

1 Trinity 14 – Galatians 5

Christ has set us free from all sin and condemnation. He has freed us from the tyranny of the law. The law was given because of sin. It threatens and punishes. It keeps people in line by coercion. Those who are in Christ are free from all of this. He has freed us from the terror of hell and punishment. Our eternal security in no way depends on us following a set of rules or guidelines. Instead, it has been purchased in full and secured for us by Christ. He put himself under the law, loving God above all things, showing mercy to his neighbor, fulfilling everything God desires and requires of us. There is now no condemnation for those who trust in him. We are free, completely at peace with God. This is the gospel truth. It is sealed in the blood of Christ and his empty tomb. It is delivered to us by his Holy Spirit in his saving Word, in our baptism, and in the Lord's Supper. There is nothing we can add to this. There is no amount of certainty we can gain from anything else. By faith in Christ we stand free from all evil.

But there remains in us our sinful flesh. This is our original sin, our old Adam, our dying and condemned nature. And this flesh is not free. It is in bondage. It can only be moved to do good things when it is forced and coerced through threats or manipulations. And when it does do good things, even when it manages to help people, it is still evil and unable to trust in God. It remains under the law. It has no security or certainty of salvation. It is dead to all good things.

But why does God have us live in this sinful flesh? Didn't he set us free? Didn't he rescue us from our sins? Didn't he give us peace and confidence of our salvation? And yet, he makes us live so close to evil, as close as our flesh and blood still cling to us. God has us live in these bodies of death in order to exercise and prove our faith. He wants us to hope in what we cannot see in full. By faith we know that we are free. But we feel in our bodies a completely different reality. Why? It is so that we would learn to deny ourselves and daily turn to Christ. It is so that we would trust that God is producing fruit in us by his Holy Spirit, despite all the rot we sense in our natural desires.

This is the Christian life. It is a continual battle between our sinful flesh and our faith in Christ. It is a battle between our natural desires and the desires of the Holy Spirit himself. Yes, that's right. The Holy Spirit himself fights within us. He threatens and terrifies our sinful flesh with the holy law of God. He holds our desires in bondage by his perfect commandments. But all the while, he continues to give us life and comfort by the gospel of Jesus Christ. He still works in our baptism to renew in us a conscience freed from sin and guilt. He still works through the absolution to give us confidence that we have a gracious God for the sake of Jesus Christ. He still nurtures us with the body and blood of Jesus as a sure token that our sins are not counted against us and that our Savior makes his home within us.

So Paul tells us to follow the Spirit. In other words, listen to what the Holy Spirit says. Let his law condemn your sinful flesh. It hurts. It stings. It may even seem at times like you stand condemned. But just like alcohol rubbed on a cut stings and burns, it also hurts when the Holy Spirit exposes the sin still infecting our dying bodies. He kills the deadly germs and causes the blood to clot and the skin to scab over. But he blows that healing breath of life on us so that we can press on with the confidence that we are still alive in Christ.

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And so it goes throughout our lives until we die. The sin remains, but for Christ's sake, God doesn't count it against us. And the Holy Spirit continues to apply his Word, both to expose our sin as well as to give us confidence in God's mercy.

Now this might seem to be a sort of manic-depression or bipolar kind of life. We're up and then we're down. We are on cloud nine and then we're down in the dumps. And certainly, it can and often does seem like this. But the Holy Spirit doesn't just take us on a wild ride, aimlessly whipping us between two extremes until we die. Certainly, he teaches us to despair of our own works. He teaches us through experience that we can have no hope or lasting comfort in our own affections. He burns away our hope in worldly things. But this is so that we would grow in our hope for eternal things. The Holy Spirit fights within us so that we would also learn to fight with the confidence that the battle has been won for us by Christ. We learn to hope against the false and fleeting hope of this world. We learn to press on with the certainty of what God has prepared for us in Christ.

This is why St. Paul tells us to follow the Spirit. Follow the Spirit, and you won't give the flesh what it wants. And what does your flesh want? It wants you. It wants all of you. It wants your obedience and your devotion. It wants to rule you. Any Christian who takes his sin seriously knows this all too well. It's evident. It's manifest. You see the filth in the world, and you learn from the Holy Spirit that this same filth lies in your own flesh, just waiting for the opportunity to drive you into bondage. The desires, which you feel in your own sinful body, are exposed by the Holy Spirit himself for what they are.

And it's good that he does this. The Holy Spirit exposes the works of the flesh so that they would not deceive you and rule over you. He makes these sins obvious to you so that you can see them for what they are.

St. Paul says that the works of flesh are evident. You know them when you see them. He starts with sexual sins, such as adultery, fornication, uncleanness, and wild living. These are sins against the body. The desires of the flesh believe that the body was made only to satisfy itself. But the sexual intimacy, which God created between a man and a woman, is meant to be a self-giving act of love. This is why he restricts it only to the union of marriage. It's also why he blesses it with children so that you would learn not to live only for yourself. This should be obvious to a Christian. It's when we divorce sex from marriage and children that we have already begun to obey the passions of our sinful flesh. And then what the Holy Spirit teaches us becomes less obvious.

Why do you think so many people have caved to the LGBTQ agenda? How did such filth take over so many circles of our nation? It's because sin stopped being obvious to people. Sure, people were grossed out by sodomy, and rightly so. Because it is disgusting. But many of these same people were not repulsed by the thought of hooking up with someone at a bar. And many of the people who were rightly repulsed by this could not see how offensive it is to God that they would shack up with their girlfriends before they are married. Sin became less evident for them. And when you can't recognize the ugliness of the sinful flesh, then this only makes you sink farther down into its control and tyranny.

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Next, the apostle lists sins against true worship of God: idol worship and witchcraft. This follows the same track as sexual sins. The sinful flesh keeps people in bondage to their own feelings. They are deceived into thinking that their sense of sincerity in what they believe is enough to make a legitimate spiritual experience. They take this as a given, as an obvious fact, that they should be free to trust in whatever they want.

Paul then lists one sin after another: hatred, wrangling, jealousies, anger, selfishness, quarreling, divisions, envy, murders. This is the very opposite of love. At the center of these sins is selfishness. Self-love, self-esteem, self-expression, self-fulfillment – they all sound so nice to this world. But the Holy Spirit teaches us to deny ourselves. He makes it obvious to us that selfishness always makes self the standard of right and wrong.

Paul concludes his list by mentioning both drunkenness and gluttony. The flesh wants what it wants and is never satisfied. This should be obvious to us as Christians.

But this becomes less obvious to those who give into their sinful desires. They confuse the spirit of the age with the Spirit of God. They confuse the desires of their flesh with the desires of the Spirit. They appeal to some pious sounding, sentimental sap, which makes people feel good about themselves. In other words, they appeal to the flesh. And they call it the Spirit.

It isn't judgmental to be repulsed by these sins of the culture. But when you observe these works of the flesh in the people of this world, the Holy Spirit warns you to take heed of yourself lest you also fall into the same sin. Recognize that those who practice these things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Take this warning seriously. That way, when you see it within your own sinful nature, you won't treat it lightly. You will hate it even more.

When it becomes increasingly obvious to you that your natural flesh is altogether sinful and bound to death, then this shouldn't shake you. Don't start reasoning that you must not truly be a Christian. Remember that your entire flesh is corrupted by sin. This includes your reason. So when you find that you are overwhelmed with the sin that is inside of you, don't try to think your way out of it. Follow the Spirit. Listen to what he says. Let his words ring in your ears and your heart. Because those who follow the Spirit are not under the law, even if they feel like they are.

The Holy Spirit delivers to you everything Christ has won for you. He credits to you the righteousness of Christ, which gives life. He doesn't point you to your own righteousness. No, he exposes your self-made righteousness for what it is. He makes it obvious to you that you can't hope in your own works. He causes you to despair over yourself. But don't confuse this with a despair of God's mercy. The Holy Spirit teaches you to lose hope in your flesh so that you would have hope only in what God has already prepared for you in Christ.

This is why St. Paul also tells us about the fruit of the Spirit. Because this is our hope. As a Christian, you want love to fill your heart. You want to have joy over God's goodness. You want peace in your conscience and peace with your neighbor. You want to be patient, kind, good, faithful, and gentle. You want self-control. You hope to

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have these things. If you didn't hope for them then you wouldn't be bothered by your sin. It is through the battle against sin, through the cloud of darkness, that the Holy Spirit produces these things. He does it freely. That's why it's called fruit. It grows and buds after seasons of cold and darkness. It can't be manufactured by laws and rules. The law exposes how much you lack these things. But the Holy Spirit uses the gospel to produce what no amount of your own thinking and working can muster up.

How do you see this fruit? First, you see it in Christ. He has loved you. He rejoiced to save you. He established peace with God for you. He is patient, kind, good, faithful, and meek. He controlled every fiber of his being all the way to the cross precisely so that he would rescue you from sin and death. Second, you see the fruit in the promise. Jesus says, "If you abide in me, then you will bear fruit." Jesus can't lie. Even when we can't see this fruit, we know he is producing it, because he said so. And whenever we fall short, he doesn't count it against us. He always provides what is lacking. Third, we see it in our fellow Christians. Take encouragement from your brothers and sisters in Christ who show this love. Thank God for those who seek peace, who seem to be joyful all the time, who stand on the truth with faithfulness and meekness.

It's necessary to look at yourself so that you can examine your sinful flesh and learn to repent of your sin. But you won't find any comfort or strength if all you do is look at yourself. So don't torcher yourself. Instead, look to Christ, his promise, and the fellowship he has given you in his church. This is what the Holy Spirit uses to lead you. And you can have the confidence that he is working in you what no amount of your works can accomplish. Amen.