Who Is Responsible?

Everyone agrees that this world is a broken mess, but we disagree violently over who is responsible for fixing it. The Bible offers a common-sense solution.

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For each one shall bear his own load" (Gal. 6:2-5).

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In the space of a few lines, Paul makes two statements that seem to contradict each other: "Bear one another's burdens" is quickly followed by "each shall bear his own load." The juxtaposition of these two concepts in the same paragraph is too deliberate to be chalked up to clumsy wording. Paul is clearly trying to teach us something about load-bearing. What is it? How can these two statements be reconciled?

A clue is found in the instruction that introduces these verses: "If a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (v. 1). There are two parties in this scenario: the person who is overtaken by a fault, and those who have the responsibility of intervening to help him get back on the right path. In this context, the "burden" or "load" that is to be borne refers to the responsibility to straighten out what has gone wrong in an individual's life. That responsibility, Paul argues, belongs to *both* the offending party and those who surround him. He must accept responsibility for his mistake and take steps to correct it; and his friends must embrace him with the firm correction and gentle support that will enable him to be successful in that endeavor.

The implications of this principle are far-reaching. Our society is currently tearing itself apart over (among other things) who is responsible for curing society's ills. One faction argues that all social ills are the result of poor personal decisions and cannot be resolved until individuals start making better choices in their lives. Another faction insists that personal choices have little bearing on outcomes, that the major factor in personal failure is the powerful influence of a broken social system. Of course, the solutions that each side offers are predicated on the starting assumptions.

Paul's approach to personal improvement incorporates truth drawn from both sides. He recognizes the personal responsibility that each individual has for his own conduct, but also acknowledges the need for outside support to help the struggling individual find his footing.

So conservatives are right when they insist that people must take ownership of their behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors. Bad choices do indeed spawn much of the pain we experience in our lives, and each of us must train ourselves to make better choices. Each of us must "bear his own load."

But liberals are also correct in arguing that individuals usually can't make those changes in isolation and need help in getting their lives straightened out. A larger social support system that can provide encouragement, instruction, counseling, mentoring, and physical assistance is essential to their rescue. We all have the duty to "bear one another's burdens" as we have opportunity.

Paul's instructions are describing the responsibility of believers to one another in the context of a local church, but the principle has value in larger societal settings as well (civic organizations, governments, etc.). Regardless of the scope of the social group, the concept of personal responsibility and interpersonal support working in tandem with each other is built into our nature as social creatures. Neglect either one, and we're doomed to fail.

— *David King*