

“Opposition Breeds Hostility”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Many of you here are avid sports fans of one type or another, whether that be football, baseball, soccer, hockey, or maybe even golf. Within the realm of sports, teams develop what we call rivalries, some of those being more intense than others. One set of fans is pitted against another, as the ones they support vie for the right to call themselves the victor until they meet again. The intensity with which these fans cheer their teams is unmatched, and often over the top. But even more than that, the hostility with which they treat their opposition is even more unmatched. It's not even all that unheard of for there to be physical altercations, and even murders at the expense of a simple game. These people are so engrossed in these things of the flesh, that it completely overtakes them, pulling them down to the depths of their original sin which lets their Old Adam run wild.

This morning, our text does much the same thing. Paul pits the things of the flesh against the things of the Spirit, and he does so in a way that draws our attention to the reality that outside of Christ, we have no hope of winning this fight. These two things are opposed to one another, battling each other in a fight to the death as all old rivalries become. There is nothing older than the battle between the things of the Spirit and the things of the flesh. That is what caused our first parents to fall. The evil one convinced them that the things of the flesh superseded the things of God. Just as Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16:23 after calling him Satan, “For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” This opposition of the two breeds hostility, both within the world and within the Christian as they daily battle their total depravity.

Within the world, we see this manifest in wars, political strife, and persecution. The things of the flesh always believe they have the upper hand on the things of the Spirit, and so they constantly attack and belittle those who support the way of Christ. In places like China and Africa, Christians are brutally murdered for their boldness to stand up and proclaim the Gospel. That brings to mind one of my dad's classmates at Seminary, Ibrahim Timbo. Reverend Timbo converted to Christianity as a young adult, and left his home in Africa to come to the United States and attend the seminary in Fort Wayne. When he left his home, the last thing his father told him was that if he ever came back home he would have to kill him for becoming a Christian and leaving their village. This matter of the flesh, this worldly principle, was not enough to shake him away from the things of the Spirit to which he was being called, and for all those under persecution, they deal with much the same.

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All of us deal with this battle in one way or another. Even if you aren't being persecuted for your faith in the sense of being killed or physically assaulted for it, we all have been victims of hostility in some form. Opposition to your faith comes from many angles—from family, friends, coworkers, and more. These people in our lives have buried themselves so far into the things of the flesh, that they have completely obscured the things of the Spirit. Very often this is done intentionally, but sometimes they aren't aware of the reality that they have given the evil one power over their lives by focusing only on the things of the flesh. Whether they've made a god of money, fame, or health, they have chosen to ignore the truth of the Spirit. They would rather have the “works of the flesh” that Paul mentions in verses 19-21 of our Epistle lesson, but the sad truth is just what Paul says after he lists those sins—“those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

The Christian battles the things of the flesh internally and externally every day. We have to fight them as we walk in a world lost in sin. But the true battle exists as the things of the Spirit, “the fruits of the Spirit” as Paul says, work to overcome the sinful flesh. Our Old Adam wants us to indulge in the “works of the flesh” because it feeds his desires, and his desires are only focused on the self in the here and now. The Christian has the necessary tool to defeat that old man, and that tool is the concrete assurance of salvation that we have by our baptisms. We must daily drown the desires of the flesh as we walk this earth, and that is a battle that will rage within us until the day we finally reach the heavenly glory. Luther said the Old Adam is a “good swimmer,” and so we can never relent as we drown him in those baptismal waters, because he is always swimming so that he can make his way back out.

The things of the flesh are subject to the condemnation of the Law, and so we preach the Law to those who are lost in the realm of their sinful flesh. And only when they have been brought to the realization of their sin—which the Law does, as it is written in Romans 3:20—only then can they receive the salvation of the Gospel proclamation. The things of the Spirit are in total opposition to the sins of the flesh. They cannot coexist, because the things of the Spirit are the things of God. And God's perfect and holy righteousness cannot tolerate or coexist with sin. That is why Paul finishes our text in the way that he does. He says in v 24, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

We belong to Christ Jesus by virtue of our baptismal identity, and as such we must crucify the sinful flesh to destroy any notion that the devil maintains some hold over you. That's what Paul means when he says in Romans 6:3-4:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

In accordance with our baptismal identity in Christ, we are called to walk anew in this life, to fight the battle and oppose the sinful flesh. Because the things of the Spirit dwell in us according to the redemption Christ has won on our behalf. Only by His gracious mercy have we received the “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” of which Paul speaks.

These things of the Spirit are things of the Gospel and not of the Law. They stand in contrast and opposition to the things of the flesh, in utter hostility toward them as they now fill us and pervade our lives. But we can never lose sight of the fact that we have these things, not because of our ability to do them, or because we have been filled with enough grace that we can accomplish the things of the Spirit, but because Jesus Christ now dwells within us. It is He alone who is capable of all these virtues, and by His indwelling in us His mighty work of salvation is complete. We live as those who are one in Christ Jesus, as those who now have thrown off the bonds of the sinful flesh to be those who are of the Spirit. This reality of faith, which we have only for the sake of Christ, is what sustains us as we fight this battle. As we continually face the horrors of this world, only Jesus is the answer and the one who not only can defeat them, but already has in His death on Calvary.

No matter the opposition that our sinful flesh brings out, we must never allow that hostility to overtake our faith and the desires of the Spirit. And the best part about that is we don’t have to fight that battle on our own, because, as Paul says in verse 17 of our text, “the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.” As we daily strive to drown our Old Adam in the waters of our baptisms, the Spirit gives us the necessary tools by which to accomplish that. In the means of grace, the Word and the Holy Sacraments, we receive the gift of forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus. By His blood, and according to His will, we stand firm in our faith to face the battles that the flesh will rage against our spirit. We come here to receive His divine service in the body and blood of Christ, to share in His Holy Supper that we might “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” (1 Cor 11:26). And that is our strength and our hope that sustains us unto eternal life.

It is not an idle thing to receive this precious gift, and there can be no opposition which breeds hostility when we come to this table. Because here—in, with, and under the bread and wine—we are able to mortify the sinful flesh, thus killing any hostility

toward the Spirit. That is why we gather with such purpose, and with such strictness to the command of our Lord. As we come together as one body in Christ to receive the forgiveness He won for us by His death on the cross, there cannot be opposition within or without. We are unified as one body in Christ in our baptisms, and we receive the same proclamation of forgiveness for our sins in the preaching of the Gospel. When the things of the flesh try to make their way into the church, we must and do oppose them, because they are against the desires of the Spirit. So, dear friends, let us hold fast to our confession, that we may be sustained in our belief in Jesus Christ as the redeemer of the world, and the blessed truth that we are justified by grace through faith in Him alone. Amen.