

Romans 8:1-17  
Jeremiah 31  
Psalm 80

“The Flesh and the Spirit”

Do you think that the flesh is too strong?  
Do you think that the power of sin is too overwhelming?

I suppose another way of saying this is,  
Do you get so caught up in Romans 7 that you never make it to Romans 8?

Because the point of Romans 8  
is that Christ brings not only freedom from the guilt of sin,  
but also freedom from its power.

Paul has just finished saying that “I died” through the holy, righteous and good law.  
Not that the law brought death (7:13)  
“By no means!”  
It was *sin* that brought death.  
But the law condemns sin—and so therefore condemns me.

**1. In Jesus God Has Done what the Law, Weakened by the Flesh, Could Not Do (8:1-4)**

That is why Paul opens Romans 8 with his marvelous statement,  
*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*  
Those who are in Christ are no longer under the law.  
The law cannot condemn those who are in Christ,  
because Christ has delivered us from this body of death.  
Through his atoning sacrifice – through his death on the cross –  
Jesus has taken the penalty for our sin.

Or, as Paul says it in verse 2:

*For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*

What does Paul mean by these two laws?

All throughout Romans, when Paul speaks of “law” he is almost always  
talking about the Mosaic law.

The “what then’s” of Romans 3-11 trace the relationship between the law  
and the Jews, the Gentiles, the Christian.

So we should expect Paul to be talking about the Mosaic law here, too.

We saw last time that the law is good and holy.

The problem is that the law does not give us power to obey.

And so the same law that is good and holy

becomes for the sinner a law of sin and death.

As Paul put it in 7:10,

“The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me”

We saw last time that Romans 7 deals with the universal experience of humanity as it is confronted with the law.

Indeed, it is our own experience –  
insofar as we consider ourselves apart from Christ.

But Paul says that we can no longer consider ourselves apart from Christ!

Because the law of the Spirit of life (the ruling power of the Holy Spirit)  
has set you free from the law of sin and death (the ruling power of sin and death).

In verse three Paul shows us that he is still using the idea of “law” in the Mosaic sense:

*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.*

The law of the Spirit of life

and the law of sin and death

are both referring to the same law as in verse three.

The law – apart from Christ – condemns us,

and so therefore may be called a law of sin and death.

But the law in Christ sets us free (and therefore it is called the law of the Spirit of life)

So the problem with the law is in us.

The law provided a clear standard of righteousness,

but the flesh is weak and impotent.

And so God has done what the law could not do.

And he has done this:

*By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh*

Now, how can Paul say that God sent his Son “in the likeness of sinful flesh”?

What does Paul mean by flesh?

The Greek word *sarx* has essentially the same basic meaning as the English word “flesh.”

“Meat”

But when Paul contrasts the “flesh” and the “Spirit”

he is not contrasting the “physical” with the “spiritual” –

nor is this a “mind/body” dualism.

Rather, Paul is distinguishing between this age and the age to come.

The flesh refers to our identity in Adam.

The Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit.

For that matter Paul is not saying that the flesh is inherently evil.

After all, Paul’s point in verse three is that the Son of God came

“in the likeness of *sinful* flesh.”

And elsewhere scripture says that “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14),  
and back in Romans 1:3 Paul said that the Son was  
“descended from David according to the flesh,”  
and in 1 Timothy 3:16 Paul will say that the Son  
“was manifested in the flesh.”

So “the flesh” is not inherently evil.

Rather, the flesh is weak.

When Adam fell into sin, the flesh lost all ability to please God.  
Those who are “in the flesh” are weak and powerless.

That is why the Son of God had to come “in the likeness of sinful flesh.”  
He came “in the flesh” and shared in our weakness.  
But he came only “in the likeness” of our *sinful* flesh,  
because he himself did not share in our sinfulness.

But God did not only send his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh,  
he also sent his Son “for sin” (or as a sin offering).

Calvin rightly points out that this phrase *peri hamartias*  
is used in almost every single one of its 66 uses in the LXX  
to refer to the sin offering.

The NT uses it occasionally in the broader sense of “for sins,”  
but usually in a sacrificial context.

So even if you translate it “and for sin” you need to remember  
that all of Paul’s hearers will hear an echo of the sin offering used here.

Jesus was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin offering  
(and as such he had to be blameless and perfect)  
so that God could condemn sin in the flesh.

As Paul says in 2 Cor 5:21, “Christ, who knew no sin, was made sin for us,  
that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

God has executed judgment upon sin and death in the cross of Jesus.

The law could not overcome the power of sin.

But God has overcome the power of sin and death,

and he has condemned sin in the flesh through the cross of Jesus.

Christ did not come merely to “save us from sin.”

I think we often approach salvation in terms of “God has saved me from my sin” –

as though sin and death remain intact,  
and I am delivered from it.

But Paul says that God has *condemned sin in the flesh*.

Sin – that powerful foe that held us captive –  
has been condemned and overthrown.

God has overthrown not just the guilt of sin, but also its power over those who are in Christ.

That is why verse 4 says:

*in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us,  
who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

God has condemned sin in the flesh.

He has destroyed the power and dominion of sin over his people (cf. Romans 6)  
so that those who are in Christ–  
those who walk according to the Spirit–  
have the righteous requirement of the law fulfilled in them.

Notice that Paul does not say that *we* fulfill the righteous requirement of the law.

He uses the passive – “that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

We are still talking about the sovereign and gracious work of God,  
but it is a work *in us* and not merely *for us*.

This is the language of sanctification–not justification.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus

(justification – the legal aspect of salvation),

because God has condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus

so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us

(sanctification – the transforming aspect of salvation).

That is why Paul immediately goes on to talk about the difference

between walking according to the flesh

and according to the Spirit

## **2. Because the Flesh Is Hostile to God (8:5-8)**

*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh,*

*but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*

*To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*

*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law;  
indeed, it cannot.*

*Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

There are two ways.

There is the way of life and the way of death.

This is pretty familiar stuff – you find it all over the Old Testament.

And verses 5-8 are Paul’s presentation of the two-ways wisdom theology of Proverbs.

Paul says that those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.

But those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

What does this mean?

There are two kinds of people:

those who are “according to the flesh”

and those who are “according to the Spirit.”

If you are “according to the flesh” then you will think the things of the flesh.

Your mindset – your way of thinking –

will be oriented to yourself and your own desires.

After all, what is the “flesh”?

[three circles]

And Paul says that those who live according to the flesh –

those who are defined by the flesh –

think the things of the flesh – set their minds on the things of the flesh.

But those who live according to the Spirit –

those who are defined by the Spirit –

think the things of the Spirit – set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

Verse 6 tells us that:

*To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*

Did you hear that?

*To set the mind on the flesh is death,*

If you live according the flesh – if you are defined by the flesh –

if you set your mind on the flesh –

there is only one result:

there *can be* only one result:

death.

Because the way of thinking of the flesh *is* death.

It is not just that it “leads” to death.

The mindset of the flesh is itself death.

And verse 7 adds that

*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.*

*Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

If you are “in the flesh” – if your mind is set on your desires – then you cannot please God.

But verse 9 comes to a remarkable conclusion:

### **3. But You Are Not in the Flesh but in the Spirit (8:9-11)**

*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*

Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh – therefore, you *can* please God!

What does it mean to please God?

This is the word used in the LXX for how Enoch, Noah and Abram “walked” with God – the LXX says that Enoch, Noah and Abram were “pleasing” to God.

What pleases God is one who “walks” with him.

Enoch, Noah, and Abraham all walked with God.

Paul has already told us about Abraham in chapter 4.

“Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

Abraham was not characterized by the flesh, but by the Spirit.

Walking with God means believing his promises and acting accordingly.

And the only way that you can walk with God –

the only way that you can believe his promises and act accordingly,  
is if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.

What “dwells” in you?

In chapter 7:20 Paul told us that

“if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.”

And in 7:23 Paul says that there is this “other law”

that makes “me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.”

Remember the three circles.

When Paul talks about the “I” – the inner man – the mind, the heart, etc.,

he is talking about who you are –

either in Adam (the old man)

or in Christ (the new man).  
But there is a law of sin that “dwells in my members” –  
    this is the language of the flesh.  
But, Paul says, you are not controlled by the flesh.  
You are not “in the flesh”  
    if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.

The “if” is important.  
    If the Spirit of God dwells in you – then you belong to Christ.  
*Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*

Notice that Paul does not simply “assume” that everyone who claims to be a Christian  
    actually has the Holy Spirit.

How do you know if you have the Spirit?  
    Well, remember what Paul has said:  
    “those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit”  
If your life is oriented towards the flesh,  
    if your mind is set on the flesh – your own selfish desires,  
    that is inconsistent with life in the Spirit.

And the reason why Paul says this so bluntly  
    is because the indwelling of the Spirit of God is far more powerful than the indwelling of  
sin.

As we’ve seen throughout this section of Romans  
    Paul sets up all sorts of parallels:

    between Adam and Christ in Romans 5  
    between slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness in Romans 6  
    and now between the flesh and the Spirit in Romans 8

So it will come as no surprise to you that here in Romans 8  
    there is also a “how much more”

This is Paul’s point in verses 10-11:  
    *But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because sin,  
    the Spirit is life because of righteousness.*

This is why you cannot stop with Romans 7.  
If you are still in Adam – if you are still “in the flesh” –  
    then you cannot please God,  
    you cannot walk in his ways.

But if you are in Christ –  
or as Paul puts it here,  
“if Christ is in you”  
then, although the body is dead because of sin  
(in other words, our bodies are still mortal –  
our sin has been forgiven, but we are still going to die)  
  
so although the body is dead because of sin,  
the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

And how is this so? (verse 11)  
*If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,  
he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies  
through his Spirit who dwells in you.*

It’s all because of the resurrection of Jesus.  
God raised Jesus from the dead.  
And he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies  
through his Spirit who dwells in you.

So the body is dead because of sin –  
but your body will not stay dead!

Because the same Spirit that was poured out upon Jesus  
has been poured out upon you.

So what is the upshot of all this?  
Paul explains this in verses 12-17

#### **4. And If You Are Led by the Spirit, You Are Sons of God (8:12-17)**

*So then, brothers we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.  
For if you live according to the flesh you will die,  
but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*

If you live according to the flesh you will die.  
If you return to the pattern of life of the old man,  
living simply to please yourself,  
then you will die.

But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Now, why does Paul say “deeds of the body”?  
Why not “deeds of the flesh”?



Because Paul is talking about the resurrection here.

In one sense, the deeds of the body and the deeds of the flesh mean the same thing.  
But the reason why he emphasizes the body  
is because he wants to remind you of the resurrection of the body.

The life that is at work in you is nothing less than resurrection life.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is already at work in you.

Notice how confident Paul is:

he says that if you live according to the flesh you will die,  
but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

After all, if the Spirit is in you then you *will* put to death the deeds of the body.

You *will* become more and more like Jesus.

How can Paul be so confident?

Because the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you.

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*

*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,  
but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons,  
by whom we cry, "Abba, Father."*

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,  
and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ,  
provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

We'll come back to the whole theme of sonship next time,

but suffice it to say that Paul is confident that you *will* become more and more like Jesus  
because the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus dwells in you!

You have been united to Christ by his Spirit.

You share in his death.

You share in his resurrection life.

You might respond by saying:

"but *how* do I do this?"

Like all things in the Christian life:

by faith.

Putting to death the deeds of the body

means saying "no" to sin – it means repentance.

It means believing God's promises – even when you don't see how.

And, as Paul says in verse 17,

it means suffering with Christ in order that we may also be glorified with him.

If you are struggling with how this works,  
then I would urge you to come to the Shepherding Groups.

The Shepherding Groups are designed for discipleship –  
not just to “teach” all that Christ commanded,  
but to teach us *to observe* all that Christ commanded.