***“Spirit That Gives Life***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, August 29, 2021

**Ephesians 6:13–18**

13Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

[**John 6:51, 59–65**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)**; 7:16–17**

51 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever. . .” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father. . .”

16Then Jesus answered them, “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. 17Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.”

We come here from different places, from different backgrounds and histories. Each of you will respond differently to the sermon. Some may resonate with one thing I say, others may respond to something else, depending on what your background is, and what your thoughts are. There is a richness in our diversity. And you will have varying thoughts regarding the two Scriptures.

I like the line in Ephesians that says “Pray in the Spirit at all times” (Eph 6:18). The rest of the passage I find more troubling. It is often used by people who see life as a constant spiritual battle. It pictures life as warfare against evil forces, even against spiritual rebels “in the heavenly places” (6:12). I don’t tend to approach life as a spiritual battle, but more like a spiritual class that I am taking. Thinking of life as a battle probably means that you’re expecting swords and arrows at all times. You have clearly defined enemies and allies and may be combative and suspicious in your approach. That seems primitive and counter-productive to me. I’m sitting here taking my class, studying, taking notes, and somebody wants me to slap on a helmet and take up a sword? It’s not the way I live. I have a very different instinct about spirituality. I’m a learner more than a fighter. I may be competitive, but it doesn’t involve actual combat.

What about the passage from the Gospel of John? I think it is a little closer to the classroom setting than the battlefield. Jesus tries to impart some truth and to correct a misunderstanding. The fundamental teaching is that “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (6:63). This makes sharp differentiation of spirit from matter. Unless you understand him spiritually, you do not understand him.

Some of the people who heard him at this time believed, and others did not believe. In the next chapter, John will say that “not even his brothers believed in him” (7:5). John shows people arguing about whether Jesus is the Messiah or not. When he starts preaching in the temple, the Jews wonder how he got such wisdom, since he was never trained (7:15). His response is: “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own” (7:16–17). Let’s look at that closely. Anyone who wants to really know the truth, who wants to know God’s way, will find out whether Jesus’ teaching comes from God or is just the product of his own will. God will make the truth known to that person’s heart.

This saying also shows that it is possible for people to do the will of God. There was a real test going on, among the people who heard Jesus. They could find out the truth, or they could harden their hearts. They had a choice. And because there were some who hardened their hearts, a spiritual battle did come. People had to choose for or against Jesus at that time, and the choice can be forced on us at this time, too.

Especially if we face any persecution, it is difficult *not* to think in terms of forces of evil in high places, and of the need to put on a helmet of salvation and a sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17), even if it is only a metaphorical helmet of believing and a sword of truth-telling. Jesus the teacher was forced to become Jesus the martyr, because of the cowardice and love of power of a gang of priests, and the acquiescence of a spineless Roman politician.

We have to choose where our loyalties are. And that means what kind of world we are working for. Do we want the kind of world where bullies get to rule society, where truth-tellers are attacked and made into scapegoats? Or do we want truth and fairness to be respected? Do we want to know the truth about things? We *can* know the truth, if we want to. And the truth is ultimately spiritual. It has to do with permanent values related to spiritual growth and progress. Truth is really about spiritual realities and relationships, ultimately our relationship to God. If we know that his words are spirit and life, then we can place our loyalties in his words. We can live for truth. We can even fight for it, and can bring in some of that combat mentality if it will serve God. We can put on a helmet against falsehood, take up the sword of honesty, and determine that we will not be duped into serving the ends of those who lie. We can also think of life as a classroom where truth is what is sought, and we can know the truth if we will study diligently. We will meet many challenges in life, but we will meet them rightly if we trust that we can call upon Jesus’ guidance to help us know the truth and make the right decisions.

What mindset do you bring to life? Do you see it as spiritual combat, or as a learning experience? Is Jesus your field marshal or your teacher? You can serve Jesus either way, but I think the classroom is a better metaphor, because you don’t need to make so many enemies. Some people who think differently from you can end up being your classmates and interesting conversation partners, rather than foes. How do you handle disappointment? Is it a defeat in battle, or is it a setback that can be overcome by more learning? Can you try harder, and overcome the problem? Do you yearn to get better?

Sometimes you need help from others. Clyde was a 17-year old student with a history of academic struggles and disrespectful behavior. Then he transferred to a new school where there were more teachers. He got one-on-one attention. He felt valued, and he started to do well. He now helps other students and is heading toward graduation ([www.ecf.net/school/success-stories/](http://www.ecf.net/school/success-stories/)). There’s nothing like individual attention.

Different kinds of people are drawn to Jesus the Teacher. Some will want to fasten the belt of truth around their waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness, so that they may withstand the evil day (Eph 6:14, 13). Some will want to keep learning and discovering the truth, in the classroom of life.

So what is your assignment today? It is to “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Eph 6:18). It is to seek the spiritual meaning of Jesus’ teaching, so that you come to trust the promise of eternal life. Get one-on-one time with God. And resolve to do the will of God, so that you may know the truth about the teaching. It is the Spirit that gives life.