



Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8  
Rev. Jonathan Stepp  
June 30, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some years ago there was a small-town priest who rode a bicycle everywhere he went. Each Monday he and the Methodist pastor would meet up for coffee and conversation and one Monday the priest showed up quite late and looking very perturbed.

“What’s wrong?” his friend asked. “Someone stole my bike!” he replied “and I had to walk here. The worst part is that I think it might have been one of my parishioners.”

“Here’s what you do,” his Methodist friend said. “This Sunday you preach on the Ten Commandments and when you get to the one about ‘thou shalt not steal’ you really hammer it home with hellfire and brimstone. Maybe the thief will repent and return your bike.”

The following Monday the priest rolled up on his bike and strolled happily into the coffee shop. His friend said, “the sermon must have worked, you’ve got your bike back.”

“Well, it sort of worked. When I got to ‘thou shalt not commit adultery’ I remembered where I left my bike!”

My sermon last week about the Ten Commandments and their relationship to Christianity prompted some good feedback and some interesting questions. Since our reading through Galatians continues on the theme of law and grace this Sunday I thought I would address one of the questions that arose this week from our recognition that the law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, are part of God’s covenant with the Jewish people and not part of our covenant.

One of the natural questions that arose this week is whether we are therefore accountable for our actions. If our law is to love God and love our neighbor – as Jesus said – then doesn’t that open up the possibility that we could call whatever we want to do “love” and then live in any way that we want to live without being held accountable for our actions?

St. Paul addresses this in today's text from Galatians. "For freedom Christ has set us free," he says. As we discussed last week, we have been set free from laws and regulations that divide us from one another. St. Paul goes on to say, "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."

Let's think for a moment about what the Holy Spirit is telling us through these words. We are free in Christ. We are free to do what is good and we are free to do what is bad because, in Christ, God has accepted us as his adopted children before and apart from anything good or bad that we might do. But doing bad things can still have bad consequences because we live in communion. We live in communion with God, first of all, so when we do bad things it disrupts our communion with God. And we live in communion with one another, so when we do bad things to each other it disrupts our communion with each other. As St. Paul says here in Galatians: be careful how you live or you might end up devouring one another.

What God calls us to do here in Galatians is not to obey the Ten Commandments but, rather, to "live by the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the flesh." What does that look like in our lives? Let's take the example of the commandment from the joke: "thou shalt not steal." What this law forbids is taking something that belongs to another person. But is merely refraining from taking others' possessions enough to fulfill Christ's command that we love one another? Have we fulfilled our duty to God and to our neighbor if we just restrain ourselves from taking our neighbors property? That is certainly a good beginning to living out the love of neighbor, but it is only a beginning.

Notice that at the end of our Galatians' text St. Paul lists both generosity and self-control as fruits of the Spirit. Since we belong to Christ and are led by the Spirit, not the law of Moses, we have only *begun* to do God's will when we have the self-control to not steal. To truly *do* God's will we must live by the Spirit and that means we must also express the gracious, generous life of God by sharing what we have with others.

The great fourth century preacher, St. John Chrysostom, phrased it this way: "to not share our own riches with the poor is robbery of the poor, and a depriving them of their livelihood; and that which we possess is not only our own, but also theirs."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Chrysostom, St. John. *On Wealth and Poverty*, "Discourse II", GLH Publishing: Louisville: 2018. Kindle Edition, pg. 53.

In other words, when we take the generous life of God the Holy Spirit as our standard of measurement we realize that a failure to be as generous as God calls us to be is stealing just as much taking something from someone else.

When seen from this perspective we realize that our accountability under grace is much wider and deeper than our accountability under the law of Moses would have been. Under the law we are primarily accountable to exercise self-control but under grace we are accountable to begin to grow up to spiritual maturity so that our lives look more and more like the life of Christ. We are accountable to not only refrain from lying, stealing, and murdering, but to also go on to learn to live a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness. In other words, to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives and relationships.

If we aren't careful we might despair of ever being able to live by the Spirit. But the good news of the gospel of Christ calls us to have hope for ourselves and for humanity. It is the good news with which our text begins today: Christ has set us free. Unlike the people in today's Gospel text, who were so bound by their past lives that they could not follow Jesus, we know that we have been set free from rules and regulations that set the standard too low and we are also set free from the shame of our failed attempts to do what is right. The Father has set us free to be able to live by the gifts and leading of the Holy Spirit and to be able to go and follow Jesus.

Amen.