

Galatians 5:13-17, 24-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Romans 12:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

The 1990's movie, "City Slickers" was about 3 long-time good friends,
who settled in with the choices and compromised they'd made in life,
and though relatively comfortable and secure,

it was far from the meaningful good-life they had expected.

As an escape from their ordinary, sedate and settled lives,
they plan an unusual vacation, two weeks as real cowboys
driving a herd of cattle from New Mexico up to Colorado.

The cattle drive is led by a tough and grizzled old cowboy, Curly,
who is everything that these three middle-age friends are not.

Along the trail, he pointed that they spend 50 weeks of the year
getting stressed, off-track and tangled in knots, and then suppose

2 weeks on a cattle drive is going to straighten out their lives.

Curly asks Mitch, "Do you know what the secret of life is?",

then explains, once you figure out & focus on just **"the one thing"**,

then all the rest of life will follow and fall right into place,

"the one thing" that changes everything.

For the Christian, **the one thing that changes everything**

is God's grace through Jesus Christ and our faithful response,

which is what Paul was trying to explain to the Galatians.

The Apostle Paul's preaching & teaching began the church in Galatia.

After he left to evangelize elsewhere, others came along who

created conflict and confusion, causing some to stray off-track.

In the Galatian church, one of the groups in conflict believed,

that since God's grace covers all and everything is forgiven,

that meant moral behavior and integrity no longer matter,

so they were free to do anything they wanted or desired,

since grace would erase any sin or immorality they committed.

On the other side, the other group believed and insisted,

that God's grace meant that God accepted gentiles as if Jewish,

so the Law, their religious traditions & rules still applied.

Quite the dilemma – those two divergent understandings of grace.

Interestingly, Paul's answer was the same to both groups,

urging both groups to focus and follow **the one thing,**

God's gracious love that leads to an appropriate response, vs. 13-14

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

To those rejecting any and all moral restraint: ---

that's wrong, for Christians are bound by **selfless love**,
a love that places the good and welfare of others
ahead of our own interests, wants and desires...
... which most certainly places limits and restricts our behavior.

To the legalist: --- you don't need all those rules and rituals
because self-sacrificial love for God & neighbor covers it all.
If you focus and follow with Christ-like **selfless love**,
everything you do will fall right into place,
and will fulfill every commandment of God's Law.

Paul explains that guided by the Spirit of God living within us,
we are called by grace to be a faithful community, that is
defined by Christ-like sacrificial and selfless love.

In sharp contrast to the my-wants-first ways of this world vs. 16,25

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

So the question is not, what do I want and desire,
but what is the loving-choice, the more Christ-like way,
for being led by the Spirit toward sacrificial love
is **the one thing** that will change everything else.

In the book of Romans,
the first 11 chapters to describe God's gift of grace,
focusing on the priority of God's love and compassion ...

... which leads to chapter 12, where we find the word, "therefore",
which is always a very important word in Paul's writings.
God's grace is real **therefore** that guides and transforms us.

Paul's point is, that once we begin to accept and walk with Jesus,
then everything about us and how we live our lives **will change**,
as he explains, reading from *the Message*, vs. 1~2

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him...fix your attention on God. **You'll be changed from the inside out.**

By God's grace, we are called to live uniquely Christian lives,
that bear witness to the truth & grace, mercy and promises of God,
by letting the light of Jesus shine in and through us.

As followers of Christ, we are called **as motivated by gratitude
for the grace and mercy and blessings that we have received,**
to allow the Lord to love and bless other people through us,
which is to be our guide in how we live our lives in this world.

Which leads to the fundamental and essential task of the Church:

that through the fellowship and the ministry we share together,
we are called and equipped to offer our own God-given gifts
and to notice & affirm the uniquely wonderful gifts in others,
as celebration of God's gracious diversity & love among us,
as it all flows together to build up the church for mission.

But what does that really look like?

The church I used to serve needed someone to work with our youth.

An elder made an announcement asking for someone to volunteer.

After the service and on her way out, a first-time visitor,

a young woman handed me a note with her name and phone number,
asking me to call because she might be able and wanted to help.

So I called and went out to see her the next week.

Andrea lived with her husband Rick, and their baby in a tiny trailer

that was very isolated and tucked way back in the woods.

There was nobody nearby or within reasonable walking distance,

so when her husband, a typical gung-ho Marine corporal,
drove their one car to work at Camp Lejeune each day,

she was left alone, cut-off and isolated with no way to get out.

They had been high school sweethearts from a small town.

They got married and pregnant right after boot camp,

and now feeling lonely, isolation was crushing her.

Through sobs and tears, disappointment and frustration,

she described how hard it was to be alone all day, every day,

so far from home, away from family, friends, the familiar.

She was broken, sad and discouraged, feeling alone and helpless,

and Rick, a dedicated and busy Marine didn't understand

that their life was so much less than she had expected.

So I made a few phone calls to several of the women at the church,

especially military wives, who immediately connected with her,

and they all made a point of including her in all their outings,

surrounding the family with Christian fellowship, warmth & welcome.

Well, it was as if someone had turned on a switch,

as Andrea and her husband were drawn into our church family.

It was amazing how they blessed and led our youth,

as they helped several of the youth in our church

change direction and connect with Jesus Christ.

It was truly an inspiring delight **to observe**

their contagious joy and deep commitment to the Lord,

the kind that transforms and helps us to discover & live

the best that our gracious God intends for each of us.

The church made a huge difference in their lives,

and probably helped save and redirect their marriage,

for by encouraging them to shift focus onto God's love,

everything else in their lives fell right into place,

and they in turn, were a wonderful gift and blessing

that influenced & encouraged our whole congregation.

**The impact of their gifts contributed to the life of our church,
and clearly demonstrated how God's love, compassion & presence,
how God's gracious Holy Spirit, purpose and mercy have
the amazing power to change and transform everything...**

... just as Paul urged and explained to the Christians living in Rome.

The logic flow is that since God has already done all of this for us,
therefore, this is how we appropriately respond to that grace,
by letting Christ' light shine in and through us,
as those who are liberated & upheld by **that gracious love**,
so that we don't let the world **grind off our God-given uniqueness.**

**Our culture exerts tremendous pressure for us to surrender
our unique giftedness and become more like everyone else,
as painful experiences in life can crush our spirits,
concealing the pricelessness and unique giftedness
that each of us receives from our loving gracious God.**

Each one of us is special and unique – we are like no other.
Every single person created by God throughout all human history
has always been special and unique – and none are like any other.
Our loving God has never made the same person more than once,
and we're each one different – uniquely special, gifted and loved.

The truth is, every one of us is capable of something magnificent,
doing something that matters, that is wonderfully fulfilling,
and that uses the best and finest of our gifts to glorify God.

Our life becomes meaningful and satisfying as we are able
and willing to present our gifted uniqueness back to God.

Our challenge is to discover & develop our own set of gifts,
and as we encourage others to develop, to use & offer theirs.

God gives to us, and we respond by giving ourselves back to God, vs. 1

I appeal to you ... by the mercies of God, to present your whole selves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...

Because of God's mercy to us, and what it has accomplished in us,
we present our whole selves, our lives as living sacrifice to God,
which when combined enables & equips the Church for its mission.

We are called to trust and act on the truth that the Lord has arranged
that all the body parts fit together perfectly to accomplish well,
the mission that together our church has been called to accomplish.

I am certain that God has already also made ample provision
for the work to be done well, here at First Presbyterian,

that it's all here right now --- among the people in this room,
for this church to grow and meet all the that is needed
for our church to usefully serve out in our community.

Because of God's mercy to us, and what it's accomplishing in us,
we're able to present our whole selves as living sacrifice to God.

God gives to us, and we respond by giving ourselves back to God.

The Church of Jesus Christ is a lot like a stained glass window ---
where each of us is just one tiny shard of colored glass
that has been cut to fit into a particular ideal spot.

Each piece equally & beautifully contributes to the overall picture
by each uniquely refracting and reflecting the glory of God's light...

... each piece helping depict the full beauty and wonder
as God's gracious love shines into us and through us,

together shining outward toward a darkened struggling world,
so very much troubled, hurting, anxious, lost and in need.

So what does that mean to us as a church, as the people of God?

I love the way Paul answers that question in vs. 6 (*The Message*)

So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pride-fully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

God's gracious love, **the one thing with power to change everything**,
for when we follow Jesus in faith, all of life then falls into place.

And this is your church, your local expression of God's love & truth.

So as Paul urged when he wrote to Timothy: (1 Timothy 4:14, 2 Timothy 1:6)

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, ... Put these things into practice ... I remind you **to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.**