

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 14, 2013
Galatians 5:16-24ⁱ

Part I

The world's attention is focused on Syria. It is debating whether or not to get directly involved in Syria's conflict. On the one side is the United States and France. In our case, President Obama has decided such an intervention is necessary and will ask congress to approve it. On the other side is Iran and Russia. They warn that if there is direct intervention, there could be dire consequences in the region and, perhaps, on a larger scale. No matter how you look at it, then, the congressional debate will be intense.

Of course, at the heart of the debate is the *allegation* that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on some of its citizens. Whatever the case may be, we all know that Syria has internal conflict. The Syrian regime has been the target of rebels. The rebels want to take down the regime and take over. From the regime's point of view the rebels are the *enemy within*.

While that is happening on a national level in Syria, the *same thing* happens to us Christians on a personal level. That is, the Christian is involved in a very real battle. It is an internal conflict between the enemy within, our flesh, and the Spirit. "The flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh." On one side is the flesh. It is your sinful self that you inherited from Adam. It does not want to walk in God's ways. On the other side is the Spirit. He created you anew in Christ Jesus. Created anew, you want to walk in God's ways.

This internal conflict between the flesh and the Spirit *began* at the baptismal font. From the moment those waters were poured over your head, the battle ensued. This battle is life-long. It begins each day you get up; and it lasts until you go to bed. It starts when your feet hit the floor and lasts until your head hits the pillow. It does, because from the moment you get up, your flesh wants to join the world. Behind the world is the devil egging on your flesh. So the battle rages within.

The apostle knew that battle. He put it like this, "I am acting in a way that I do not understand. For instead of doing what I want to do, I do what I hate. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the Law is good." Be that as it may, he adds, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For I want to do what is right, but I just do not do it...Instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do."ⁱⁱ

That's the truth of the matter. The flesh often gets the best of us, as the apostle admits. "But," he adds this note in our text, "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." Led by the Spirit, you want to do the right thing *not* because the law forces you against your will; that's doing it for the wrong reasons. You want to do the right thing *because* you have been created anew in Christ Jesus; it's what the Spirit works in you. So, you are torn between the two as the battle rages.

Part II

So that you are not left defenseless in this battle, you need to know the enemy; to be clear as to what the enemy looks like. So the apostle points out that "the works of the flesh are *evident*." It's like the rebels fighting the Syrian regime. Tech devices capture and send video and pictures. They make it *plain* that the rebels have been stockpiling arms; plotting attacks; striking at the regime. It's been in the news two years running. So, too, it is with our enemy; our own flesh. Our enemies' works *are* plain to see.

The apostle, then, gives a *list* of the enemy's works. He lists them in four groups. The *first* group identifies cheating, a dirty mind, and loose living; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness. The *second* group pictures false gods; idolatry and sorcery. The *third* group deals with a "dog eat dog world" and "every man for himself;" hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders. The *final* group deals with the attitude that "life is just a party," and "I just want to have fun;" drunkenness and revelries.

The thing is the works of the flesh do not end up in a good place. "Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." The word "practice" is a key word. "Practice" means to make a way of life; to have a mindset. A mindset is like taking a pair of glasses. The glasses have a prescription. If the prescription is wrong, what you see is skewed. It is blurry and out of focus. When that happens, you can no longer see the enemy clearly.

If you can't see the enemy, then the enemy has won. When he has won, you have cut yourself out of God's kingdom; you have left yourself in the battle-torn field of hell.

That's what the enemy within, looks like. The apostle not only wants you to know what the enemy looks like, he *also* wants you to be clear about your ally. Your ally is the Spirit.

Your ally is at work too. That's plain from "The fruit of the Spirit." The apostle mentions some of the Spirit's fruits. This time there are three groupings. The *first* is a list of matters of the heart, your "inner compass"; love, joy, peace. The next identifies ways of treating your neighbor, how "you put a good foot

forward”; longsuffering, kindness, goodness. The final group is about integrity, how you “walk the walk”; faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

The apostle sums up the list by saying, “against such there is no law.” That is, they are produced *not* by being coerced by the law, *but* by a spontaneous reaction from the gospel. They are like the Samaritan returning thanks to Jesus at the top of his lungs. He didn’t stop and say, what *should* I do? He was *already* busying doing it. It was a fruit of our ally, the Spirit.

Part III

So, this is who our ally is and what the enemy looks like; what the conflict is between. The thing about this battle is that the flesh often *does* get the best of us. It gets the upper hand. That is, who of us cannot find our flesh in its list of works? Just consider these among that list: hatred and fits of rage, selfish ambitions and impure thoughts, envy and jealousies. We see in that list sins that we have done; struggle with; plague and haunt us; and *still* get the best of us.

It is a battle waged every day; the flesh is dug in the trenches; it hurls its grenades against our new life in Christ. It is a battle in which we loose lots of skirmishes; in which the enemy tries to gain ground; and the more he gets, the more he wants. If we are not careful, he will win the day; and we will adopt the mindset of the flesh.

We are *especially* tempted to give into the fleshly mindset when *bad* things happen to us. It reminds me of what happened to the Mirable sisters. They grew up in the Dominican Republic in the 40’s and 50s’. It was a time when the country was ruled by a cruel dictator, Trujillio. Trujillio abused many; ruined many peoples’ lives; destroyed families. It became personal and up front for the Mirable sisters. In such distressing times it is easy to feel abandoned by God. That’s what some of the Mirable sisters felt. Feeling abandoned, they left the church. They looked for relief from pain in the wrong places and fell from the faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are not immune to such temptation. When bad things happen, we too can feel forsaken by God. Pain from failure at work or school life; heartache from loss of human love, suffering from infirmity that puts us flat on our back can leave us feeling forsaken. It is then that we are tempted to look for relief in the wrong places; places the flesh likes to go. Then the fleshly mindset has taken us from God.

It can also happen when good things come into our lives. That is the point of today’s gospel reading. Ten lepers looked to Jesus in faith. “Lord, have mercy,^{iv}” their raspy voices pleaded. Jesus granted their request. He did so that on the way to the priests their skin became like new. They got what they hoped

for. When they did, nine of the ten went on their merry way. When life was good, they forgot God.

When good things come our way, it is easy for us to forget God, too. To be sure, there is so much “good” in our time. Health care, longevity, entertainment, recreation all makes life good. So much “good” though can have a slippery slope. It can dull our senses to that we loose sight of the faith. Loosing sight of the faith, we fall back to the fleshly mindset; “eat, drink, and be merry,^v for tomorrow we die.” Then the fleshly mindset has taken us from God.

So, what is our hope? Our only hope is that “those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” That is, God nailed *your* sins to the cross. He did in Christ’s body. There God hurled the grenades of his anger; and Jesus was shell shocked as he was punished for your sin. There God gave Jesus the whole nine yards; and Jesus tasted the wasted battlefield of hell for you. There God, in Christ, triumphed over your enemies; over the devil and the world; over your flesh and its desires. There God laid down his arms and signed the peace treaty for you in Christ.

You participated in what God did for you *at* the baptismal font. You did, because in those waters God buried the passions and desires of your flesh in Christ’s death. In those waters God raised you with Jesus, who rose triumphant over your enemies. In those waters God made you a new creation in Christ Jesus.

So your baptism has daily meaning. From the moment you were baptized, you have been in a battle. Each day you get up, you step onto that battlefield; you find yourself in a battle for your life. The psalmist got it. He knew the battle: “O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God.^{vi}” He also knew who his ally was: “But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill.^{vii}” Each morning, then, he could begin and end the battle in Christ: “I lay down and slept, I awoke again, for the Lord sustained me.^{viii}”

That’s how it is with your baptismal life. It is turning to God in the heat of the battle. It is leaning on him and saying, “I am helpless. Save me! ...and he does; he does because **Jesus is the One who won the battle for your life.** Amen!

ⁱ References to the text (NKJV) will not be cited

ⁱⁱ Romans 7.15-19 God’s Word to the Nations (GWN)

ⁱⁱⁱ Summarized from *Mariposas*, as I remember the telling of the Maribel family

^{iv} Luke 17.13

^v Luke 12.19

^{vi} Psalm 3.1,2 ESV

^{vii} Psalm 3.3,4 ESV

^{viii} Psalm 3.4 ESV