

Pastor T.C. Arnold
14th Sunday after Trinity
Galatians 5:16-24
Sept 5th, 2010

Two friends sit down at the local coffee shop and enjoy a rather serious conversation. One friend opens up to the other explaining her feelings on “where she is at” in her Christian walk. She says, “I still have sins that I can’t seem to overcome. But I am convinced that one day I will overcome them. Then, I will finally be the Christian that God wants me to be.”

A man corners his elder at church on Sunday morning and explains to him that his life is just a wreck. He doesn’t feel worthy to even darken the door of the sanctuary. He confides in him, even sharing with him that he is living with a deep dark secret. He can’t even bring himself to tell his pastor. He feels that even though he believes that Jesus died for his sins, he will not go to heaven. The magnitude of the sin is too great. He has lived with it for far too long.

Both of these stories are not uncommon. You may, at one time, have been the friend sitting and listening to the Christian who is working to restore to completion her relationship with Christ. Or, you may be the man who thinks himself too unworthy to get into heaven. You may be familiar with these situations. Though they are vastly different, they are really the same. And to such a Christian – a Christian that is very familiar to our world – to the average Joe and Jane “pew sitter” in each congregation – Paul writes about the flesh and the Spirit.

The Church in Galatia was the recipient of these words nearly two thousand years ago. But the Christian Church of today still has the same problems as in centuries past. These problems resonate through our congregations, through our families and through our lives. You see, Paul was dealing with a church that believed it was by what they do – by keeping the law – that they could attain a better status before God. This cannot be done. This is not the purpose of the law. The law can do what it did in the examples above – make the woman think that if she conquers the sin she will be the Christian that God wants her to be – and the man who can’t even bring himself to look God in the eye because of what he had done.

While these two stories are vastly different, remember, they are really the same. Both the woman and the man in the story have a problem seeing that the grace of God – the Gospel work of Jesus on the cross – is sufficient for their life. It permeates through the life of the believer – even if she doesn’t feel like she is a good enough Christian because of her inclination to do one specific act. The Gospel message of life – the blood of Jesus – covers a multitude of sins – even the sins that man believes are unforgivable. We tend to mesh our life lived under the law and the life Christ has earned for us in the Gospel so much that we can’t see how they are actually separate and distinct. Paul shows us how the two are separate. We either live by one or we live by the other.

We know the works of the flesh. Paul says they are evident. And one does not have to be a card-carrying heathen to see such things at work in the lives of each of us. These works of the flesh are held in check by God’s word of law. They are held in check for Christians because we understand that this word of law is for us. Therefore, we do not walk in the works of the flesh. But here, you may be worried. Because just as I say, “Christians do not live by the works of the flesh,” and then we list those fleshly works – “*sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, divisions...*” and so on, we think, “but I have done those, I must be living my life by works of the flesh.” We must understand that living by works of the flesh and having done these things are two totally different things.

Living by them means that those fleshly works guide your life and your faith. In other words, if you do such works and “believe” that your faith says, “it’s okay” – then you live by works of the flesh. If you carry forth such works and believe you can justify what the Bible says about it – and call

it good – then you are living by works of the flesh. That is your standard. That is how we can evaluate what Paul is telling us for our own lives today.

We have all done what Paul lists. I know that each of us has done every one of these fleshly works in one way or the other. Remember, having done them, and living in them are two different things. So, for your life as a Christian today, I pray you live in the Spirit, not in the flesh. Each day is a struggle for the “Spirit-liver,” the Christian, against the works of the flesh. Each day is a struggle and each day we fail. For some, they believe they will be able to conquer the flesh and not sin anymore – and that will make them righteous in the sight of God (like our first example). For others, they don’t see any hope because they can’t curb their life or they believe their sin is just too enormous (like our second example) for God to forgive. Here is where we need that second list.

The second list is how a person will live guided by the Spirit of God. These are called fruits of the Spirit because they spring forth from the life that only comes from the Lord. The first fruit is love, which is the basic to all other virtues. This love seeks to benefit others, understands and accepts the other person as he or she is, and strives to help and benefit that person. In this way God loved the world. He offered His Son on the cross so that rebellious humanity might have hope, forgiveness, life, and a blessed eternity through the Savior’s sacrifice. That’s the kind of love we show others as the Holy Spirit works in us.

The second fruit is joy, sometimes a rare emotion among church members. We come into church looking like a whipped child, and we leave looking as though we had just received a 20-year prison sentence. Instead, we have reasons to rejoice always when we recall the great things God has done for us. We rejoice especially that death has been conquered and that the way to eternal life is guaranteed through the death and resurrection of our Savior. There’s something missing in the life of a church member who can find no cause for joy in life.

Along with joy comes peace, the peace of sins forgiven, quietness of the soul; all dread of death is removed, and the highway to heaven is wide open to every believer. This peace can be ours in the midst of the turmoil and confusion of this hectic life – even for the man who can’t bear to look God in the eye because of the deep sting of his sins and unworthiness.

Another gift is patience, the ability to control ourselves, to wait and not grow impatient or take things into our own hands. Life may be a push-button, split-second affair in some ways, but God cannot be hurried. His blessings come in His own time and in His own way.

Then the apostle mentions kindness, goodness, and gentleness. The practice of these would solve many problems in strife-broken homes. It would bridge the gap between demanding parents and uncooperative children. Kindness and gentleness may be the only things that will dissolve the icy chill of one who has been offended. Instead of the caustic remark and the sarcastic reply, which only drive people farther apart, kindness and gentleness might well be the solution.

Two friends sit down in the local coffee shop and one is trying desperately to please God by conquering a particular sin. A man can’t even bear to look his Lord in the eye because he believes his sins are too detestable to forgive. Two very different situations, yet they are so much the same. Each day we live with our sins – we are sinners. But we live by the Spirit in faith. In that faith we have for us the promise that all is forgiven. Because of the way we live? No! Because of the way Jesus lived. He lived the perfect life. He made the perfect sacrifice. He gave the perfect gift. And it’s ours. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.