

**Galatians 5:13-15**

13 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. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

The Apostle Paul founded the churches in Galatia but later had to deal with a conflict. The Jewish Christians insisted that the Gentile Christians observe Jewish customs. These are not bad people. Their position makes sense from their perspective and heritage. However, it does not consider the perspective of the whole group. Therefore, the Apostle Paul did not criticize, condemn, or rebuke. What he did was teach them a lesson. Righteousness is not about observance. Righteousness is founded upon Jesus Christ bringing us salvation through his death on the cross. The Apostle Paul built up an extensive argument by explaining the contrast between being ruled by the law and being guided by love. Before the advent of Christ we were governed by the law with all of its rules and regulations. The motivational factor for obedience was that of discipline and punishment. However, Christ set us free from that. We no longer need a physical symbol because we are now ruled by love.

Love is biblically emphasized. There are many lessons on the love that God has for us. Our God is a loving God that provides for us, sustains us, and engages in a relationship with us. As well as the lessons on the love of Jesus for us with a ministry of caring and the lessons that he taught about how we are to have love for each other and to love others like Jesus loves us.

When the Pharisees challenge Jesus on the greatest commandment being to love God with all of your heart, soul, and mind, Jesus responds that the 2<sup>nd</sup> greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Then he says that the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Therefore, the love commandments provide the foundation for all of the law. These two together are as one single commandment of what it is all about. It is all about love; the Love of God for us, the love of God giving us Jesus, and the love that Jesus shares with us and for us. If we obey this as one single commandment then all of the other commandments fall into place.

God's call to freedom is a contrast of commitment. For the opposition, commitment was a matter of obedience to the regulations, strict observance of the law and the traditions. Paul calls this the yoke of slavery and explains that God's call is to freedom. Our commitment to love one another is as strong of a bond as slavery. To love your neighbor is a biblical mandate and is of the most importance. Love God with all of your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is a lifestyle. It is not just a matter of living, not just a matter of what you do. It is a lifestyle, the very essence of your humanity. Living by the Spirit and gratifying desires of the flesh are in direct contrast with each other. When you walk by the Spirit there are no desires of the flesh. Christians don't need the law to force them to love their neighbors. When you are led by the Spirit it is a direct contrast to being subject to the law.

You cannot love God without loving your neighbor. It is unnatural. When you love God, you love what God loves. God's love is revealed in Jesus Christ. God loves all of humanity so much that God sent Jesus to rescue us. The value God places on our neighbors is measured by the price Jesus paid for them. The Christian does not love the neighbor because it is commanded or because if we disobey we will be punished. The Christian loves the neighbor because it is our nature to do so.

Many years ago I was asked to visit the son of a church member. My initial response was positive, I am glad to visit anyone when asked. Later in the conversation it was revealed that he was in prison. That was OK with me because it is part of the nature of being a Christian to visit the sick and those in prison. This was a sensitive situation for the mother and it took several conversations over a few months to get a clear picture of the situation. At that time he had been in prison for 8 years, the woman waited 10 years to press charges, and she is now 30. I quickly did the math in my head and realized that the victim was age 12. So, then I was on the hook to extend pastoral care to a man that was found guilty of raping a child. This meant that I had to do some serious soul searching because I confess that last thing I ever wanted to do as pastor is to love a pedophile. It takes complete surrender and serious soul searching to actually live your life governed by the commandment to love others as yourself.

Most people do not or cannot love as biblically taught. The fundamental task of the Christian church is to produce Christlike minds and Christlike character. This means that you love the same people that God loves; everyone, even the worst of the worst. The commandment to love is one single commandment that is the foundation for all the others.