

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Galatians 5:16-23 *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

In Jesus Christ, who has fought for and won our souls from death, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

“Stand your ground! Don’t fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war let it begin here!” Those memorable words were spoken on April 19th, 1775, by a man named John Parker. He was in command of a small group of local militia in the town of Lexington, Massachusetts. His soldiers were called “minutemen”, because their orders were to be ready to fight at a minute’s notice at any time of the day or night. On that fateful day, they were met by a column of British soldiers who were trying to seize the supplies of the American army at Concord. They were called upon to fight, and the first shot they fired marked the beginning of the American Revolution. It’s been called “the shot heard round the world,” because, at the time, everyone knew what firing that shot meant—it meant war!

When you became a Christian, another type of shot was fired; another kind of war was declared. It’s the war between your sinful flesh and the Holy Spirit. The battleground is your heart. Sadly, it’s a war that will never be completely won while we live on this earth, because this side of Judgment Day our lives will never be completely free of the power of the flesh. However, one side will always hold sway over the other. In some, the flesh dominates, and snuffs out the Spirit. In others, the true believers, the Spirit dominates, and keeps the flesh under its thumb. As Christians you and I are “looking for a fight” — we’re looking to fight the flesh, and our text for today tells us how to do it! That’s why our theme is:

THIS MEANS WAR!

The battle lines are drawn
In some, the flesh advances
In Christians, the Spirit gains control

The Gulf War of many years ago is still relatively fresh in the country’s memory. Did you know that the “Gulf War” wasn’t really a war at all? War was never officially declared by the United States on Iraq. For that matter, we never declared war on North Viet Nam, or on Korea, or on Iraq or Afghanistan in the years since 9/11. In fact, the U.S. hasn’t been involved in an openly declared war since 1945. But whether we realize it or not, right now you and I are involved in a bitter and bloody war; one which we fight every day, one in which there are victories and defeats. The battle lines are drawn—it’s a war between the Holy Spirit and our flesh.

You'll notice something interesting in our text: Paul shows us right up front how to succeed in this war. ***But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*** The only way to prevail against the sinful flesh is to “walk by the Spirit”—to allow the Holy Spirit to be the force that guides you in your walk through life. But, Paul says, that won't be easy! ***For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.***

The battle lines are drawn. On the one side is the sinful flesh—and it's a powerful force. Do you have the sinful flesh? If you're a human being, you do! When Adam and Eve first fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, they pronounced a sentence of sin and death on every human being that would come after them. Scripture tells us that each one of us has inherited that “original sin” from them. Even before we start, our very human makeup is sinful right down to the pores on our skin, and it wants to be more sinful still as our lives go along. You've felt the power of the flesh, haven't you? It tempts you to do the things you know are wrong, things that are against God's will and harmful to your faith. You can expect to keep on feeling that dark power, Paul says, because ***“the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit.”***—The flesh lusts after the things that are the opposite of the things the Spirit desires.

But there's another power inside of you, fighting on the other side of the battle. It's the power of the Holy Spirit. It, too, is very strong. It was strong enough, after all, to plant faith in your heart in the first place, and that's amazing enough in itself! Beyond that, the power of God's Holy Spirit is what keeps faith strong in your heart, even though the flesh is constantly trying to drive it out. Peter says, ***“You are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”*** (1 Peter 1:5)

The battle inside your heart is constantly going on, and that's something you can feel too, isn't it? It's a struggle between the flesh and the Spirit, pulling you this way one moment and that way the next. It makes life tough, Paul says, ... ***to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*** The question isn't whether the battle exists or not—it's there in each of us. This is war! The question is—WHO'S IN CONTROL? Who's winning? Which of the two forces is going to dominate in your life?

There's been all kinds of talk about vice-presidential candidates in recent months, since the election is still coming in November. But most of the time, it doesn't really matter who the Vice President is; after all, when the election is over in November, only one person is going to sit in the driver's seat—and that's the president, not the vice-president. The same is true about a person's heart: only one force can be in charge, either the Spirit or the flesh. It's a sad fact that, in the lives of many people, the flesh advances and takes control.

How can you tell when the flesh is in control of a person's life? We can't read hearts, like God can. We can't see what's inside a person, but we can sure see what's outside. Paul says that the works of the flesh are obvious. ***“Now the works of the flesh are evident...”*** and he goes on to describe the kind of behavior we can expect in people who are completely governed by their own flesh. It's not a complete list, but it sure gives us the idea. First he mentions sins of lust: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality. We don't have to go too far to find some modern-day examples, do we? Casual sex is taken for granted in our day. Teen pregnancy rates, though declining, remain troublesome, and high school clinics are

dispensing contraceptives like aspirin to try and solve the problem. Couples “living together” outside of marriage is now so common that it’s taken for granted, and it’s more surprising to most people when boyfriend and girlfriend don’t share a bed. God’s divine institution of marriage is looked on as something old-fashioned—a thing of the past.

Paul moves on to idolatry—which is the worship of anything other than the true God. Like the worship of money, perhaps? The worship of pleasure or comfort? What could be more common in America as we enter the new century! Paul mentions sorcery, also known as witchcraft: the worship of Satan. Believe it or not, this is also on the rise in this country, most alarmingly among teenagers. Next come sins of lovelessness: enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger. He even mentions drunkenness, living from one bottle to the next. You don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes to see that these sins are going on every day, all around us. These are the works of the flesh.

But don’t get the wrong idea—this isn’t the list of unforgivable sins! With God there is forgiveness for every sin. No, the original Greek of this verse reveals Paul’s true intent: “Those who PRACTICE such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” People who carry on with these sins, day after day, with no thought of repenting or changing their sinful lifestyle—these people show that the light of faith has been snuffed out of their hearts, or never existed there in the first place. These are the outward signs that the flesh, not the Spirit, is in control of a person’s life. For them, the struggle is over, and the flesh has won.

For a Christian, though, the struggle goes on. The very fact that you feel that daily struggle should actually give you comfort! One older pastor told me about a visit he got from a certain woman who was a member of his congregation. The woman was obviously upset. She was terribly worried, she said, that sin had taken control of her heart, and that she had lost her faith. His words were comforting: “If you’re still worried about it,” he said, “then you haven’t lost your faith!” He realized that when the flesh wins, then the struggling is over. But in the heart of a believer, the struggle goes on—and the Spirit gains control.

In contrast to “the works of the flesh,” Paul now turns to the “fruit of the Spirit.” He says, But the fruit of the Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control**. Notice anything different about this list? It’s NOT a list of things that that we can do. No one can make himself loving, or kind, or self-controlled, no matter how hard he works at it. These are attitudes of the heart that the Holy Spirit creates in us by faith. And FAITH is definitely the key word there!

Who is it that inspires us to these qualities, who gives us the supreme example of love that we reflect in our lives? It’s our Savior, Jesus Christ. In Him our faith is grounded. Look at that list again—all those qualities apply best to our loving Master: it was His great love for us drove Him to Mount Calvary. He brought us joy and peace, by personally blotting each and every one of our sins out of God’s book. For our sakes, He was longsuffering upon that cursed tree. Jesus was kind and good; He was faithful to us, even to the very end; gentle and self-controlled even in the face of mockery and scorn.

Can we have no reaction to the love of our Savior? Is it possible that our lives might not show that we are the ransomed children of God? No. Just like apple trees bear apples and grape vines bear grapes, Christians bear fruits in their lives. Not because we have to. Not because it’s our duty. But because we

can't help it! We are compelled by the power of the Holy Ghost working in our hearts. Read Philippians: ***"For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."*** (Philippians 2:13) Don't you think that it's light work, serving God in this life, when Jesus has already finished the heavy work of providing for our life to come?

If you were remember watching the news this time last year, you probably saw lots of coverage of the large wildfires raging in California. Every crew chief they interviewed on TV has the same thing to say: they just want to get the fire under control. A couple of years ago I finally learned what they mean when they say a fire is "controlled." It means that a cleared and burnt-out path has been stretched completely around the fire, so that the fire literally has nowhere to go, and poses no threat to the surrounding timber. It's the same for us Christians. In us, the Holy Spirit is the force that battles and fights and struggles in our hearts in an effort to surround and bring under control our sinful flesh. The fire still flares up from time to time—but it has nowhere to go. In daily contrition and repentance, we can turn back to our Savior for forgiveness, again and again. We are now the people of God, and "against such," our text says, "there is no law." That's why you and I can sing with the hymn writer:

Who can condemn me now for surely,
The Lord is nigh Who justifies.
No hell I fear, and thus securely
With Jesus I to heaven rise.
Lord, may Thy body and Thy blood
Be for my soul the highest good. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (Philippians 4:7)

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

July 19, 2020

- Written by Professor Paul Naumann -