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Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18

I'm sure my mom can fill you in on the details of this story that I've forgotten over the years. When I was much younger, we used to live across the street from a big park. We'd go over there fairly often because it was a nice park with lots of things to do. It was a pretty quiet area, so it was a good place for kids to play and for adults to relax and have a little peace. I don't recall exactly when it was, must have been during the summer I decided I was going to go play in the park. In my youthful exuberance it seems I neglected to inform my parents of where I was going. I had some fun for a while and came home to find my parents frantic. I don't recall trying to make excuses and, even if I had, there wouldn't be any that would have held water. I was supposed to ask and I didn't. I got my butt swatted as a result and had no one to blame but myself.

I mention this because there are an increasing number of people who are against many different kinds of punishment for misbehaving children. Punishments that, before the last generation or two, people wouldn't have thought twice about. Corporal punishment and even raising your voice to a child is taboo in some circles these days. One of the chief arguments against them is that these punishments are often abusive and do long term damage to the child. I think the problem is actually that people call things "punishment" when they are actually "abuse." It's true that as sinners we can lose our temper and allow anger to dictate our actions, but if we are following what Paul says here, then any punishment or discipline we mete out will be done in the proper spirit. Though punishment may not feel gentle to the recipient, the punisher knows that to allow bad behavior and actions to go unpunished will mean much worse will happen eventually.

It's important to help people correct problems before they get out of hand. Parents don't want children who are self-centered and demanding or who are incapable of living on their own. So any behavior that arises that might develop into a bad and destructive habit is dealt with and disciplined for the child's own good. We don't like doing it, but it's necessary.

Actually that's not always the case. I mentioned some time back that shame isn't something our society seems to have anymore. That's why you can have an older man pretending to be a little girl and not see a problem. But actually that's not always the case either. There are two kinds of shame. There's the shame I feel when I do something wrong and my conscience fires up to remind me of my wrongdoing. This kind of shame is necessary. It reminds us we need forgiveness and grace from God. It reminds us of how we've hurt others and ourselves. This kind of shame has largely been lost in our society. People make excuses, rationalize, and otherwise turn shameful behavior into something praiseworthy.

The other kind of shame is, unfortunately, everywhere. This is the shame we heap on others. When we see someone do something, intentional or not, that has a bad outcome, we don't hesitate to scorn them publicly. We throw all of the derision and insults at them we can possibly think of to make sure they know they are terrible people and should apologize to the entire world for their stupendous failures.

If you recall a couple of weeks ago there was the incident here at the Cincinnati Zoo. A four year old boy managed to get into the gorilla cage and was endangered by a gorilla who was then shot and killed. Immediately following this incident, a wave of hatred was directed at the mother for being such a failure as to let this all happen. There was even a backlash against the

zoo keepers for not trying every means possible to deal with the gorilla short of killing him. Only an inept and useless mother would allow her son to do such a thing. Only ignorant zoo keepers would resort to violence right away rather than trying everything at their disposal first.

I could join in pointing my accusatory finger at the mother and the zoo keepers. The loss of a gorilla is bad enough, much less one that's an endangered species. Particularly since we are called to be caretakers of the world God has given to us. The hurt to the child is also regrettable. Though his injuries weren't severe, he may be emotionally scarred and never go back to a zoo again or enjoy nature in general.

I could point my finger, but what does that accomplish? Even if I knew all of the details of what happened, if I knew how the boy got into the gorilla cage and knew that his mother and the zookeepers and everyone else was incompetent, publicly shaming those people does nothing to fix the situation. It does nothing to help anyone. All it does is make me sound smart. "I wouldn't have been so stupid as to allow something like that to happen. I would never have lost track of my four year old son," or "I would never be so swift to kill a majestic gorilla. I would have tried every other option first before heartlessly shooting him." Clearly I'm the better person because these things would never have happened if I had been in charge.

Tearing others down is easy to do and we enjoy pointing out the faults in others, but it doesn't actually help anyone. We cover ourselves in sin while thinking we're pointing it out in others. When God calls our attention to our sins, it isn't to deride us or insult us. It isn't to make us a laughingstock of the community. It's to show us the damage we're causing to ourselves, to correct what we have done wrong and bring us back to safety. When we shame and belittle others it does nothing to help them or us.

Paul speaks to a church in need of help, a church being threatened by false messages and teachings, a church that's doing everything wrong that it had recently been doing right. Things were fine when Paul was there but now they are going off the rails. He has some harsh things to say to them. But there's a fundamental difference between what Paul does here and what others might do in a similar situation. Paul has no interest in shoving their face in the dirt. He has no interest in making them look bad and gets no pleasure out of having to address this problem.

If you think about it, things could have much worse for us than they already were. As sinners, we are already condemned and not only that, we continue to do dumb, reckless, and hurtful things all the time. God could sit there on his throne and sneer at our incompetence. Jesus could have come to earth specifically to laugh in our faces. But that isn't what happens at all. God loves his children and hopes every single one of them will come to him for salvation.

God sends prophets who called attention to Israel's sins and the sins of the world in order to warn them of the eventual outcome those sins would bring. The great disasters that God sent on various cities and nations often came only after repeated attempts to get them to listen and turn from their wickedness and sin.

Christ's coming continues this work. Much of his ministry is spent talking to sinners. Some repent and believe. Others refuse to listen. Jesus is never interested in hurling insults or trying to make himself look smarter and better than those around him. Jesus comes, "to seek and to save the lost." Jesus offers life and salvation, and only administers judgment and condemnation if he is given no other option. The apostles who come after Christ continue this work, bringing the message of salvation to the world and calling it to turn from its wickedness and live.

If God's attitude toward us was the same as ours is with others, none of us would be here. None of us would even have a chance. Each of us would sin. Each of us would reject the God

who made us and gave us life. Christ would never come to save us and we would each be lost for eternity.

As Paul says, “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” Talking ourselves up and making ourselves look smart doesn’t really change who we are and doesn’t do anything to help anyone, ourselves included. For if we boast in ourselves, then we will have only ourselves to blame when it comes time for God to judge our merits. That’s why Paul says to boast in the cross of Christ. Boast instead of what God has done for you. Boast in the mercy and grace he has given you. Boast that you are loved by him and, despite his greatness and majesty, he has come down to save you.

This explains what Paul says at the beginning. If anyone is caught in a transgression, you should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. God has given you a great and wonderful gift as he forgives your sins through the blood of Christ. Christ has given everything to save you. Sharing that gift is how we show others what God has done for us. By restoring those who are caught up in sins, we give them what God has given us. There is no need to build ourselves up, because God has already given us the greatest gift there is. Now we are given the privilege of giving that same gift to those who still need it. Not to boast in ourselves, but to boast in Christ, to boast in those who have been restored by him, just as we have been. For when the time comes, we will see the result of what God has done for us and through us, the multitude of saints who gather together in God’s kingdom to celebrate the rich gifts he has given.