

St. Paul: Saturday Session Thirty-three: Spiritual Combat 2

Paul sees our ultimate struggle against the principalities and powers. Perhaps his most famous quote about spiritual combat expresses it remarkably well. ***For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*** Eph 6:12 Naturally, we can't match Satan and his minions. But Jesus vanquished Satan on the cross. Christ won the ultimate victory. We're on the winning side. Though Him and in Him, if we arm ourselves properly, we prevail. ***Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.*** Eph 6:10-11. We can't remind ourselves too often that our strength is in the Lord. His might overwhelms Satan and Co. Only in His armor do we stand firm against the devil. So it's worth remembering Paul's description of this armor. ***Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*** Eph 6:13-17

Daily combat of the spiritual kind includes living and sharing the Gospel. In Phil 4:3, Paul urges his friends to this strife: ***I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*** Paul mentions the women who helped spread the Good News, but includes all his fellow workers. Since we strive to be his fellow workers, and thereby get our names inscribed in the book of life, we share his struggle. We may not be as enthusiastic as Paul, nor as constant, nor as fiery. But we must fight the fights God allows. If we do the best we can, Christ can win more battles. First we share Gospel by living Gospel. This fight, with Christ's help and protection, earns our eternal life. As we live Gospel, we live Christ. Since Christ is God, we live God by our spiritual combat. Second, we share Gospel by explicitly presenting Christ. Most naturally, we present Christ by admitting that He makes our life worthwhile. His productivity oozes through us, and we strive to increase that flow. As St. Francis taught: We must preach Jesus always, and sometimes use words.

Our complete fight balances good example and words to express more definitely that Jesus is Lord. If we commit ourselves to this combat, we discover the joy of Christ. After all, Christ is Joy. Paul shares this discovery with us in Phil 4:4-5: ***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.*** Yes, we fight, but then we win in Christ, and rejoice in Him, and finally we enjoy His peace. ***And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*** Phil 4:7. Paul shows us the entire cycle of life. First God bestows the gift of life upon us. Then we accept it, and begin to fight for Christ. In this combat, even if we wear ourselves out, our effort is joyful, and culminates in peace. All this tumbles forth from Paul because he's so on fire with Christ, Who is Love. Nothing but Love sustains Paul, and us, in spiritual combat.

Because Love sustained Paul, he faced all fights confidently. ***For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*** Col 2:1-3. You know well the many conflicts Paul suffered. Enemies embattled him at every turn. But he did not shrink from combat. As he tells the Colossians, he fought for the right reason, that they might be knit together in love. Love Himself provides all the wealth from full assurance of understanding, because Love Himself is God's mystery. It is Christ Himself Who comes to us, if we accept Him. He is the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Spiritual combat allows Christ to fight through us. Our combat, if it is genuine, is Jesus struggling through us to win the battle. Paul admonishes us to let Christ combat His enemies, using us.

Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. Col 2: 6-7. If we accept Christ, and follow Him, He fights Satan through us. The more we allow Him to fight in us, the more He builds us up in Him. Then our faith overflows. As Jesus wages spiritual combat in us, we become grateful. May we overflow with gratitude because we accept Jesus as Lord and master in this spiritual combat.

By contrast, Paul warns against word-mongers who lead people astray with purple phrases. ***See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.*** Col 2:8-15

Here Paul refers to his enemies, Judaizers who weave a web of lies against Christ. These enemies pursue Paul to undo his converts, to make them return to Mosaic Law and circumcision. How can new-baptized Catholics tell that these Jerusalem experts are lying? Spiritual combat against lies is most difficult. When men try to take God's place, when the world, or what is momentarily popular, tries to replace Christ, who will fight for truth? Paul answers the call. Paul allows Christ, Who is God in bodily form, to fight through him. Only Jesus makes us complete. No one but Jesus rules us, or has any authority over us. Bodily circumcision can't compare to spiritual circumcision in Christ. Baptism is what it signifies. Going under water is burial with Jesus into death to sin, and rising up with Him. Only God can work these things in us. No man, even coming from Jerusalem, can make us live. Only Christ raises us from our death in sin. Flesh represents sin very well. Even if we were circumcised in the flesh, if we sin, then we need spiritual circumcision to free us from sin. God does that through Jesus, Who forgives our sins. He takes them away by paying with His blood, cancelling our debt on the cross. His spiritual combat disarms devils who ruled the world until Christ wrested it away. God triumphs through Jesus.

This is the great victory that Christ won. Our small battles can be small victories if we let Jesus fight through us. Like Paul, our battles are usually with people. Paul describes how these people show themselves: ***For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.*** Rom 1:21-25. First, God's enemies do not honor Him, nor give thanks for His gifts. They impose futile speculations, which darken their hearts. Insisting that they are wise, they live foolishness, exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God for an image. E.g.: worship of the almighty dollar. Having thus darkened their hearts, they drive themselves to lustful excess, worship of sex, dishonoring their bodies. Exchanging God's truth for a lie worships some creature.

Paul urges the Romans to fight against such lies. Lies are ghostly, without substance. So fighting them is tricky. This spiritual combat describes our struggle very well. The media presents many lies per hour. Our armor gets a workout just by listening to TV. Are we letting Jesus fight in us? Is He the power behind that armor? What specific little battles must we let Christ fight for us? How must we exert ourselves to fight along with Him? Paul describes them without naming the specific TV programs, or popular lies promoted by famous public figures. But we connect the dots.

Many of Paul's descriptions sound like he wrote them today. ***For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.*** Rom 1:26-32. Because they worshiped a lie, instead of God, these results followed like the night the day.

Paul recommends to the Romans that they follow a set of steps. First, acknowledge God as Creator. Second honor Him, especially as He came to us in Christ. Third, banish all idolatrous lies. Fourth, let Jesus combat these lies. Fifth, Paul lists specific sins for us to combat. He gives two general descriptions of sins (unrighteousness, wickedness), then 18 specific sins. All these sins are popular among wicked people, then and now. Quite probably, Paul mentions your favorite sin among them. Paul admonishes us to fight them all. This combat is fierce because sinners know full well that they are worthy of death. So they fight feverously to fend off their just deserts. They heartily approve of others who practice the same sins. Naturally, they hate anyone who refuses to accompany them in those sins. So they attack innocent bystanders. They can't stand innocence. In our time, they even promote child pornography. They rape the children they have not succeeded in aborting. They insist that practicing homosexuals are fine folks, and should adopt children. Just mentioning these sins scares us. On our own, we can't withstand them. But Christ fights in us, if we allow Him to vanquish these sins.

If we allow him, then everything works together for good, as Paul says so well. ***And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the first-born among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*** Rom 8:28-32