

Digging Deeper

October 4, 2026



What does it mean to bear one another's burdens?

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Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." The word burden here means "a weight of personal and eternal significance." It can refer to a character flaw, a struggle, or a moral requirement. Some have wondered at the meaning of this verse as it compares to Galatians 6:5, which says, "Each one should bear his own load." Are these verses contradictory? How can we bear someone else's burdens if we are each supposed to carry our own loads?

The Greek word translated "load" in Galatians 6:5 is *phortion*, which refers to an individual burden that is not transferable. We each have certain obligations for which we alone are responsible. For example, God has given each of us responsibilities for our families (1 Timothy 5:8), our churches (1 Corinthians 12:18), and our personal holiness (1 Peter 1:15-16). We cannot assume the responsibility for someone else's behavior. We can, however, bear other burdens; we can come alongside a struggling brother or sister and help shoulder the weight of a trial or temptation that threatens to pull him under.

We can illustrate the idea of bearing one another's burdens with the picture of a man staggering beneath a heavy load of grain. He must somehow get this grain home to his family, but he is about to crumble beneath its weight. A brother sees his distress and rushes to his aid, lifting a part of the burden and thereby easing the weight of it. Although the supportive one does not assume the whole load, his help allows the struggling one to carry on to his destination.

The church at Antioch is an example of believers bearing one another's burdens. Acts 11:27-30 records that the church learned of a coming famine in Judea. Though they did not personally know the ones who would be affected by this difficulty, they took up collections to send to them by way of traveling apostles. The Antioch church did not assume responsibility for total provision, but their generosity lightened the load for those who would be suffering.

We are each responsible before God for the gifts and resources He has entrusted to us (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10). We cannot blame others, shift responsibility, or make excuses about why we were unfaithful with the assignments we've been given—we must bear our own loads. But there are also times when life threatens to overwhelm. A spouse dies. A child is injured. A job folds or a house burns down. As part of the family of God,

we are to come to the aid of our brothers and sisters in need (Philippians 2:3-4). When a load suddenly becomes too heavy for one person, we are to bear one another's burdens. The added strength and encouragement of others is often the difference between pressing on and giving up.

Unfortunately, there are a few who isolate Galatians 6:2 and make a career out of asking for help. They misuse God's command to bear one another's burdens to avoid their own responsibilities and habitually harass their church families with expectations of aid. Walking in the light of God's Word is a delicate balance between selfless giving and responsible boundaries. If we err too far on one side, we become self-focused and overly independent. But erring too far the other way leads to assuming responsibility for other people's messes. When we aim to bear our own loads, while always being available to bear the burdens of others as the Lord leads, we will strike that perfect balance.

Should we Bear One Another's Burdens(6:2)? Or Carry Our Own Load(6:5)?

Kenneth Berding

Which is it? Are we supposed to carry one another's burdens, as Galatians 6:2 says: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ"? Or should we carry our own load, as Galatians 6:5 (only three verses later) says: "For each will have to bear his own load"?

First, let me remind readers that there is no way that the Apostle Paul (who wrote these words) is accidentally contradicting himself. If Paul is anything as an author, he is intentional. So if this isn't a contradiction, what's going on?

In Galatians 6, Paul offers sage counsel on situations all Christians face. Moreover, his counsel turns out to be exceptionally practical and helpful. What is it that Paul exhorts his readers to do?

Answer: Paul challenges Christians to help others carry burdens when those burdens become too heavy to bear while simultaneously reminding his readers that every Christian bears responsibility for carrying his or her own load.

In other words, Paul offers balanced advice that encourages Christians to sacrificially serve other Christians who are overburdened, while in the same paragraph reminding his readers that each person has a certain amount of responsibility to carry his or her own load.

Stated differently: God wants us to sacrificially help those who need help. But we also need to encourage and teach people how to carry their own loads.

Every day I encounter hundreds of college students who carry around textbooks (and phones, and computers, and snacks, and changes of clothes, and wallets, and even frisbees) in backpacks. Except in the rare case when a guy offers to carry his girlfriend's backpack, all students on our campus willingly carry their own backpacks. But sometimes a student needs help bearing something too heavy for one person to carry alone. A few days ago, I observed some film students working together to move heavy equipment while preparing to shoot a short film. The director was unable to carry the heavy equipment alone. He needed others to bear the burden with him.

The difference between Galatians 6:2 and 6:5 is akin to the difference between carrying heavy equipment and toting a backpack.

Paul's comments about burden/load-bearing suggest that this is the right way to interpret these verses. Let me use Q&A format to highlight the literary flow of Galatians 6:1-5.

What situation does Paul initially address?

if anyone is caught in a sin

Who should respond in such a situation?

you who are spiritual

What should you do?

restore such a person

With what attitude?

in a spirit of gentleness

Doing what at the same time?

keeping watch over yourself

To avoid what?

being similarly tempted

What else should you do?

bear one another's burdens

Resulting in what?

fulfilling the law of Christ

Reminding yourself of what?

(that) if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself

What should you do instead of thinking that way?

let each one test his own work

With what results?

then he can be proud of what he's done

Rather than what?

rather than taking credit for someone else's work

Furthermore, what else should be done?

For each one will have to bear his own load.

Now, there is some disagreement about whether in this final statement (verse 5), Paul is merely predicting that each person in the future will have to give an account for what he or she has done (what grammarians might call a predictive future), or whether Paul is telling people that they ought to bear their own loads (an imperatival future).

But in my mind, either option is a reminder to Paul's readers (us included) that each of us has the responsibility to carry around our own backpacks rather than expecting others to lug it around for us. Supporting this idea is that Paul not only offers instructions in this paragraph, he also addresses attitudes necessary for helping others: acting with a spirit of gentleness, keeping watch over yourself, not fooling yourself into thinking you're more than you are, testing your own work, not boasting in others' accomplishments. That is,

each person will eventually give an account for what he or she has done, implying that each person needs to take responsibility for toting one's own backpack.

It may be that Paul signals a difference between these two scenarios with his use of two different words: the one we translate "burdens" in verse 2 (βάρη, which in many contexts is viewed negatively) and the word we translate as "load" in verse 5 (φορτίον, a diminutive of φόρτος, which may point to something lighter). Granted, he may have simply used a different word for stylistic reasons, that is to avoid using the same word twice. But it seems more likely, at least in my mind—especially considering the differences in his instructions between verses 2 and 5—that he altered the word because he had different types of loads in mind.

What can we take away from this discussion? Here are four possible applications, directed to various people's tendencies:

1. Are you slow to help others who are over-burdened?

Respond more quickly to others who truly need your help.

2. Do you tend to unload your problems on others—routinely expecting others to carry your load for you?

Acknowledge that you bear responsibility to carry your God-given backpack. Pick it up and start carrying it.

3. Do you struggle to accept help from others? That is, do you try to carry everything on your own?

Allow others to help you carry your burdens when truly over-burdened. God never intended his children to carry everything on their own.

4. Are you one of those people who carries on your back eight backpacks at a time—backpacks that belong to others—when others around you aren't carrying even one? In other words, do you find yourself doing everything for others, even responsibilities that God has given them to do?

Teach others to carry their own loads. Teach through example and encouragement.

Let me grant that most of us will struggle with at least one of these four applications. Depending upon behavioral patterns we have laid down (sometimes over years), we may need counsel and guidance, growth in understanding how the gospel works out in life, and lots and lots of practice, to properly attune ourselves to how we should carry (or not carry, or help others carry) backpacks and burdens.

Bear one another's burdens—when those burdens become too heavy to carry. But also take responsibility to carry your God-given load.