

Sermon for September 21st, 2025
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

READINGS

Proverbs 4:10-23

- 10** Hear, my son, and accept my words,
that the years of your life may be many.
11 I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
12 When you walk, your step will not be hampered,
and if you run, you will not stumble.
13 Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.
14 Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of the evil.
15 Avoid it; do not go on it;
turn away from it and pass on.
16 For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.
17 For they eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.
18 But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.
19 The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know over what they stumble.
20 My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
21 Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
22 For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
23 Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.

Psalm 119:9-16

[Collect text in Bold]

- 9** How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
10 With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!
11 I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.
12 Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes!
13 With my lips I declare
all the rules of your mouth.
14 In the way of your testimonies I delight
as much as in all riches.

**15 I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.
16 I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.**

Galatians 5:16-24

16 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. **24** And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Luke 17:11-19

11 On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. **12** And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance **13** and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” **14** When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. **15** Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; **16** and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. **17** Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? **18** Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” **19** And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

Our text for meditation this Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity is on our Epistle reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

St. Paul begins this passage by exhorting us to walk by the Spirit. What does he mean by that? The answer is simple, really. Our bodies are not yet redeemed. Our “flesh,” as the Apostle calls it, is fallen and still has the stain of sin in it. The Holy Spirit, however, having brought us to the new birth from the moment of our Baptism onward, is *not* fallen. In fact, He is God who dwells within us, walking with us at every moment. How do we walk by the Spirit then? By listening to His Word and receiving it. But as we shall see, this is not something which should cause us to worry that we must be saved by how much we sanctify ourselves.

The Corruption of the Flesh

By the flesh, St. Paul means that sinful part of us, the distortion of our human nature which constantly wants to sin. The Apostle is *not* telling us that our bodies are wicked just for existing, and nor is he telling us that enjoying things is sinful! Otherwise he would not include sins like jealousy or strife, sins which have nothing to do with the human body. But for too long, the Church has had a problem with monks and nuns and all other sorts of ascetics who believe that enjoying anything earthly is bad. They go on long fasts, deny themselves sleep, and endlessly mouth the same phrases trying to empty their minds, thinking that all this earns Heaven for them. Certain monastics even favor whipping

themselves, wearing itchy hairshirts, and even subjecting themselves to intolerable isolation, believing that in this way they can “mortify” the flesh and thus be perfect. Such people, whether they be Catholic or Orthodox, are terribly misguided – St. Paul says so himself! In Colossians 2:23, he says “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are *of no value* in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” Self-inflicted pain and hunger do not take away the problem!

You see, St. Paul uses the word “flesh” as a catch-all term for the sinful part of our nature because that sin is what is *wrong with it*. We were created *good*, but sin rises up to twist that good nature into something bad. The Scriptures are replete with descriptions of God blessing people and rejoicing to see them enjoying earthly matters, from food to alcohol to sex to sleep.¹ These are good things! But sin within our flesh rejects marital fidelity and prefers fornication, orgies and other sexual sins. Sin dwelling in our flesh rejects the joy of having our needs met and turns it into oppressive greed. It misdirects what should be proper worship and devotion, turning it towards witchcraft and idolatry. Enjoying a mild buzz from a couple of beers gets warped into a week-long drunken *bender*. Loving justice gets turned into abject hatred.

The Apostle warns us that whoever makes a practice of these sins is damned. By practice, what I mean is that those who do not have true faith in Christ will not *struggle* against this sinful part of their flesh. The man who is comfortable with his fornication, who loves it and continues in it, doesn't even think it is a sin – such a man does not believe in Jesus. Otherwise he would agree with Jesus that fornication is wicked. The man who loves his fits of rage, who loves causing strife, who thinks that enmity and schisms are good, such a man does not believe in Jesus. When St. Paul tells people that such people do not inherit the Kingdom of God, he is talking about *faith* and life practices more than individual deeds. Everyone messes up out of moments of weakness, no matter how long he has been a believer; the man who makes a life out of them though is not stumbling, but rather committing spiritual suicide.

The Work of the Spirit

Let no man fool you beloved. Take careful note of the language here. St. Paul lists **works** of the flesh, but he does not then list “works which we do to walk alongside the Spirit.” He lists **fruit** of the Spirit, as though we are plants and He is watering us. When it comes to the wickedness of our sinful nature, he says “those who **do** such things will not inherit the kingdom of God;” sin, especially living in sin, is a choice. But when it comes to the Spirit, he says “if you are **led** by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” The virtues that St. Paul lists – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – these things are the result of what the Holy Spirit does *for us*. He is the One who takes believers, those who are already Baptized, already justified by faith, and sanctifies them as they continue onward.

The believer is not under the Law, particularly under its sentence of damnation, because the Holy Spirit is there to lead the believer in the proper paths which avoid that sentence. If we stray (which we all do from time to time) and find the Law accusing us of our sins, the Holy Spirit leads us back to His Word, where we are brought safely back to the saving message of the forgiveness of our sins by Christ Jesus. This makes the Holy Spirit crucial to our salvation; He leads us in penitent faith through this life, making sure we are not shipwrecked.

St. Paul ends this passage by saying that believers “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” What does that mean? It means that the flesh is crucified by your reception of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit offered salvation to you when you first heard the Gospel, and you did not resist; then you were Baptized, and you received the forgiveness of your sins that Christ won on the Cross; from that moment on your sinful nature was crucified. Crucifixion is typically a *slow* death, a kind of

¹ Psalm 104:27, 145:15, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes 5:12, Deuteronomy 28:11-12, 1 Kings 3:13, and much more.

asphyxiation that occurs as the human body, hanging on the wood, cannot maintain the posture necessary to take a fresh breath of air. Eventually, the expansion of the chest makes inhaling nearly impossible, and the victim has to push their whole body upward to breathe. That is happening to the corruption of our nature, our old Adam; our sins and sinful nature are not *dead* yet, but they still keep coming up for air trying to survive the sanctification that the Holy Spirit is working. Eventually, as our sinful nature gets exhausted, those breaths it takes – the times when we stumble and sin – get less frequent. Eventually it dies, and we await the Resurrection, where the Holy Spirit will rise us from whatever grave our body is in, and ensure that we are completely perfected.

Walking by the Spirit

Our flesh is a stubborn thing. A 90 year old man who has been a devout Christian his whole life will still sin on occasion, because the corruption of his nature *clings* to him and aches to breathe, to preserve itself. But that devout man knows better than to let sin reign over him, for he walks by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspired the Word, the Scriptures, the Gospel proclaimed to us all. To walk by Him is to hear His Word gladly, to receive the forgiveness of our sins at the Divine Service, and to have our faith strengthened through these means that He has provided. After all, it is that faith which justified us before our Lord, and by faith we receive the gifts He gives us – especially that gift of the Holy Spirit, who leads us in every step we take.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.