

English Church Heidelberg: Sermon – 25.10.2026

Pleasing God and Loving our Neighbours

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18; 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8; Matthew 22: 34-46

Let me begin with a familiar story. A father and his son were taking their donkey to the market. At first, both walked beside the donkey. People laughed and said, "Why have a donkey if you do not ride it?" So the son rode the donkey. Soon others criticized, saying, "What a disrespectful son, allowing his elderly father to walk!" Then the father rode the donkey while the son walked. Again, people complained, "What a cruel father, making the young boy walk!" So both rode the donkey together. This time they were told, "Poor donkey! How can they burden it so much?" Trying to satisfy everyone, they both got off and carried the donkey. The people laughed even more at their foolishness. Finally, the father turned to his son and said, "No matter what we do, someone will always find fault with us."

The story illustrates a truth that all of us know from experience: it is impossible to please everyone. Yet much of our lives can be spent seeking the approval of others. We like to be appreciated, admired, and spoken well of. We want to remain in the good books of people around us. Consequently, we often shape our words, choices, and actions according to the expectations of others. Timothy Keller wisely observed, "Your worth is not determined by what others think of you, but by what God declares about you." The Christian life calls us to find our identity not in human approval but in God's acceptance and love. At the same time, we are commanded to love our neighbours as ourselves, to care for one another, and to seek the good of others. The readings appointed for today help us reflect on this important balance. Therefore, let us meditate on the theme: "Pleasing God and Loving our Neighbours."

1. Pleasing God rather than pleasing People

In today's Epistle reading, St. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the primary aim of Christian ministry is not to win human approval but to please God, "who tests our hearts" (1 Thess. 2:4). The verb "to please" carries the sense of seeking someone's approval or acting in a way that satisfies their expectations. For Paul, pleasing God is a hallmark of authentic discipleship, whereas compromising the truth in order to gain human favour is incompatible with faithful service. To

illustrate this, Paul explains that neither he, nor Sylvanus, nor Timothy relied on flattery or hidden motives in their ministry. The Greek word *kolakeia* (κολακεία) refers to self-serving flattery that disguises selfish intentions behind pleasant words. Paul insists that they neither sought financial gain from the Thessalonians nor desired praise, honour, or privileges for themselves. Scripture consistently warns against such behaviour: "A flattering mouth works ruin" (Prov. 26:28), and "Whoever flatters a neighbour spreads a net for his feet" (Prov. 29:5).

One of the great temptations in Christian life and ministry is allowing the desire for recognition, appreciation, or popularity to become more important than faithfulness to God. Praise and privilege can subtly shift our focus from God's glory to our own. Therefore, Paul asks elsewhere: "Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). As St. John Chrysostom wisely observed, "Let us seek not the praise of men but the praise which comes from God." Likewise, A.W. Tozer reminds us that "The approval of God is infinitely more valuable than the applause of men."

Friends, many of us know the disappointment of not receiving recognition for our sincere efforts, whether in the church, the workplace, or the family. Yet Paul encourages us not to be discouraged. God sees what others may overlook. He knows our motives, observes our faithfulness, and rewards every act done in His name. Therefore, let us continue to do good, not for human praise, but for the glory of God, trusting that the One who tests our hearts also rewards our faithfulness.

2. Pleasing God through Loving our Neighbour

While Paul insists that the Christian's primary concern is to please God rather than seek human approval, this does not mean becoming indifferent to people. On the contrary, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he and his companions cared for them "like a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children" (1 Thess. 2:7-8). There is a significant difference between seeking people's approval and genuinely seeking their good. Paul develops this same principle in Romans 15:1-2: "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour." Christian love moves beyond self-interest and seeks the welfare, growth, and flourishing of others. In today's

Gospel reading, a lawyer approaches Jesus and asks, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (Matt. 22:36). At the time, Jewish teachers debated how the 613 commandments of the Torah should be summarized or prioritized.

Jesus first quotes the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." These words formed the daily confession of Israel, recited morning and evening and taught to every generation. Jesus then immediately adds a second commandment from today's Old Testament reading: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Michael Green summarizes it well: "With God first and neighbour second, all else in the law is commentary." Jesus places love of neighbour alongside love of God, showing that the two cannot be separated. Genuine love for God will inevitably manifest itself in love for other people. Leviticus 19 makes this very clear. God's people are commanded not to hate, seek revenge, or bear grudges, but to love their neighbours as themselves. This command extends even to the stranger and foreigner living among them: "You shall love the alien as yourself" (Lev. 19:34). The stranger, migrant, refugee, and sojourner are all included within the scope of neighbour-love.

Between the questions, "who is my neighbour?" to "whose neighbour am I?" lies the heart of theology of neighbour. Jesus reinforces this truth in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, teaching that our neighbour is anyone whose need God places before us. As theologian Ligon Duncan observes, loving our neighbour is one of the clearest ways we reflect the image and character of God to the world. When Christians love as God commands, they demonstrate what God Himself is like. A powerful example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While many church leaders in Germany were engaged in theological debates, Bonhoeffer recognized that their Jewish neighbours were being persecuted and murdered under the Nazi regime. He understood that love for God demanded practical love and courageous action on behalf of one's neighbour. His faithfulness ultimately cost him his life, but his witness continues to remind us that love for God and love for neighbour can never be separated.

Brothers and sisters, our devotion to God is measured not only by the prayers we offer or the doctrines we confess, but also by the love, compassion, and care we show to those around us. To love God with all our heart must lead us to love our neighbour with all our strength.