

BY LOVE SERVE

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Are you familiar with the anxious feeling that arises when a law enforcement vehicle appears in your rearview mirror? Even if you are unaware of any violation of law, you become hyper-vigilant of every decision and move that you make.

Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we live no longer under the anxiety produced by the Law of God, which, though holy and good itself, could not produce real freedom but only multiply anxiety because of our weakness.

Last Sunday, I reminded you that the liberty Jesus Christ has obtained for us is real and lasting. It includes freedom from guilt, freedom from shame, and freedom from judgment to come. It is these freedoms that we have just celebrated in Holy Communion. No wonder Christians are among the happiest people on earth!

When I sin, I can turn immediately to my Savior and confess and forsake my sin, and He will immediately forgive me and cleanse me from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Guilt is gone! Shame is in retreat! And I have no fear of judgment. I am free! I walk in grace.

Dangerous to be Free

Such freedom is wonderful. It is also dangerous! Actually, *it is I* who am dangerous; I am a danger to myself. Because I have an inclination to use this freedom to my own advantage, to indulge my desires instead of pursuing God's will. My imagination suggests to me that God doesn't care, doesn't mind, isn't watching, won't know.

And so, the Word (the Bible) warns me:

*"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as **an opportunity to indulge your flesh**, but through love serve one another"* (Galatians 5:13; NET).

In Christ, we were called to freedom, but what we *choose to do* with our freedom makes all the difference. Therefore, I have a question to ask you. It is not, "How do you feel about your freedom?" And it is not, "What do you like best about your freedom?" My question is this: What do you *do* with your freedom? How do you *use it* from day to day?

Eugene Peterson clarifies the verse in this way:

*"It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; **that's how freedom grows**"* (Galatians 5:13; MSG).

How you use your Christian liberty determines its growth. Your enjoyment of freedom can grow! And lead to more freedom. Or your freedom can shrink. And even return to bondage.

"Use your freedom to serve one another in love."

Love is the Essence

Love is the heart and soul of the Good News about Jesus.

*“God so **loved** the world that He gave His one and only Son”* (John 3:16; NIV). Jesus, in turn, *“**loved us and gave Himself up for us,**”* so we are enjoined to *“live a life of love just as Christ loved us”* (Ephesians 5:2; NIV).

Love is the beginning and the end; it is both the means and it is the goal.

See how Peter described the development of our faith:

“For this very reason, adding your diligence [to the divine promises], employ every effort in exercising your faith to develop virtue... and in [exercising] virtue [develop] knowledge... and in [exercising] knowledge [develop] self-control, and in [exercising] self-control [develop] steadfastness... and in [exercising] steadfastness [develop] godliness... and in [exercising] godliness [develop] brotherly affection, and in [exercising] brotherly affection [develop] Christian love” (1 Peter 1:5-7; AMP).

Walking this path of faith leads inevitably to godly love. Love is the ultimate expression of genuine faith in Christ. *“When we place our faith in Christ Jesus... What is important is faith expressing itself in love”* (Galatians 5:6; NLT). Or, as the Amplified Bible renders it, *“faith activated and energized and expressed and working through love.”*

Paul pointedly wrote: *“Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and **the greatest of these is love**”* (1 Corinthians 13:13; NLT).

Jesus was emphatic: *“ ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments”* (Matthew 22:37-40; NLT).

Love is Your Choice

It is the first and greatest commandment, therefore, you must love. It is a matter of obedience. Love is an obedient choice (whether or not you feel compelled). Often there is no sense of compulsion, only opportunity.

Hear the words of Jesus: *“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.*

“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you” (Matthew 5:43-48; MSG).

Love is commanded concerning neighbors; love is commanded concerning enemies. When the opportunity presents itself, we are free to choose... to obey. This is the action of your true self, your God-created self. This is how God Himself treats you.

Love is Your Action

The obedient choice to love leads unalterably to action. It is faith acting, because love is never guaranteed reception or a response. Faith does not love *because*, and faith does not love *if* or *when*. The only cause that faith requires is the will of God and the corresponding opportunity.

Love is faith in action (with or without *feelings*). Love doesn't depend on feelings for inspiration or support, and love doesn't wait for feelings to rise. It is *faith* in action: trusting God, I act (obey). *"We walk by faith, not by sight"* (2 Corinthians 5:7; NKJV). I particularly like how Peterson fleshes out this passage: *"That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don't get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. **It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going.** Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us?"* (2 Corinthians 5:6-8; MSG).

Love is Your Service

So, love is my choice to act in faithful obedience to God, regardless of my feelings, regardless of anticipated response — regarding only the leading of the Holy Spirit, the need and the opportunity.

Before anyone else, my act of love serves God, because I am obeying the First Commandment. My surrender to act in love is what the Bible calls my "spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1; NIV). Worship is service to God; that's why we call this a "worship *service*." When we gather to worship Him, many things take place, and we ourselves gain many benefits. Nevertheless, we are primarily here to serve *Him* with our worship. We sing, we pray, we respond, for an audience of one.

Then, of course, love also serves others.

"For you, brethren, were [indeed] called to freedom; only [do not let your] freedom be an incentive to your flesh and an opportunity or excuse [for selfishness], but through love you should serve one another" (Galatians 5:13; AMP).

"Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had" (Philippians 2:4-5).

Love's Aim

Love's aim is to find a point of need and serve it. I've already addressed looking beyond your own feelings (or lack of them); love also looks beyond the other person's faults (in behavior or appearance).

Their need is not always what they think it is. A person who is hurting may be looking for one thing (that he imagines will soothe his pain), but what God may want to give (and do) may be something quite different. Sympathize with her felt need, but also listen to the Holy Spirit to know how to love her. This usually isn't about "fixing" the person's condition, but simply showing her God's love in the midst of her circumstance.

To serve someone appropriately, means asking yourself (and God) a question: What would meet, at least in part, this need? A prayer? Time spent listening? Physical help? Material provision? Transportation? A thoughtful card?

If you seek to serve in a loving manner, you'll find the answer and make a difference.

Love's Pursuit

Finally, love serves faithfully. Unless circumstance prevents more, love is not just a "flash in the pan." It's more like fanning a spark into a flame. It takes time and careful effort. Not necessarily tons, but probably at least a little more than you want to give. That's what makes it a sacrifice of faith; that's what makes it love.

"And let us never slacken in doing good; for if we do not give up, we shall have our harvest in due time. So then, as long as we have the opportunity let all our actions be for the good of everybody, and especially of those who belong to the household of the faith" (Galatians 6:9-10; NJB).

What will you *do* with your freedom? Some squander and waste it until it has disappeared. Others spend it on themselves until they are empty. But some know to use it for the sake of others, and theirs increases!

Children of God, love one another.