

**Sermon for June 26, 2022 (Third Sunday After Pentecost)
Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown, CT
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Galatians 5:1,13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

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. For 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. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

- Today's epistle is from a letter Paul wrote to the Christians in a region of northern Turkey called Galatia.
- Remember that, after his conversion, Paul went from place to place, preaching the Gospel, and then appointing leaders in each town and moving on.
- We know from his letters that he stayed in contact with the churches some of the places he'd planted churches, while he travelled, and even when he was put in prison.

- The letters contain some theology, and also some instruction about how to live the Christian life.
- But many of them also address particular problems that Paul has heard about in particular churches.
- In Galatia, one of the big problems seems to have been that the Christians there were divided into factions and fighting with one another.
- People dividing into factions and fighting – seems like some things don't change with history.
- And unfortunately, this is not the last time this happened in the history of the Church.
- But Paul tells them that this isn't the way Christians ought to live – the whole Law is summed up in the command to love your neighbor as yourself, and love is patient, kind, generous, gentle.
- He adds that, not only is that what the Law requires, it is what the Holy Spirit leads us to be if we are living in the Spirit.
- So if the Galatians are fighting amongst themselves, there is also a deeper spiritual problem: they are not living in the Spirit, but being guided by their own fallen human desires, which is what Paul means when he speaks about "the flesh".
- Now this opposition between the Spirit and the flesh – or living according to the Spirit and living according to the flesh – is a basic and distinctive part of Paul's theology, one that he uses in a number of his letters.
- Let's look at what he says about it here.
- Today's passage begins with one way of summing up the Gospel Good News: "For freedom Christ has set us free" – free from the bonds of sin and death.
- This is the Easter message.

- But immediately he goes on to warn against submitting again to the yoke of slavery – of going back willingly to the bad old ways of living that Christ died to free us from.
- It seems that Christians had originally thought that, once they were baptized and filled with the Spirit, they would never sin again, perhaps never even be tempted again.
- But it soon became clear that this isn't how it works.
- True, sometimes people *are* set free once and for all from some things when they turn their lives over to Christ, and begin to live radically different lives.
- But we find, over time, that there are things in us that still need healing, growth, change, and sometimes forgiveness.
- Some are slips that happen from time to time; but we can also still live in the grips of forces like uncontrollable anger, greed, sexual desire, or substance addiction.
- And so there's a lot of work to do in the Christian life, cooperating with God in His work of transforming us into creatures of love.
- Yes, Christ has set us free.
- But the freedom that comes in Christ is not a freedom to be able to do whatever you want, it's a freedom to respond to the Spirit and grow in the way of love.
- The forgiveness of our sins is not a reason to sin more because we won't be held accountable.
- It's a reason to be glad all that old life is behind us and work on living a loving and righteous *new* life in Christ.

- And we do have to work at it, because there are still things that make [something other than living in the spirit] awfully alluring.
- Some of these are outside our individual selves – forces of society, or the pressure of our own social groups, or the seductions of the media, or corrupt governments.
- These are always whispering – or sometimes shouting – “you’ve got to do this!”: believe what this party says, dress this way, look like a fashion model or a professional athlete, make more money, get a promotion, salute the picture of the Great Leader.
- These forces outside ourselves are what Paul and other Christian writers mean when they talk about “the world”, and oppose it to being “in Christ”.
- “The flesh”, by contrast, is a name for forces *inside* of us – psychological drives, biological and biochemical and neurochemical states.
- I see a buffet laid out and my appetites want to eat *all* of it. Well, not everything on the table, but some of everything.
- I see one of those Newport mansions, and I think “Ooh, I want one of those.”
- Someone insults me, or cuts me off in traffic, and I get angry and want to shout at them or even punch them in the nose.
- I see someone do something stupid or embarrassing, and I want to tell everybody about it in gossip.
- These are all temptations that come from within ourselves – the Flesh.
- Part of the spiritual life consists in learning to recognize them and resist them, following through on our baptismal vows to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil.
- And among the manifestations of the flesh, Paul of course includes things like food, and drink, and sex.

- But he also lists more things that we wouldn't normally think of as bodily desires.
- In this reading, he lists enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy – the sorts of things that are apparently tearing apart the church in Galatia.
- So the Galatians – and all of us – need, as Paul says, to stand firm in the faith, and strive to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh.
- But there is also a danger in putting it this way.
- Cuz you might get the idea that what Paul is saying here is that our bodies are bad – that we shouldn't pay attention to them, maybe even that we should think of them as shameful or hate them.
- And, unfortunately, a lot of Christians over the years have fallen into this way of thinking, even mistaking it for Christian doctrine.
- Maybe YOU thought this was what Christianity teaches about the body, because maybe it was what you heard in Sunday school or from a different preacher.
- But in fact this was the first big dispute over doctrine that the church faced in the second century, against a group of people called Gnostics.
- The Gnostics DID believe that the body was evil. In fact, they believed that the entire material world was evil. MATTER was evil, so of course the world and the flesh were bad too.
- They believed that what we really are is pure spirit – that we're divine sparks that are temporarily trapped in material bodies, but freed from the body and its desires when we die.
- Sometimes they likened our body to a set of dirty clothing that the real person – the soul or spirit – has to wear for a while, but should be glad to be rid of.

- One of them, Marcion, even said that the God described in Genesis 1 wasn't really God at all.
- For him, the God of the Old Testament was really the Devil, who created all this material mess we're a part of, and Marcion rejected the whole Old Testament and half of the New.
- Now these Gnostic ideas are very powerful and a lot of people were drawn to them, and still are.
- And the Church wisely declared them heretical early on.
- In fact, I think rejecting Gnosticism may be the most important doctrinal decision the Church ever made after the books of the New Testament were written.
- But they do keep coming back.
- Why do I think Gnosticism was so bad?
- If you think it through, you'll see that, if you start out thinking that the body and the material world are evil, this is going to lead you to one or the other of two opposite conclusions.
- One is that, if we are freed from the body when we die, and the body is not really *me*, but something like my clothing, it really doesn't matter that much what I do with my body here and now.
- If I eat and drink too much, and go to sexual orgies, those things aren't affecting the real me, the divine spark, but only getting my clothing dirtier.
- But when I die, I'm automatically going to be freed from all that, and be a pure divine spark again with no repercussions.
- Go this way, and licentiousness and immorality seem like they are ok – maybe even desirable – might as well have fun with the body while I'm stuck in it.

- The other possibility is just the opposite, but is just as bad if not worse:
- if my bodily desires are all bad, and the body is where sin and evil come from, I need to practice a really extreme sort of asceticism to try to mortify the flesh: kill my appetites to be more like a pure spirit again.
- Go this way, and you hate your body, and harm it, and this harms the whole person.
- Now both of these errors are based on an assumption: the assumption that “the flesh” means “the human body”.
- But ‘flesh’ and ‘body’ are two different words in Greek, just as they are in English. And Paul does not use them interchangeably.
- Listen to what Paul says about the body as opposed to the flesh:
- In 1 Cor 6, he says “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit that dwells within you...therefore honor God with your bodies”.
- Paul does not think that the body is bad, even though it is the source of many desires that lead us into sin.
- And this is consistent in the Bible.
- In the very first chapter of Genesis, God creates the whole material world, including human bodies, and proclaims it all good – just the opposite of what Marcion said.
- Marcion could only hold his view because he rejected the Old Testament – his view is profoundly unBiblical.
- Nor does the Bible teach us that we will become divine sparks when we die – it speaks of a bodily resurrection, just as Christ was bodily raised from the dead.
- It is a glorified spiritual body, but it is spoken of as a body.

- Christians are called to love and respect the material world as God's creation; and in addition to this, to love and respect our own bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit.
- Well, then, what is this "flesh" Paul speaks of, if it is not just another name for the body?
- Let me offer a way of thinking about it.
- Remember that in Genesis 2, God made the first human body from the Earth or dust, and then breathed His own breath or spirit into it.
- Scholars don't all agree on what this means, but I tend to think it is talking about the Holy Spirit.
- Our souls and our bodies were made by God to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and it's only then that they are in proper working order – *that's living in the Spirit*.
- But Christians believe that human nature as we find it is fallen – the Holy Spirit is not in us after the Fall (until we are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit), and without it all we have to guide us are our biological and psychological desires, social conditioning, and a bit of reasoning. We are, in essence, very smart social animals – a kind of mix of monkey and Macintosh.
- Our biological nature has lots of good resources for telling us what we need biologically, but that's as far as they go.
- Hunger tells us we need food, but it doesn't distinguish my food from my neighbor's, or which food is good for us.
- Anger tells me when my boundaries have been violated, and gets me ready to defend myself, but it doesn't tell me how it is appropriate to respond.

- And these animal instincts can also be disordered biologically – I might be constantly hungry, or addicted to a food that is bad for me, or I might be angry all the time and unable to control it.
- When I'm living this way, I'm living according to the flesh.
- Our bodily drives are there for good reasons, but they only know their own territory – hunger, fear, anger, sexual desire – and so none of them is a good guide to conduct.
- Philosophers like Plato recognized this, and said that what we need to put them into order is Reason.
- And that's certainly partly right.
- I can reflect on what to do, or on the mistakes I've made, and try to change my conduct.
- But Christian thinkers add to this that we need something more as well: we need God's Holy Spirit in our hearts to guide us, to prompt us, and to transform us from within.
- And perhaps that is one of the reasons that we get this reading during Pentecost, the season in which we remember the work of the Holy Spirit.
- In the end, the main message is not about the life of the flesh, but the life of the Spirit.
- The reason that life according to the flesh is bad is, first and foremost, because it is life without the Spirit, or without letting the Spirit guide us.
- So in this season of Pentecost, let us pray that God send the Holy Spirit upon us to guide us, and also that we listen to the Spirit and live in the Spirit.
- Let us pray God that we may stand firm in our faith, and not fall back into the habits and patterns of the world and the flesh, that God may complete the work in us of transforming us into Christ's full image and likeness, and

live full and abundant lives as God's adopted children, and as citizens of God's Kingdom.

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