

WHY NOT ME? AND WHAT ABOUT US?

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

Apparently Paul thought the Galatians needed these instructions, and the Holy Spirit certainly knew believers and churches would need them in the centuries to follow. Surely **we** need them. Whether it's a huge scandal within the American evangelical movement or a lower profile moral and spiritual failure among us, the Holy Spirit knew we would need help.

Perhaps yours is different, but my initial response to another's moral and spiritual failure is often something like, "how **could** she?" or "whatever was **he** thinking?" or "how could **that** happen?" A more thoughtful and helpful response, however, would be to wonder, "why not **me**?" What is it that has spared me, my loved ones, and many others the pain of **my** spiritual failure? How have I managed not to fall? To whom do I owe profound gratitude for helping me remain faithful and guarding my feet from stumbling?

Such questions keep my focus where it should be—on the grace and mercy that has "brought me safe thus far," on the God of grace and his unmerited resources that have empowered me to resist temptation, and on the host of loved ones and friends whose fellowship has become sweeter than the pleasures of defection. Such questions also alert me to the dangers I might not otherwise see—a weakness or vulnerability that drives me to deeper dependency upon God and others. Another's failure should always awaken us to how vulnerable **we** are and how gracious **God** is toward us. But what of the fallen? Several aspects of Paul's counsel jump out at me.

First, one's failure is, in some ways, the community's failure. We should never minimize the individual's responsibility, but neither should we minimize the essential resources of the community for believing life.

Paul's counsel is set within a larger discussion of the Christian's use of freedom. He has said, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (5:13-14). He goes on to urge them to walk by the Spirit and reject life in the flesh, contrasting the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. In so doing he underscores the relationships within which our spiritual lives develop and flourish. Thus, when one is overcome by some trespass or sin, it signals a rupture in the gracious community so necessary for sustaining faithfulness. Perhaps the individual simply chose sin. Perhaps the community wasn't there for the individual, contributing to the disaster. Perhaps the truth lies in the middle. Under no circumstances, however, is the failure of one only **that** one's business. It is a **community** concern. I suggest it provides occasion for the community to assess its own spiritual and relational dynamics. Were we **there** for that one? Did we speak the truth in love? Are we open, gracious, and safe enough for the doubting, struggling, and wounded among us? Are we truly a **spiritual** community, a habitation for the Spirit of God? If not, why not? What does God need to do for us and among us? In other words, it is a good time to ask, "What about **us**?"

Second, Paul's language is important to note. The verb he uses suggests entrapment, like wild game that is lured and trips the trap wire. The imagery reminds us we are would-be prey for an enemy, with an advanced degree in engineering, specializing in snare-design. We do not subscribe to a "victim's mentality," but neither do we deny the presence of an Enemy who targets God's own. We affirm that subtle compromises, "innocent" flirtations, and tiny divergencies from the path can inch us toward some carefully camouflaged trap. Again, how we need one another's help to scan the landscape, to stick together in our walk, and to look out for each other when we seem to be wandering off.

Third, the failure of one requires a spiritual response from the community. "You who are spiritual" occasions much discussion among interpreters. Does this designate a spiritual SWAT team that swoops into action to rescue the erring? Or is Paul assuming that community members are, in fact, spiritual, that the Spirit of God indwells them and grants them holy resources of love, grace, wisdom, and power that can flow from life to life? I lean toward the latter. But whichever it is, within the community there must be those who can be about the work of restoration. There **must be** because God composes the Body, and gifts it according to his will. That means he must have given to each Body of believers those through whom he

can work. And even if some are not able to be directly involved in restorative ministry, they can still support through their prayers and through conversation that is wholesome toward all. The community must mobilize on behalf of the one to bring restoration.

Fourth, Paul says this should be done with gentleness. That is, with both power and blessing. Gentleness demands sensitivity, understanding, patience, solidarity with the fallen and hurting, each step of the way toward wholeness.

Fifth, there are special dangers for people who care for the fallen. Paul says, “Watch yourself.” Among the dangers are pride, self righteousness, and a patronizing spirit that treats others condescendingly. It is easy to confuse our meager efforts with the great saving power of God. We must beware lest we think we ourselves are saviors incapable of such things.

This brings us back to those two alternate questions. Why not **me**? And what about **us**?

Loving Lord,

Fill our hearts, homes, and churches so full of your love and grace, so full of Your Holy Self, that our every weakness only drives us closer to You and that our care for one another mirrors the Family that You are—
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.