
With the Spirit's Help

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 29 June 2025

Galatians 5:13-25 • Luke 9:57-62



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

As for you, my friends, you were called to be free. But do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires control you. Instead, let love make you serve one another. For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.” (Galatians 5:13-14)

I’m repeating this portion from the beginning of the Galatians reading because I want to emphasise it, and I want you to think about it. I often remind you of the two greatest commandments: love God and love each other. These are eternal, and the command to love God will always be the first one. But here, Paul is speaking about the second part, loving each other, or loving your neighbour, if you prefer. And we can all see why we should love our neighbours. If we love

our neighbours, we will not hurt them, or steal from them, or go to war against them. This is obvious. But the point Paul is making goes beyond this. He goes back to the Ten Commandments, which he usually refers to as the law. These laws — honour your parents, don't steal, don't murder, etc. — are of course good rules for living in harmony with your neighbours. But there is a catch in the law — it can breed a kind of self-righteousness. You can become proud of the fact that you follow the law. You can become conceited about how perfect you are, to the point where following the law becomes a way of saying, "Look how great I am! I am perfect — I follow all the laws, I do everything God asks of me. How wonderful am I!" If you get to this point, you've completely misunderstood the whole point of the laws, which is to get you to think about others, rather than yourselves. As Paul says, you become slaves to the law, when actually — and I know this sounds a little odd — we should be slaves to each other.

At least it would sound odd to the Pharisees of Jesus' time. They prided themselves on how perfectly they followed the law. In fact, they made more laws, offshoots of the Ten Commandments, just so they could discuss them, debate them, follow them, and therefore become more perfect. But in doing so, they forgot that we are supposed to serve each other. Remember the young man who came up to Jesus and asked him about the commandments? When Jesus told them what they are, the young man said he had followed them since he was a youth, and asked what more he could do. Jesus replied, "Sell all you have and give the money to the poor." That the young man could not do, because he was too in love with the law, and his own perfection in following it. Jesus told him to do something that would show he loved other people more than he loved himself, and he couldn't do it.

So Jesus came and did not abolish the law, but he put it in his place — in service to the greatest commandments. The law is not a way to make yourself look good; it is a way to serve others. And we serve others because we love them. As Paul says, "Let love make you serve one another" (Gal 5:13). Love makes us slaves of one another, in the best possible way.

But we do not forget the first great commandment: Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And this is what Jesus is speaking of in our Gospel passage. Just as we forget ourselves in service to others, we forget ourselves in service to God. Jesus is on the road, on the way to Jerusalem, when a man comes up to him and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." This is good, right? Jesus wants his people to follow him. Jesus has called his

disciples, by ones and twos, and told them to follow him. Now here is a man who volunteers.

But Jesus suspects that the man doesn't really know what he's volunteering to do. Jesus replies that while the animals like the foxes and birds have homes, places to rest, he himself does not. And if the man joins him, he won't have anywhere to lay his head either.

Another man wants first to go bury his father, who we assume has recently died. But Jesus says no, you must leave that to other people, and he gives the man a commission: go and proclaim the Gospel. This is quite serious, and would have shocked the Jews who heard this conversation, for the son's obligation to bury his father is one that cannot be shirked. A body was to be buried the same day, unless it's the Sabbath, and the son who failed to do this would be dishonoured in the sight of his family and friends. But we have first an obligation to God, and to serve God in spreading the Gospel. Jesus is telling us that nothing can come before that obligation.

The third man similarly wants to do something first, before following Jesus. He has already started down the road with Jesus, and then turns back, wanting to say goodbye to his family. But once you decide to follow Jesus, you cannot go back. It is a sacred commitment. To love God with all your heart means that nothing else in the world can come first in your heart: not your friends, not your family, not your job, nothing.

And can any of us say that we follow this rule? I know I cannot. I try to keep Jesus in mind at all times, giving thanks, asking for guidance, trying to serve God; but of course I fail. I get busy with other things and forget about my duty as a Christian. I continually fall away and come back again, and I suspect many of us are like this. Paul says it is the fault of our human spirit, which counters the wishes of the Holy Spirit, so that we cannot always follow Jesus. At least, we cannot follow Jesus if we only depend on ourselves. But if we let the Spirit lead us, then it can be done. And the Spirit makes it all easier than it sounds, for if we relax into the Spirit's guidance, if we relax into the will of God, then we realise that we can go about our daily business, dedicating everything we do to God. And the Spirit will inspire us to do more: to follow Jesus in spreading the Gospel to those we know. The Spirit saves us from ourselves, and makes everything possible. Pray constantly, give thanks in all things, large and small, and realise that everything comes from our loving God. Praise the Lord that we have the Spirit within us to help us and guide us, at all times and in all situations. Through Jesus Christ, amen.