

Weight Lifting  
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn  
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: December 30, 2018

Scripture: Matthew 11:25-30; Galatians 6:1-5

I. Weight lifting is one of the original sports contested at the very first modern Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens, Greece. Only men competed in weight lifting in the 1896 Olympics, and that was the case for more than 100 years.

Only since 2000 have female weight lifters been competing in the Olympic games. The top female lifters as weighing in as little as the 127 lb. weight group can lift more than 300 lbs. over head nearly without breaking a sweat.

Although it may not sound like a Biblical subject, weight lifting does occur in the Bible. In the Bible, however, the reference is to “burden-bearing” rather than weight lifting.

Both the OT and NT use that phrase to mean “bearing a heavy load.” The term is also used in a figurative sense. David says in Psalm 55, “Cast your burden on the Lord, and God will sustain you” (v.22).

In the passage I read from Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia, he wrote, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the Law of Christ” (v.2); and then a bit further he wrote, “For each man will have to bear his own load” (v.5).

Our Lord Jesus Christ made many references to burden-bearing. Probably the most familiar is that passage from Matthew 11, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (v.28).

This morning, we will look at these three passages and see what they say about the burdens we bear, and the resources God provides for us to make our burden bearing into a witness for God’s glory.

II. When Paul says, “For each person will have to bear his own load,” what load is he referring to here?

It is the load of living out our responsibilities as Christ’s disciples. In dependence upon the Holy Spirit, I have a personal responsibility to bear my own load, to carry my own burdens.

There are at least three kinds of burdens we are commanded to carry. There are the burdens that come to us because of our own limitations and weaknesses. There are problems I have created (by short-sightedness, poor judgment) that I have no one to blame but myself.

With better judgment, I could have avoided those problems, but I created that burden myself. That is a burden I am commanded to carry.

There are other burdens over which we have no control. Someone hits our parked car at the store and drives away. A storm rips shingles from your roof, or the company you have toiled away for just has too many down years in a row.

These burdens are inevitable; they are thrust on all people not as a consequence of having behaved poorly, but simply because we live in a world where these things happen. These are some of the burdens we bear.

III. In Biblical weight lifting we lift not only our own burdens, but we are commanded to do our best to help others carry their burdens. Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the Law of Christ” (Gal.6:2).

The Law of Christ Paul speaks of here are the two greatest commandments: love the Lord your God, AND love your neighbor as yourself.

If we open our eyes and ears to the world around us, we will no doubt see the pain and misery of many who live nearby.

Emotional heartache after a tragic loss. Financial pain due to job loss. Physical pain related to loss of health and strength.

The members of the First Presbyterian Church have for decades helped to carry the burden of those who are hungry and hurting. The founding of Barberton Area Community Ministries and your ongoing support for its mission in our community is tremendous act of helping bear others' burdens.

The twice/week soup kitchen that we provide for our community – keeping the kitchen in working order, updating our bathroom facilities, maintaining Fellowship Hall, hosting the volunteers, and cooking and serving every couple of weeks ourselves – is helping to bear the burdens of those nearby.

You also bear the burdens of others as you offer Christmas gifts for a family just a week ago, donate toward the Christmas Joy offering, pray for others, phone your neighbors and friends, provide a ride to an appointment, and write cards and letters of encouragement.

This congregation succeeds in helping to carry the burdens of others in a variety of ways, and so we work together to fulfill the Law of Christ.

May we continue to be faithful in the new year.

IV. Of course, the key to all burden-bearing – whether our own burdens or those of others – lies in allowing God to be the master weight lifter, the burden-bearer without equal.

Our Lord Jesus said in Matthew's gospel, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (v.28,29).

The great weight, the burden, that Jesus had immediately in mind was that of the heavy, demanding, unyielding bondage of Jewish law: once broken, the resources for reconciliation were

few, and the consequences were grim. It was a burdensome law.

Akin to that ancient law, the burdens Jesus relieves are our anxieties and fears, a conscience that is weighted down by a sense of unforgiveness, or those who stagger under the baggage of resentment, guilt, and worries.

All of those heavy, burdensome weighted bags are able to be handed over to the humble porter who will carry them away once again and forever. “Come to me,” Jesus says, “learn from me, . . . and you will find rest.”

How different might our lives be if we understood and made a habit of handing our biggest concerns to the greatest weight-lifter in the universe?

In the book of Hebrews we read these words of encouragement: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight . . . looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1,2).

V. The Apostle Paul does not write of our need to lay down our burdens because he has heard tales of persons who had done wrong in the eyes of the Lord.

Paul, himself, was one of the greatest of all sinners. Prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul hunted down believers in Christ and participated in their deaths.

Paul had some incredibly heavy burdens to lay down at the feet of Christ. When Paul speaks of laying down the burden of a past failure, he knows of which he speaks.

Sometimes, we have to bear the weight of our own mistakes, but God is there to help us. Sometimes, we have to bear the weight of the burdens over which we have no control, but God is there to help us. And when we are privileged to attempt to bear the burdens of others, God is there to help us.

In this new year, may our hearts be lightened by the weight-lifting of our Lord.

And with grateful hearts we can bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the Law of Christ. Amen.