

9th June 2021. – Have Victory Over the Flesh by Seeing All Things Anew – Wednesday Prayer Meeting

The theme for today is: Have Victory Over the Flesh By Seeing All Things Anew. The testimony that was given fits in to our theme very well. What most people dread, happened in that family. Covid breached the defenses and entered the family. Normally we are devastated by such a thing and we break apart and we go through a lot of crisis, but here, because they saw it differently, the very thing that could be devastating actually became a true experience of blessing -- a blessing for a spiritual journey with the Lord and also a blessing to heal the family and bring them together in a deeper way. We are learning the ways of God. It's a little difficult because we are used to our own ways, but we are learning the ways of God and we are walking in it.

So we are dealing with the 3 enemies: the flesh, the world and the powers of darkness. Today we are dealing with one of them, next week the other and third the other, so that what we reflected last week on a continuous basis and as a brief introduction we are going to dwell deeply today. So today's theme is: Having Victory Over the Flesh By Seeing All Things Anew. For that we are going to look at and have a reflection on what's the meaning of the word 'flesh'. That will help us go deeper. To find that we are going to the scripture itself. Let the scripture explain what the flesh is. Romans 7:5 is the text. This particular verse has made St. Paul really be hated by the Jewish theologians even up to today. They say St. Paul has been very unfair to the Jewish faith or Jewish law. One of the main reasons is what he has said in this verse:

Romans 7:5

For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.

If you look at this puzzling verse, he says, "For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law..." This really made the Jewish leaders and scholars tear their hair because they said the law itself is divine. What they mean is the ten commandments. To protect the ten commandments they had hundreds of other small laws and it was sacred to them. St. Paul is saying, "The sinful passions aroused by the law..."

Why did he say that? A fish does not know that it is in the water because the fish has lived all its life in the water. Do you know when they will realise water is essential for them? When they are pulled out of the water and when they flip and they flop, then only they realise, we have been living all our life in the water. When do we know we need air? When we don't have it and the oxygen is difficult and you struggle to breathe. Then you realize because when you have got used to oxygen you don't think about it. In the same way, when people have lived all their life in the flesh and they are dealing with people who are also living in the flesh, all of us think that the life in the flesh is the only life possible and available.

So because of that, most people - I don't know about you but I can say about me - I didn't know there was another kind of life. I thought a life in the flesh was the life and if somebody was not living the life of the flesh, I thought something was wrong with them. Poor people, they have not really understood where to find true happiness and true joy, they are just wasting their life and we have pity on them -- no partying, no dancing, no shouting, no merry making, no running around, no horsing around. What kind of life is that? Because the flesh is natural for us.

So in the life of the flesh there are certain characteristics that are common:

1. A person living in the flesh is focused on themselves

When we were put into the hostel, you're terrible homesick when you're a child. I must admit that at the end of our school career we didn't want to go home because the hostel seemed much better than going home because you enjoy your colleagues and what you were doing. When you're a small child and you're put there you go through a terrible home sickness. In the afternoon I remember we used to have this siesta whether you like it or not and we had this matron who we perceived as a bit of a dragon even though she may have been a kind person. She used to pipe this music into the dormitory and I still remember this song that was going in which blended beautifully with my homesickness. It said: "Why is the sun still shining? Why is the sky still blue? Don't they know it's the end of the world?" I'm also asking myself, "Don't they know that my world has ended because I'm homesick and I have no meaning to my life?" It's only later that I realized this is the common problem of humanity. We are centered on ourselves and everything is about ourselves. Those days I used to say 3 people live inside us: me, mine and myself. It's all about that.

When it comes to relationships, it's almost the same. All the time we are looking for some advantage, some benefit from our relationships, otherwise we won't relate too much. Even eating, drinking, searching for pleasure, sexuality, looking for the comforts in life, luxuries -- if you look at these, it is all centered on ourselves. So life centered on ourselves has a name and that name is called the flesh.

But this life has a problem. What is that? You're never satisfied. You may think one thing will satisfy you but it never satisfies you. I realized that the day I bought a car. To buy a car was a big thing, I had to wait so many years to be able to buy a car. After I bought the car, in about 2 weeks I suddenly realized my car is dated. Now I'm having a car that will be outdated in a few months by a newer version and my car will be forgotten. It's not brand-new now, and something of the glitter and the shine disappears. I think it happens for girlfriends and boyfriends, husbands and wives and that's why you find this thing of trying to find a new way of finding happiness because the flesh will never satisfy it. When the flesh does not satisfy we try to find other ways to meet our needs. That's why we have a restless people with a restless heart. When we are restless and unhappy, actually we turn on each other. You'll see beautiful, happy family life but also biting, shouting, showing teeth, snapping because the flesh comes out in family life as well. Who are the people we snap to and we tell them brutal truths and really let them have it? The ones who are close by because we are dissatisfied inside.

When do we realize that we have a problem? It is when we decide to follow the laws of God, beautifully said by St. Paul: For when we were controlled by our sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies... What does that mean? When we try to obey God only we suddenly realise I am unable to follow the ways of God. Until then I don't know that I have a problem, until then I don't know that there is an issue in my life. Try to follow God and you suddenly realise something else is working inside us. To discover that you have the flesh is also a grace. So don't be discouraged, to realise that we have the flesh is the beginning of freedom:

Romans 7:22

For in my inner being I delight in God's law...

That means I want to follow the ways of God.

Romans 7:23

...but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

When I try to follow the ways of God only I realise there is a rebellion going on inside of me. We have found out the flesh. Until you discover the flesh you'll never find the new life of God. So don't be discouraged. The flesh is the natural thing that's hidden from us and from the world because everybody's in the flesh.

Romans 7:24

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Here, this experience of wretchedness is actually the moment we are invited to realise that Jesus is able to give us a new life -- a life that is above the flesh. I'm using the word 'above' carefully. Normally what happens is, we rise above the flesh or you fall into the flesh. So here is the word 'flesh', our human, self centered nature that rules us from birth to death. In fact, one saint has said that the flesh will actually die 5 minutes after we die because even after we die the flesh will be at work because of this broken nature.

How do we take a deeper look at the flesh? We are going to look at it through the letter of St. Paul to the Galatians 5:19-24. I want to suggest a title for the flesh: Fun at the start; death at the end. So if you want to link the word flesh you link it with fun at the start; death at the end.

Galatians 5:19

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery...

Actually if you look at sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, none of them cause pain. All of them bring pleasure. If sexual immorality brings pain, every time you have a bad thought you get a headache, I don't think anyone will have any bad thoughts. I remember we were in Ohio in the US and Sujith who is the coordinator in Ohio has this dog, a beautiful Labrador. The fellow has a hobby, he runs and chases any car that goes on the road but in the garden. From one point of the garden to the other he will chase. There are no fences but the fellow stops dead at the border of the garden. So I asked how the fellow does this. He said, "When the fellow was a pup we had this thing tied to his neck and the moment he came to the border of the house, electric signal impulse was given and the fellow felt a pain. The fellow learnt if I cross this I'm going to get a shock." Now the collar has been removed but the fellow will never go.

So God could have done this very easily to us also. Tie us with an electric collar, any bad thought and zing you get one and we will all be saints. But here, sexual immorality gives pleasure. Impurity gives satisfaction. Debauchery gives us things in our life that we are longing for. Actually I told you the title - fun at the start; death at the end. In the end all 3 of these will drag you and your family into a hell. That's really what happens.

Yesterday after the sinhala meeting, somebody sent a text and this person says: I have been involved in a sinful relationship while married and caught up with this for so long. Yesterday I realised I was making hell for myself and my family. I called right at that moment, gave up the relationship, returned to my

family and God. Why is that? Because that man realised that his seeking for pleasure was leading to hell. So you don't have to wait until you go to hell. You can bring hell and keep it close to yourself - one in your heart and second in your home. Here are 3 things that happen inside us.

Galatians 5:20

...idolatry and witchcraft...

Why do people practice idolatry and witchcraft? Because they want to get what they desire. So they pray to this and pray to that to get it or you do black magic to get it or go and do witchcraft to get it. The flesh is not converted, desires are sinful, self-centered. How do you get your self-centered desires fulfilled? Through idolatry and witchcraft. Get what you desire from them. One of our coordinators in Australia, when he was here in Sri Lanka, was doing a business with one of the top businessmen here and they fell off. When they fell off he got information that this other business was doing black magic against him. He was running a supermarket and they sent him a message that said: We will make your money run in the drains. He says to his amazement one day the teller machine they were using for money burst and all the coins flowed out from there into the drain outside and down it went.

He thought, bad joke. They are practicing witchcraft against me and I need to fix this. So he went to 5 different places and asked for 5 dead spirits to send against this person. When he finally came to the Lord, he was prayed for. When they prayed for him, the amazing thing was, it was not the spirits that his friend who had become an enemy had sent. Actually it was the spirits that he had gone and prayed to that were possessing his body. I'll talk about it week after when we talk about the powers of darkness.

You will see that when you are in the flesh, how you get your desires met is through idolatry and witchcraft. But then after that is described the result of the flesh. Here is what you will get if you live in the flesh:

Galatians 5:20 continued

...hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions...

Imagine a house where the normal environment is hatred, discord - one is attacking the other, jealousy - anyone gets anything and they are jealous, fits of rage - people go into tantrums, selfish ambition - everyone thinking only of themselves, dissensions - all the time disagreeing, factions. Imagine what an unhappy family that is. Imagine an office like that, imagine a parish like that, imagine the community like that. When you have the flesh leading us, this is what will take place.

Galatians 5:21

...and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Actually people are afraid of going to hell. Some people have a great experience of hell. Where do they have it? In their hearts and then in their homes, in their families. Why? Because the flesh is leading them. "Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." A lot of us read this text and think inherit the kingdom of God means when we die we won't go to heaven. I want to give you another meaning to this tonight. Inherit the kingdom of God is living under God's rule today, enjoying God's life today. All this time I explained the life of the flesh but there is another kind of life. Now St. Paul explains

the life of the Spirit. What is the life of the Spirit? That is living in God's kingdom here and now, today inside us and in our families.

Galatians 5:22

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...

So we saw the fruits of the flesh and now the fruits of the Spirit. Here is the title for that: Death at the start; life at the end. In the other one it was life at the start; death at the end. In this one, death at the start; life at the end. What does that mean? When you obey God you die to your flesh. There is no joy, there is no happiness, you're giving up stuff and when you do that there's pain, there's death, there's struggle but the assurance is, a little later will come love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.

You have to make a choice. Are we going for the temporary joys of the flesh and quietly living in a life of hell or are we going to allow the spirit to defeat the flesh, go through that death and enjoy the fruits of the kingdom in our lives today? I think it happens in our own hearts. You die to sin, you die to your broken nature, you die to your desire, there is a loss, there is a pain, there is an emptiness. But I can tell you that it leads us deeper to another place where there is peace, joy, goodness, sense of favour from God that nothing can ever bring into your life.

I explained that through cigarette smoking. I used to smoke a lot of cigarettes those days. I used to smoke before I went to sleep and the moment I got up also I used to smoke and in the night also I used to get up and smoke. So I didn't think of life without having a cigarette, I couldn't even think about it. But then once I met the Lord and I was baptised in the Holy Spirit, the Lord challenged me to give up smoking. I had tried many times but I had failed. When I threw away my cigarette packet with 7 cigarettes inside it, I still remember one week to 10 days later only I got the fruit. That is, taste had returned to my mouth. I didn't know that I had lost my taste. It had happened gradually and it returned to me. Then a few days later smell returned to me. I began to smell the beautiful environment, the flowers, the fragrance. I had lost it without even knowing it. That's what has happened to people who live in the flesh.

Yesterday another person had sent a testimony after the meeting, how this person had heard the example of the cigarettes. 20 cigarettes this person has thrown away and writing to us, saying, "I have chosen to receive the delayed joy and peace of God rather than give in to my flesh and self indulgence." If that's happening among us that's truly the grace of God.

Where does it all start? What is our first step? The first step is to see things differently. See things differently and have victory over the flesh.

Romans 8:5

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what the nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

The great battle starts in the mind. Where do you see happiness? Where do you find peace? Where do you find fulfillment? Where do you find the meaning to your life? If you allow God's word to influence your thoughts and mind and you begin to see as God is showing you, the shift from hell to heaven has begun.

So the first thing is the shift of the mind. Where do you find happiness? Where do you find security? Where do you find joy? Shift it to God's word.

Romans 8:6

The mind of sinful man is death...

That means in the end no peace, no rest, insecure, dark, angry, defeated.

Romans 8:6 continued

...but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace...

The kingdom of heaven is here. Jesus said it. He said the kingdom of heaven is among you. Then he said, remember the kingdom of heaven is within you. People asked where? It is here already. A life led by the Spirit has the kingdom of God within them -- love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. The mind led by the flesh has the things of the flesh creating a hell inside -- jealousy, anger, reaction. You must feel sorry for them. They are living in a self-made hell and they don't know anything else, so they are going to live and die that way, unless someone saves them.

You meet people in the world like that. The world means a whole bunch of people who think like that and we feel like a fish out of water and we ask, is something wrong with us? Then only you begin to realise it's the flesh and the Spirit at battle.

For how to see things differently I'm going to read from St. Ignatius of Antioch. He is going to tell us how to see things differently. St. Ignatius of Antioch lived in the latter part of the first century and in the beginning of the second. Tradition will tell us that St. Polycarp and St. Ignatius were church fathers. Initially there were the apostles and after the apostles in the next generation came the fathers of the Church. So Sts. Ignatius and Polycarp were actually disciples of John the great apostles. Now Ignatius was the Bishop of Antioch when he was captured by the Romans and taken to Rome to be thrown to the wild animals. Here is a part of a letter written by St. Ignatius to the Roman Christians. Here you can distinguish between the mind of the Spirit and the mind of the flesh:

"For our Lord Jesus Christ, now that he has returned to his Father, has revealed himself more clearly..." What he is saying is, now that Jesus has ascended into heaven, we can see who he really is more clearly. "Our task is not one of producing persuasive propaganda..." How different from 21st century Christianity, our Church is the best, your church is not too good, we can give you a miracle, what can you give the world? Pushing the flesh. He says, "Our task is not one of producing persuasive propaganda; Christianity shows its greatness when it is hated by the world." Either this guy is crazy or he is having another rule in his life. "Christianity shows its greatness when it is hated by the world." And we think something is wrong when we are hated. All I wanted was to follow the Lord and I'm being hated. That's the sign of discipleship. Here is the light of God's word revealing in a new way what's happening to us.

"I am writing to all the churches to declare to them all that I am glad to die for God, provided you do not hinder me. I beg you not to show me a misplaced kindness." He is saying, "Don't show me misplaced kindness by trying to get me out of this." If he was here he would have been analysed psychologically and they would have given a label to his condition and called it religious fanaticism or some other kind of condition. They are out of reality. What do you mean by reality? They are not thinking in the flesh.

"Let me be the food of beasts that I may come to God." How is he going to come to God? By becoming food for beasts. In cricketing language, when I read this I'm bold. I feel ashamed of myself. What have I done? How do I think? It's coming through the peace. "I am his wheat, and I shall be ground by the teeth of beasts, that I might become Christ's pure bread." He is talking about animals but we can talk about people criticizing us, reacting to us, analysing our character, giving serious misinformation about us -- beasts.

St. Ignatius is saying, "I am coming closer to God through that attack." Thinking in the flesh, thinking in the Spirit.

"I would rather that you coaxed the beasts to become my tomb and to leave no scrap of me behind; then when I have died I will be a burden to no one." What kind of inner freedom is this? "I shall be a true disciple of Christ when the world no longer sees my body. Pray to Christ for me that by these means I may become a sacrifice to God." Suffering, rejection, pain is the pathway into the kingdom of heaven for St. Ignatius because his spiritual eye has opened and he can see things not in the flesh but in the spirit.

"I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul. They were apostles, I am a condemned criminal; they were free, I am still a slave. But if I suffer, I shall become the freed man of Jesus Christ and I shall rise again to freedom in him." He is saying: Through the suffering, I'm going to be made perfect. This bowling is too much. We are not equipped to handle this kind of bowling. We can bat, we can boast about what we have done and what we have said and the glorious things that have happened through our life. When it comes to this bowling you're finished. We have nothing to offer. We'll have to put the tail between the legs and quietly slink away. We have no answer to this revelation.

"Now as a prisoner I am learning to give up my own wishes. All the way from Syria to Rome I am fighting wild beasts, by land and by sea, by day and by night, chained as I am to ten leopards, I mean the detachment of soldiers who guard me; the better you treat them, the worse they become." What's our complaint? Our complaint is we are loving these people and they are behaving badly! "I am more and more trained in discipleship by their ill usage of me," when they treat me badly I'm learning to be a better and better disciple of Jesus Christ.

What kind of glasses do we choose to wear? Is it the glasses of the flesh even as we are religious or the glasses of the Spirit? If you wear the glasses of the Spirit, everything becomes different. Overcome the flesh by seeing things differently. Let's pray today in our adoration: O God give us the eye of the Spirit to see what's happening in our own lives and to respond to you, that our hearts will become the kingdom of God and our environment will become the kingdom of God.