

### ***What to Carry***

In the name of him who bears in his body the marks of our sin, dear friends in Christ: Years ago when I was physically fit, young, and stupid (as opposed to the present fat, old, and stupid) I used to enjoy backpacking. It's a strange combination of recreation and self-inflicted misery. Way up in the wilderness of the Cascades or the High Sierra, for example, at least three days' hike from the nearest road, you get to experience nature completely unspoiled and see mountain vistas so glorious they take your breath away. It also means nearly killing yourself climbing up impossibly steep passes, subsisting on freeze-dried foods that under normal circumstances you wouldn't inflict upon a dog (maybe not even a cat), sleeping on the cold, stony ground, and having to defend yourself against bears and other dangers. It's great.

The most important part of each trip, however, happens before it begins. It's determining what to take with you – what to carry. The trick is to take exactly what you need and not one item more because if you don't need it, you carry its weight for however long the hike is for no reason. An experienced backpacker knows that every ounce counts. The goal is to minimize the burden on your back and yet make sure you don't lack anything necessary. You don't want to run out of something vital. On one trip the group I was with came across a couple who had run out of toilet paper. They were reduced to using leaves for matters of personal hygiene – which aren't great but will do in a pinch. Unfortunately this pair didn't know how to properly identify and avoid poison oak. Yeah, try to get that image out of your mind. Mercifully, they did not invite us to examine their injuries; but we could tell from the way they were walking it wasn't good. We shared with them what we could spare – even gave them a tiny tube of hydrocortisone (for all the good it might have done). But you get the point: carry what you need (or might need) and nothing else – which is another mistake. Inexperienced backpackers tend to over-think it and carry stuff they'll never need but they bring it along “just in case”. If you're going hiking with one of them, it's a good idea to help them load their pack and see what they're planning on taking: “A bowling ball? Really? No, I don't think you're going to need that. Let's leave it out.” Not that anyone would take a bowling ball; but I've seen folks take things equally useless.

With that in mind, there are some basic rules. The first is that everyone carries his own personal necessities: clothes, water, bed roll, toothbrush and toiletries, mess kit, trail snacks, water purification tablets (don't want to catch the dreaded giardia – the hiker's version of Montezuma's revenge), and so on. But there are also shared items. Say you're in a group of four. A pup tent normally sleeps two, so you'd only need two of them. For the whole group you'd only need one camp stove, and depending on the duration of the trip maybe some extra fuel canisters. You only need one first aid kit. Then there's food. For some meals you might be on your own, for others the whole group eats together. So these shared items have to be equitably distributed among the members of the group: you carry this, I'll carry that. (Pro tip here for those who might be inspired to go backpacking in the future: volunteer to carry as much of the food as possible. Your load gets lighter every day.)

Of course, when distributing these shared items, you have to take into consideration the relative ability of each person to carry a load. A child or out-of-shape greenhorn hiker can't comfortably carry what a physically fit adult can. Likewise, if a member of the party becomes sick or injured on the trail, you might have to redistribute the weight to make it easier for them. If they're seriously injured, you might end up having to carry them as well as their load.

So, why am I talking about all this? It serves as an illustration for what Paul is telling us in today's Epistle. We are on a journey together – a journey through this life to the next that is part fun and part misery. And on this journey we have burdens to carry, some of which are individual and some of which are shared. We've also got an enemy out there who wants to see us fail. Even more he'd like to destroy us. So we've got to hang together, watch out for one another, and work together as a team, as we march along bearing the heavy loads that we've got to carry.

For we all have burdens to bear. To begin with, and closest to home, each one of us has an individual spiritual load. Our Christian faith, though we hold it all in common, is ultimately very personal. No one can believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ for you. And one day you will appear individually before the judgment seat of God. Then the question will not be, "What were you taught?" or "What was the confession of your church?" but rather, "In whom do *you* trust?" Are you covered by the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus who suffered and died for your sin? Or are you standing before God in the filth of your sins trying to hide them behind the soiled rags of your own imagined goodness? Obviously we'd all prefer to be in the former garb – but we also know our natural inclinations are to lean toward putting on the latter, which is why our Christian faith needs to be exercised, built up, and retained through various spiritual disciplines. Just as an athlete builds and maintains his strength through physical training, we keep up our spiritual fitness through the means the Lord has given us to do that. Namely through continued exposure to God's Word by which the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins and turns our hearts to Christ for forgiveness. This is what our weekly worship services are about. And there are a number of individual disciplines that help: daily devotions, Bible reading, confession, repentance, and prayer—the point is that you have to be participating though. The person who says he can continue to be a good Christian without these things is like an athlete who thinks he can stay in shape by watching sports on TV. It doesn't work that way. The only one who can keep your spiritual house in order is you. That's what St. Paul means when he says each one must bear his own load.

We have other individual burdens to bear. We've got families, jobs, and all kinds of other obligations – some of which are absolutely necessary, and others that we carry by choice. Either way, they can't be allowed to interfere with our first obligation to keep up our own faith in Christ. And certainly, when something we are carrying by choice comes into conflict with that first need, it's time to let it go. Put the bowling ball down (and I mean that figuratively. I haven't got anything against bowling—unless you want to do on Sunday mornings). But speaking of bowling balls, there's another kind of useless and detrimental weight that we sometimes try to carry on the trail, and that's a favorite sin that we don't want to let go of. We sneak it into our backpacks hoping that no one else will notice—but it's usually easy enough to detect. When we see a brother or sister struggling, stumbling along, and falling behind for no apparent outward reason it's pretty clear there's something wrong. Or maybe someone knows very well what the problem is because they saw the person pick it up. Whichever the case, it's up to the rest of us to help that person out. Paul writes: "Brothers, if anyone is caught up in a transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." It means we need to confront the person with their sin, gently, yes, without anger or malice; but with Christian love and firmly enough to do the job. We've got to get that extra weight off so the person can keep up. Otherwise they may be lost to enemy.

And while we're speaking of carrying unnecessary burdens, you want to be careful not to impose them on any of your fellow hikers. This happens when you refuse to forgive a brother or sister in Christ who has offended you. It's like putting rocks in their backpack – a dirty practical

joke that hikers sometimes like to play on each other. The thing most people forget is that by not forgiving and harboring anger in their hearts, they are putting even heavier stones in their own backpacks. We need to get rid of all this useless, harmful weight because it only wears us out and makes that much less able to carry the burdens we need to in order to complete our journey.

And it's vital that we have some ability to bear more weight because in addition to the personal loads we carry, there're other obligations that we have as a group. A church needs structure and organization, and so some are given the task of carrying the responsibility of serving as officers. We need leaders who help look out for the spiritual welfare of the members as well as those who take on the task of keeping up the property and managing the books. Others bear the load of teaching Sunday school, preparing the altar for communion, or the hundreds of other things that need to be done to keep it going. One burden we all bear is that of supporting the church financially. Paul writes that the one who is taught should share all good things with the teacher. The basic idea is that to the degree that the Lord prospers you, you in turn should contribute toward keeping the ministry going. Those who are financially the strongest should bear the bulk of the weight – but everyone should do their part. Here at St. Paul we've taken on the additional burden of operating a Christian day school. It's a noble mission and we can be grateful that the Lord gives us the strength and will to carry it, because through it he is grounding young lives in the Word of God and building them up so that one day they in their turn will be better able to bear the burden they must carry.

And while we're hiking along we've got to watch out for each other. Especially when someone is wounded by the circumstances of life or the attacks of the evil one, we may need to lighten their loads and place some of it upon our own shoulders. This is what Paul means when he says, "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." If you see someone stumbling then it's up to you to treat their wounds and help them to their feet and say, "Here, let me take some of what you're carrying." If you need more help, you call for it. We're all in this together and we're not leaving anyone behind.

And something else we also want to be wary of is the tendency we all have to think that *I'm doing more than my fair share*. This can either be *prideful*, as in, "This group couldn't make it without me and all the things I do" or *resentful*, as in, "Why am I the one who always gets stuck doing everything? Why do I have to carry the whole load?" Sometimes it's both attitudes at once; but either way it's the wrong way to look at it. It's the Lord himself who does the weight distribution. He determines who should carry what. And his wise decisions in this regard are not based on what we think is fair and equitable. He's not comparing your load to that carried by others; but rather to the strength, capability, talents, and resources he has given you – and, I might add, to the strength and ability that could be yours if you'd only ask it of him. I've a hunch that we could all be doing more for the kingdom of God and for our brothers and sisters in Christ if only we'd open ourselves to both the spiritual gifts and opportunities the Lord provides for us.

So, in light of all this, what I'd ask today is for you to do a thorough inspection of yourself. What are you carrying that you shouldn't be? What could you be carrying that you're not? How could you be increasing your ability to carry more of the load? Who are you neglecting that could really use your help? Who are you weighing down with your criticism and lack of forgiveness? In what ways have you been resentful of the burden the Lord has given you? In what ways have you been full of pride about it?

Such an inspection, if done honestly, will bring us all to the same place: to our knees in repentance. But that's a good place to be, for from there we can receive again the Word of

Christ's forgiveness, which is the power that lifts us up and gives us the ability to bear our burdens. Then too we will see that by carrying the comparatively small loads that we've been assigned, we are imitating in a very tiny way the Lord Jesus who carried on the cross the enormous weight of the whole world's sin. If we feel like boasting, with St. Paul let's boast about what Christ has done for us. And let's rejoice that the best and lightest "burden" we bear is the sign of his cross on our foreheads. And with that, let's shoulder our loads and hit the trail. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***