

I want to preach this morning on two verses in our Galatians passage that are at obvious odds with one another. First we read that we are to "*bear one another's burdens*", but then just 3 verses later we hear that "*each one will have to bear his own load*." One verse says one thing; the other verse says another thing. One verse is the Law and the other verse is the Gospel. Both are true. What do I mean by this?

This past week David Brooks wrote an Op-Ed in the New York Times about Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. In a piece he titled, "Bill Wilson's Gospel," Brooks tells Wilson's story. It's a story about both bearing one's own burden as well as having that burden be borne by Another. It is a story about both Law and Gospel.

*"On Dec. 14, 1934, a failed stockbroker named Bill Wilson was struggling with alcoholism at a New York City detox center. It was his fourth stay at the center and nothing had worked. This time... he consulted a friend named Ebby Thacher, who told him to give up drinking and give his life over to the service of God.*

*Wilson was not a believer, but, later that night, at the end of his rope, he called out in his hospital room: "If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything. Anything!" As Wilson described it, a white light suffused his room and the presence of God appeared. "It seemed to me, in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing," he testified later. "And then it burst upon me that I was a free man." Wilson never touched alcohol again. He went on to help found Alcoholics Anonymous, which, 75 years later, has some 1.2 million members...."*

This is an inspiring story that has both despair and redemption. It is a story of bearing one's own burden in that Bill Wilson was alone in that hospital room bearing the consequences of his own life. There was no escape, no one else to blame. That is the Law at work. And yet it is also a story of Another bearing Bill's burden for him – God coming to him in white light and setting him free. That is the Gospel at work.

I want to suggest this morning that Bill Wilson's story is in some way everyone's story. Although not everyone is an alcoholic, his story has universal connection. This is because addiction is the best way to describe our sinful condition as human beings. As I said, we are not all addicted to alcohol or drugs or sex, but we are all addicted to self because of our original sin. Our addictions can take many forms: you can be addicted to your success, you can be addicted to control, you can be addicted to your children, you can be addicted to 4<sup>th</sup> of July sales, you can be addicted to

anger or lust or envy. You can even be addicted to getting positive feedback on your sermons!

Our dog Blue keeps getting into the compost bucket on our porch. As you might imagine the compost bucket smells terrible – terrible to us, but apparently not terrible to Blue. We thought we had secured the lid, but Blue continues to find a way to nose the top off the bucket and dig into coffee grounds, rotting onions, and broken chicken eggs. Of course his culinary escapades result in his general discomfort and his being sick to his stomach at all hours of the night, but that doesn't stop him from the next round. He just can't help it.

The Bible says that when it comes to sin, we are like Blue. Sin is terrible for us, makes us sick, leads to our general discomfort and even to our death, but we return to whatever version of the compost bucket dominates our lives. There is actually a Bible verse that describes this: *"As a dog returns to his vomit, is a fool who repeats his folly."* (Proverbs 26:11) You may be thinking, "OK, fine. But I'm no fool." You may be thinking that, but the Bible thinks otherwise. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, *"The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them."* (Ecclesiastes 2:14)

God has put into our universe this inexorable Law that cannot be violated. The Law says that we all must bear our own burden. Paul also says it this way in our Galatians reading – *"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."*

Just as in a garden, if you plant a tomato seed, you will harvest a tomato and not a cucumber. If you sow anger and irritation toward your children, you will reap resentment and distance when they grow up. If you sow licentiousness in your dating life you will reap distrust from your future spouse, and perhaps the recompense of disease in your body. If you sow avarice in your spending life, you will reap crushing debt. In Bill Wilson's case, he sowed excessive alcohol use in his life and reaped addiction to alcohol.

You reap what you sow – this is the Law and in a real way you must bear these consequences alone. There is no use in soft-peddling the brunt and force of the Law. But then again, I don't need to, because you have your own compost bucket to tell you the exact same thing.

If all we had was God's Law, life would be very grim indeed. We would only inhabit the despairing first part of Bill Wilson's story. For that is what the Law is intended to do – drive us to despair in ourselves. Drive us to the end of our rope. Drive us to a hospital room and drop us off in the middle of the night. As Paul says, "the law condemns us."

This is an alien word for our culture, because we are generally taught to avoid despair and weakness and need. And yet, this is how God works. This is also how A.A. works and what Bill Wilson discovered that night at the end of his rope in 1934. David Brooks rightly notes, *“In a culture that generally celebrates empowerment and self-esteem, A.A. begins with disempowerment. The goal is to get people to gain control over their lives, but it all begins with an act of surrender and an admission of weakness”*.

The act of surrender and the admission of weakness are the doorway from the Law to the Gospel – God’s word of mercy and love for sinners who repeatedly go back to the compost bucket. Along with the Law, there is the Gospel - *“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”* Sometimes you can’t make it on your own.

Bearing another’s burdens is not simple or clean. At the end of Norman Maclean’s *“A River Runs Through It”*, an old father talks with his son about how to help his other son. The one son has a penchant for alcohol, street fighting and reckless living. The father is a minister with a lifetime of experience on trying to bear one another’s burdens.

*“‘Help’, he said, ‘is giving a part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly. So it is...that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don’t know what part to give or maybe we don’t like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed. It is like the auto-supply shop over town where they always say, ‘Sorry, we are just out of that part.’”*

The other son replies, *‘You make it too tough. Help doesn’t have to be anything that big.’”*

To bear one another’s burdens is to admit weakness as the norm for our lives. It is to both give help and receive help. Bearing one another’s burdens is infused with the gospel, because it is predicated on recognition of weakness and is actuated by love and mercy. It is also the way to be real with each other. Again, David Brooks says, *“In a culture that thinks of itself as individualistic, A.A. relies on fellowship. The general idea is that people aren’t really captains of their own ship. Successful members become deeply intertwined with one another — learning, sharing, suffering and mentoring one another. Individual repair is a social effort.”*

So the Scriptures today tells us “each one must bear his own load” – the law that is inexorable and true. But it also tells us to “bear one another’s burdens.” Often it is true that we don’t have the right part or we don’t like to give any part of ourselves.

Sometimes we can and do help one another. It is in these times that we feel most alive and we feel close to one another.

Ultimately, though, the burden of our addiction to sin is too big to be borne by ourselves or even by others relating to us in love. This burden must be borne by Another, by One who has the parts that are needed and who gives of Himself. When Bill Wilson cried out, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself", that prayer was answered in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. God knew what part to give – He gave Himself to die on the cross for your addictions. Jesus bore his own load of despair and humiliation – no one else could do it. Social repair was His individual effort. And in doing so, He bore your burden and thus fulfilled the law of Christ.

Amen.