

Sermon: **Love God and do whatever you please.**

Readings: [Romans 6:1-11 and 1 John 4:7-12](#)

For a while Nissan used the slogan: “Life is a journey. Enjoy the ride.”

To enjoy a journey, you need to know your destination and how to get there. If you don't, you will face challenges. Sue and I experienced this first hand in Turkey when I suggested that we drive 8 km from Selcuk to the mountain village of Sirince. We had a very basic map and in those days no GPS. I don't like asking for directions and I have the belief that I will find my way to the destination in mind. I also at that stage had not yet read the book “Men don't listen, and women can't read maps” by Alan and Barbara Pease. I knew I was going in the correct general direction but could not find a sign to Sirince and I could not read any of the other street names. Our map didn't help even when Sue turned it upside down. Sue grew politely more restless as I stubbornly said I will find the road – No I don't need to stop to ask directions!

I paused slightly on a hill as we passed a municipal worker for the third time. Sue whipped down the window and called him to us. He couldn't understand what we were saying, and we couldn't understand him. But we pointed to the name Sirince and his eyes lit up. He opened the back door of our car and got in. He pointed up the road and then guided us to the correct road. To be fair the sign post to Sirince was down. We thanked him and offered to take him back, but he declined. I think he realised I would get lost again unless I kept straight on.

There comes a time in every journey when just stubbornly trying harder on your own won't get you to your destination.

There comes a time when you need to stop, to ask for help and to accept guidance. Then you journey further.

Your journey of faith is no different.

Paul teaches in Romans that our journey of faith has two stages. The first is justification, and the second is sanctification.

In Romans 4 Paul describes how Abraham was justified by faith. Righteousness was credited to him. And this righteousness credited not only to him alone:

“...but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him, who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”¹

Justification simply means to be made just, right or righteous. That is not our natural state, as we all know. The Bible says: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”.²

In Galatians Paul wrote this:

“16 know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

As we accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour we are justified. It is ‘just as if’ we had not sinned. The separation from God is broken. This is not just a state of mind but an objective status, resulting in a new relationship with God.

¹ “Romans 4:22-25

² Romans 3:23.

This has not been earned through any actions taken by us. Not by the works of the law. In fact, our being made right is despite of all we have done.

This is the beginning but not the destination.

From here we are to journey on, and the process of journeying on is referred to as sanctification.³

What does this mean?

Sanctification is a process. It doesn't happen all at once. It means growing in our faith as a follower of Jesus, becoming more holy, or set apart. Like a child growing up into adulthood. Not staying static in our faith but growing more mature. We won't immediately become loving, kind, humble and self-controlled but we are to make progress as we journey on. There will be setbacks and life-long struggles, but God helping us, we will mature.

Paul uses himself as an example. He explains that while he is a follower of Jesus, he is not "already perfect," but continues to pursue God's call to new life.⁴ Even as a missionary and eyewitness to Jesus' resurrection, Paul continues in an imperfect love.⁵ For him, being sanctified means embracing weaknesses and trusting in God's undeserved kindness.⁶

And it is here that our actions are important. Not to earn anything (we have seen that clearly) but to respond to what has been done for us.

And as we have seen over the teaching on Pentecost and on the Trinity (over the last two Sundays) we are not alone in this.

"13 For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength."⁷

Jesus said in regard to the role of the Spirit:

"16 And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper (Comforter, Advocate, Intercessor—Counselor, Strengthener, Standby), to be with you forever—"⁸

The Holy Spirit: God with us. You are not alone.

But how are we to journey on? What are we to do?

What about this: Love God and do whatever you please.

When I first read these words of St Augustine, I was puzzled by them. Does this mean that as long as we love God we can really do as we please? Isn't this an invitation to go on sinning? Are there no rules to obey?

I grew up understanding that Christianity was all about rules. You are to do this! You are not to do that!

And overseeing this was a God to be feared who would oversee the examination. Good people would get good marks. But what if my marks were bad?

How does this saying "Love God and do whatever you please" fit into this understanding?

³ The doctrine of Sanctification has Scriptural support in [Romans 6:22](#), [1 Corinthians 6:11](#), [2 Corinthians 3:18](#), [2 Corinthians 7:1](#), [1 Thessalonians 4:3](#), [1 Thessalonians 5:23](#), [Hebrews 6:1](#), [Hebrews 12:14](#), [James 1:4](#)

⁴ Philippians 3:12–14

⁵ Romans 7:15

⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

⁷ Philippians 4:13

⁸ John 14:16

In Ephesians Paul wrote⁹:

“8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Does this mean that if we are saved by God's grace through faith- a gift of God - then what we do – works – are not relevant or important? Does this mean that provided we claim to love God we can “do whatever we please”.

What then do we make of Paul's emphatic instruction in Romans 6 read for us this morning:

“6 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”

I started to get some understanding of this saying of Augustine by reading further and found a second part to this quotation. The full sentence translates as:

“Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.”

“... for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend God.”

This provides an explanation to the statement “do whatever you please”.

But what does this mean for you and me on our journey of faith?

The tension between faith and works is something we have often debated in our fellowship group.

Paul seems to place the major emphasis on faith:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works ...”

While James places the emphasis on works:¹⁰

“14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?”

The writer of Hebrews wrote chapter 11, the great chapter on faith starting with the words:

“11 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

The heading to this verse in my bible is ‘Faith in Action’. That in itself indicates not faith in isolation, but faith resulting in action.

It is easier to understand “works” than it is to understand “faith”.

“Works” are the actions we take – the things we do.

But what is faith?

The Oxford dictionary¹¹ defines ‘faith’ in different ways including:

- Beliefs in the truths of religion as contained in the Holy Scriptures; and
- The spiritual apprehension of divine truths - often ascribed to the exercise of a special faculty in man and woman, or to supernatural illumination.

⁹ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹⁰ James 2:14

¹¹ The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary page 790

These definitions describe belief and apprehension but don't indicate or include any actions or deeds.

CS Lewis in his book "Mere Christianity"¹² looks at faith in two senses or on two levels which I find very helpful.

He says that at the first level 'faith' means:

"... simply Belief – accepting or regarding as true the doctrines of Christianity".

This is based on reason or understanding. But he takes this further. He points out that our minds are not completely ruled by reason.

Anaesthetics or bungee jumping.

Different circumstances and different moods can impact your faith and you need to be aware of this. Doubts will arise despite reason and so Lewis writes that faith in this first sense is;

"...the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods".

We need to be aware of this and we need to train the habit of faith. We need to be prepared for the doubts that will arise and for the question: "Is that really what you believe?"

How do you train? By being in community as you are this morning, whether on a virtual platform or in person. You do so by prayer, reading and in discussion with fellow believers.

You and I need to be reminded of what we believe. We need to be led to a deeper understanding of our faith. We need markers to guide us on our journey of faith. We need to stop and ask for help in finding the right road. And we need from time to time to check whether we are travelling on the right road.

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!¹³

If we believe we can swim, we need to get into the water and practise what we believe.

We need to practise living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus.

And as Lewis points out, not just for a week or so but as a way of life.

This may go well for a while.

"But the main thing we learn from a serious attempt to practise the Christian virtues is that we fail."¹⁴

Benjamin Franklin tried to live a morally perfect life in his own strength.

"I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into."

¹² Mere Christianity: Book III chapters 11 and 12 pages 119-129

¹³ 2 Corinthians 13:5 English Standard Version and see 2 Peter 1:10-11. 10 Therefore, brothers,[a] be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. 11 For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Mere Christianity page 123

Franklin set out 13 virtues that he would strive to perfect by recording on each day on a table any of the virtues he had failed to keep.

He did improve but did not achieve perfection. His mind also wandered. As his 'humility' improved he had a thought as to whether he was one of the most humble.

I spoke about my early understanding of living a Christian life in preparation for an examination. Could I get good marks by deserving them? Relying on myself, my own actions. If I did this, then surely God you would look favourably on me.

It was releasing for me to read the following:

"I think everyone who has some vague belief in God, until they becomes a Christian, has the idea of an exam, or of a bargain in their mind. The first result of real Christianity is to blow that idea into bits. When they find it blown into bits, some think that Christianity is a failure and give up. They seem to imagine that God is very simple-minded. In fact of course, He knows all about this. One of the very things Christianity was designed to do was to blow that idea to bits. God was waiting for the moment at which you discover thsathe there is no question of earning a pass markin this exam, or putting him in your debt.

Then comes another discovery. Every faculty you have, the power of thinking, or moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given you by God."¹⁵

This brings us to the point where we understand that our own undirected actions are not what God wants.

So, is it faith alone?

Lewis says that a dispute as to whether it is good actions, or Faith in Christ that leads Christians home is like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is the most necessary.¹⁶

God wants us to journey in faith in relationship with Him responding to what has been done for us.

So, what are we to do? Are we to follow the attempts of Franklin to improve on his 13 virtues? Are we back to the law in the Old Testament?

Paul's advice to those in Thessalonica was this¹⁷:

"We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way...."

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he did not refer to a set of rules but said:

"37 ... "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself."

The statement 'Love God and do what you please' begins to come into focus. We need both: faith and actions on this journey.

I read that when Augustine made this statement it was when preaching on 1 John4: 4-12.

¹⁵ Mere Christianity page 123

¹⁶ Mere Christianity page 127

¹⁷ Colossians 1:9b-10a

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Read this passage when you are looking for guidance on your way ahead. Invite the Holy Spirit to get in beside you and direct you as you journey on.

Let us consider verses 7 to 12 of this passage.

God's Love and Ours

"7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us."

"Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved."

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