

### **Look to Yourself**

Psalm 30  
Galatians 6:1-6

“You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other.”

So wrote John Adams in a letter to Thomas Jefferson dated July 15, 1813. These two giants, who had collaborated on the writing of the Declaration of Independence, spent months enjoying friendship in Paris as emissaries of the new nation, and had a long and delightful correspondence, were also two of the most proud men to serve as Presidents of the United States. And they disagreed about the proper role of the federal government. Adams wanted a strong central power; Jefferson wanted a weak one, with the states holding the reins. They grew progressively sharper with each other in their letters. Eventually they stopped writing at all. They had no communication whatsoever for over decade.

Friends of each urged them to apologize. Each wanted to but for years neither could bring himself to make the first move. Until Adams did with that one line letter quoted above. Jefferson responded positively and they resumed writing. Now older men, they had mellowed and each understood the other would always stand tall in history. Their later letters were warm and honorable. Astonishingly, they both died on July 4, 1826—the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration. Adams' final words were, “Thomas...Jefferson...still surv...” And he died before he could complete that word “survives”.

Sometimes it's not about the other guy—or gal. Sometimes our pride forces us to look everywhere for blame except where it often lies. Authors Osterhaus, Jurkowski and Hahn start their book, Thriving through Ministry Conflict, with these lines: “There is a problem, and the problem is me.’ Only when ministry leaders accept accountability for whatever conflict exists in a church does that church have a prayer of healing that conflict.” I know I have referenced conflict before, and I do not propose to make this sermon about conflict in this church. I propose instead to illustrate that when we meet resistance from others we need to, as the Apostle Paul writes in today’s passage, “Look to yourself”. Yes, this appears in a paragraph about the sins of others. And yes, Paul counsels his readers to “restore” those caught in “trespasses.” When somebody sins in a way that injures relationships, we are to hold them accountable. But we must do so with a clear sense of our own sins—and we must do so “in a spirit of gentleness.”

Paul continues, “Let each one test his or her own work.” I once knew a couple who argued with each other in public, all the time. It made those around them really uncomfortable. Once they got into it at a campfire during a church outing. One of the other pastors asked the whole group, “Do any of you ladies have mirrors in your purses?” When two women said yes, he asked them to go to their tents or campers and bring them to him. He then handed them to the arguing couple and said, “Every time you start to argue I want you to hold your hands up like you’re holding these mirrors and remember this: the Bible says when you’re hurting each other, ‘Let each of you look to yourself.’” A bold move, but it stopped the arguing at least for that trip.

Psalm 30 contains the line, "Thou has turned for me my mourning into dancing."

It serves as the germ for the praise song, Mourning into Dancing. This song opens with the lines:

Where there once was only hurt, He gave his healing hand,  
Where there once was only pain, He brought comfort like a friend.  
I feel the sweetness of His love piercing my darkness,  
I see the bright and morning sun as it ushers in His joyful gladness.  
He's turned my mourning into dancing again...

Healing from hurt, comfort from pain. God brings these through that very Spirit of gentleness, that Holy Spirit that props us up when we are weary, that fills us with understanding when we are confused.

When we live in relationship with others, sooner or later we will hurt them.

Sooner or later they will hurt us. It is what happens next that matters. According to Galatians 6, step one needs to be self-examination. What did I do to contribute to this trouble? What did I fail to do? Step two needs to be bearing one another's burdens. Conflict often emerges from stress, often stress from a source completely unrelated to what the conflict appears on the surface to be about. A woman who once worked for me became increasingly angry on the job. One time she snapped at me about something and I said, "Look, we need to stop this. What is happening with you to make you so upset?" She said I didn't really want to know. I said I did. She literally took a deep breath and told me her husband, who had a big temper, had taken to sleeping with a loaded pistol under his pillow. It made her unable to fall asleep. She was scared and exhausted. And their son, with whom our son had once hung around,

had dropped out of college and she did not know for sure where he was.

For once I was quick enough not to say much. And once she got started she kept going, sharing story after story about the burdens she carried. Their daughter's fiancée had broken up with her. Their crazy Irish Setter was getting loose and the neighbors were complaining. Her hairdresser was retiring. Her aging mother, two hours away across the state, refused to leave her home and was falling. Her brother and sister, who lived in the same city, had fallen out with their mother—and with each other—and refused to help. The tears started somewhere around there. She had quit her career, which she had enjoyed, when the first child came and now it was too expensive to get re-certified. She had started drinking again. Finally she looked at me and said, “Honestly, you have nothing to do with this. You're just the one who gets to take it from me.” She apologized and thanked me for listening.

I do not see myself as the hero of this story. For one thing, I too have a big temper. It is not pretty when I lose it. I have hurt those I love. But thanks be to God we also have that Spirit of gentleness from which to draw healing and comfort. When we bear one another's burdens, when we listen without judgment, when we have real empathy, when we test ourselves for whatever we may have contributed to the situation, we restore one another. A wise man once told me to pray silently in the moment when somebody was making me angry. He had seen my temper on the basketball court. He sincerely wanted to help equip me to serve as a pastor. His words have saved me—and those whom I serve—many a time. Through prayer and

reading the words of wisdom in the Word of God, drink in that Spirit of gentleness, the Spirit that turns mourning into dancing. The Spirit that heals relationships—with each other and with God.