all we have to do is exercise brutal self-honesty.

A lot of us take inventories as part of our jobs. Few take self-inventories as part of our lives, but a real easy way to do it is this: It's called "if you spot it, you got it." I can only recognize a flaw in others if at least to some degree I possess that flaw myself. It may manifest differently or to a lesser degree, but

the simple fact remains that I would not recognize it in someone else if I did not have it in myself. Therefore, whatever problem my friend is struggling with, I too am vulnerable. I can't look down on them because I exist on the same plane. When Paul warns us of the danger of falling into temptation he is probably not talking about falling into the same temptation but rather the temptation to think we are superior and better than the other person. Paul says, "If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves."

Finally, Paul urges us to carry each other's burdens. Carrying each other's burdens can mean many things. First and foremost, it means being truly available to that other person. It means listening with an open heart. It means standing by, not walking away. Having all the answers is absolutely NOT required. Having compassion is. And after that, there are practical needs to consider . . .

Does that exhausted overworked parent who is getting very little sleep need help with the laundry? How about running the vacuum, doing the dishes or bringing in some shopping? Does this person need a ride? Help finding a therapist? A safe place to hang out for a few hours? Do they need a new coat? A pregnancy test? Someone to go with them to get tested for AIDS no questions asked? James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2: 14-17)

If my friend who is struggling has glaring practical needs and I am doing nothing about it then I have failed. To truly help we have to truly help. Is it convenient? Absolutely not! But this is how we fulfill the law of Christ. This is what loving one another as he has loved us means.

Paul concludes by saying that while we carry one another's burdens we should carry our own load, which sounds on the surface like a contradiction, but he is really saying something else. Paul is saying that I need to keep my side of the street clean, and not worry about what someone else does. We all have a tendency to point to others so we don't have to look at ourselves. But I am responsible for me. I need to keep my own life in order, stay humble and right sized, and always be willing to offer real help when someone else is in trouble. Amen.

Proverbs 16:23-25

- 23** The hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent,
and their lips promote instruction.
- 24** Gracious words are a honeycomb,
sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

Galatians 6:1-6

6 Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. **2** Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. **3** If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. **4** Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, **5** for each one should carry their own load. **6** Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor.