

Mindset: Flesh vs. Spirit
Romans 8:5-11
Forest Hill Presbyterian Church
July 12, 2015

⁵ 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. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ 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. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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. – Romans 8:5-11

Have you heard of “first-world problems”?

- I keep running out of storage on my phone and I can't keep all the music and pictures I want on it. – First-World Problem.
- I sometimes can't remember where I have stored a file – on my computer, on Google Drive, in DropBox or was it still just in my e-mail inbox. – First-world problem.
- We're running out of room in our basement storage room and can't decide the best places to put all the stuff in our house. – First-world problem.

These first-world problems just aren't an issue for people living in true poverty in developing countries, who are instead wondering where they will get food or how they could possibly get their sick child to a doctor.

Our cultural setting gives us a certain mindset, a certain way of thinking that is not common in other cultural settings. We can speak of an American mindset or even

of a Northern or Southern or even a Maryland mindset. Our stage in life will also cause us to develop a particular mindset.

In Romans 8:5-11, Paul lays out two very different mindsets that drive two classes of people in the world:

1. Those who live according to the flesh have a flesh-driven mindset.
2. Those who live according to the Spirit have a Spirit-driven mindset.

These two mindsets are as different from each other as they could possibly be. In fact, they are in direct and hostile opposition to one another. But what does it mean to have one or the other of these mindsets?

I. Those Who Live According to the Flesh

The first group of people Paul mentions in verse 5 is “those who live according to the flesh” and who thus “set their minds on the things of the flesh.”

What does Paul mean by “flesh”? Is he referring to our bodies? We all have bodies and, as such, we all have physical needs. Some people have interpreted this passage to say that we should ignore our bodies and their needs. *Who cares about food or clothing or rest or medical care? The body is unimportant.*

This is not a good definition of what Paul means by “flesh” and is not a Biblical way of understanding the body. In Matthew 6, Jesus tells us not to be anxious about food or clothing, but He tells us that we don’t need to worry because “your Heavenly Father knows you need them.” In other words, we should trust God more and be anxious less, but we should not just pretend that our bodies have no needs.

So what does Paul mean by “flesh”?

Definition of “flesh” – our human nature in its fallen state. Alienated from God and living for self.

Human beings were originally created by God to reflect His image and live in fellowship with Him. Since Adam’s sin brought all of humanity into a fallen state,

we still bear God's image, but we no longer enjoy fellowship with Him and we are instead born spiritually dead and alienated from God. Alienated from God and dead to His call on our lives, the natural state of human beings is one of ignorant rebellion, of self-centered living and of self-determined priorities.

This way of living is what Paul means by "those who live according to the flesh."

- a. **Take Sides with the Flesh:** "set their minds on the things of the flesh" – means to be like-minded with or to take the side of.

Paul makes what seems like an obvious statement about this class of people when he says, "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh." But Paul is not just repeating Himself. The Greek word he uses that is translated "set their minds on" carried with it the idea of having the mindset of or even of taking the side of. It's one of the terms he uses to describe the opposition between flesh and Spirit. The flesh and the Spirit are not just two different ways of living; they are opponents, set in fierce and determined opposition.

When we first moved to South Carolina 4 ½ years ago, one of the first events we attended was a Civil War battle re-enactment. Our small town was the site of a minor skirmish in the War Between the States and every year, during the town's Spring Festival, re-enactors put on a fake battle for spectators. My son, Andrew, didn't know much about the Civil War, but he was excited about the battle. He asked me which side Maryland fought on in the Civil War, and I told him that Maryland was on the side of the Union. As the re-enactors were taking their places and the battle was beginning to unfold, Andrew stood up and shouted, "Go Union!" for all to hear. I pulled him back down and asked him to be quiet, please. As I looked around, I thought that our church was either going to fire me as their pastor or else that the whole town might soon see a re-enactment of tarring and feathering. 150 years after the Civil War, some people are still very much committed to the side of their ancestors.

But the mindset of some people is more like my wife's at an NFL game. Several years ago, Beth and I had the opportunity to attend an evening pre-season Redskins game. It was only pre-season, but I was excited. Half-way through the

second quarter, as Beth had been chatting with her sister, she leaned over to me and asked, “What color are the Redskins wearing?”

Some people – maybe most people – are barely aware there is a conflict at all. Whatever people might say about themselves, living life as though God does not exist and simply living according to your own preferences, choices, desires and expectations is, in fact, picking a side. It is siding with the flesh.

Paul then says three things about the flesh mindset:

1. “For to set the mind on the flesh is death.” And why would he say this? It is because or
2. “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.” Hostile? Really? Why would he say that? It is because or
3. “For it does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot.”

b. Death:

God is the Source of all life. He is the Author of life and the One who gives all life to everyone and everything. To be cut off and alienated from Him as the source of life is death.

c. Hostile to God:

The flesh mindset is living in and leading to death because it is set in hostility against God. Now very few people in the world would openly say, “I hate God.” But the hostility of the flesh toward God is found in refusal to submit to God’s law. If the God who made you and Who gave you life and everything good in your life – the Source of all truth, goodness, beauty, laughter, pleasure and justice – if this God asks you to love Him and to love one another and you fail to do both, ignoring Him and living for yourself, this is hostility. This is more than just passivity; it is open rebellion, whether loud or quiet, acknowledged or unacknowledged.

d. Cannot Please God

Then Paul says something unusual and perhaps unexpected – “for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

He emphasizes the “cannot”- the flesh is not just unwilling to submit to God’s Law or to please God, but the flesh is unable to do so; it cannot please God.

We sometimes refer to this aspect of fallen human nature as “total inability.” But this is not a physical inability; God created human beings with the capacity to please Him and obey Him, but Adam and Eve made a choice to discard this ability, to surrender to the temptation of the devil and enter into rebellion.

Adam and Eve’s decision to sin has had lasting consequences for all of their descendants, and so all of fallen humanity now has a moral or spiritual inability to submit to God’s law and please God. And, apart from the grace of God working in our hearts, that’s how we like it. We like being our gods, though we may not say it in so many words.

One of the most popular poems in the history of the English language is *Invictus* by William Earnest Henley. *Invictus* means “unconquered” and the last stanza of the poem, which is the most famous, reflects this attitude:

**It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.**

Here Henley directly attacks God’s eternal judgment. It doesn’t matter if the gate is narrow or “strait” as the King James Bible puts it. It doesn’t matter what charges and punishments God’s scroll contains against him. Henley declares, “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.”

This poem has been quoted and recited by many people over the years, most chillingly it was chosen by Timothy McVeigh at his execution for the Oklahoma City bombing to be his last words, written by hand.

But here's the interesting thing about the flesh. When we think of the ways of our sinful nature and of rebellion against God, we often think of drunkenness, doing drugs, acts of violence, exploitation, etc. We think of bad things. But our flesh has its own standards of morality and its own religious inclinations, too.

Here in Romans 8, Paul is not thinking primarily about the "bad stuff" that the flesh mindset causes people to do. No. He's thinking of the religious impulses of the flesh.

These is the same flesh impulses Paul refers to in Philippians 3, when he says:

³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— (Phil. 3:3-9)

John Owen: Trying to be holy "from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world." – The Mortification of Sin, quoted in *The Hole in Our Holiness* by Kevin DeYoung.

Paul had to surrender all of his religious and spiritual merit badges, counting all as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. C.S. Lewis puts it this way in *Mere Christianity* -

“Christ says, “Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good...Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked--the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.” — C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

II. Those Who Live According to the Spirit

The opposite of those who live according the flesh is those who live according to the Spirit. All of humanity belongs to one group or the other. For everything that could be said of those who live according to the flesh, the opposite could be said of those who live according to the Spirit.

If you have the ESV, you'll notice that Spirit is capitalized throughout this passage. That's because Paul isn't taking about some vague spirituality, of being a “spiritual” person. Rather, Paul is talking about the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit of God. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us alive to God, who gives us life and peace, who enables us to submit to God and to please God.

When Jesus was explaining the kingdom of God to Nicodemus in John 3, He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus was confused and didn't understand what Jesus meant, so Jesus clarified:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

On our own, all we have is flesh life. We cannot see the kingdom of God. We cannot submit to God. We cannot please God. We cannot know God.

But the Holy Spirit comes and brings us life and peace, spiritual life and peace with God, through faith in Jesus Christ. As we're brought from flesh life to spirit life by the power of the Holy Spirit, our mindset is transformed and we join God's side. We can now delight in God's law and please God with our lives. It is the Holy Spirit, who applies the work of Jesus to us and who brings us from death to life, who makes all of this a reality in our lives.

There is a divine conspiracy at work in the lives of those who live according to the Spirit!

1. God the Father ordained our salvation and called us into life by His sovereign will.
2. God the Son accomplished our salvation.
3. God the Holy Spirit applies the accomplished salvation to our hearts and lives.

The question for you is, "Has the Holy Spirit done this for you?"

III. You . . .

In verse 9, Paul turns from talking about "those who live according to the flesh" and "those who live according to the Spirit" and addresses the Romans directly – YOU

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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.

We need to take these words as addressed to us personally, too.

a. If the Spirit of God dwells in you

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

The surest way of knowing that you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit is whether or not you have the Holy Spirit working in your life. How can you know?

b. If Christ is in you

Well, the job of the Holy Spirit is to reveal Jesus to us and to unite us to Christ. So Paul calls the Spirit of God “the Spirit of Christ.” And says “if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”

So the way you know if the Holy Spirit is in you is if Christ is in you. How does Christ dwell in you? In Ephesians 3, Paul says Christ dwells in our hearts by faith.

The Holy Spirit gives us faith in Christ, our faith in Christ unites us to Christ and Christ then dwells in our hearts by faith. So, do you believe in Jesus?

- Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the eternal God the Son, who became human and lived a perfect life, pleasing God in everything?
- Do you believe that He died on the cross as the sin-bearer, to take our sins upon Himself?
- Do you believe that He rose again from the dead, conquering death and hell as the victorious life-giving redeemer?
- Do you believe that He is sitting at God’s right hand now, interceding for you?
- Do you believe that He is coming again to judge and reign forever?

If so, do you do more than just believe THAT these things are true?

There’s a big difference between believing ABOUT Jesus and believing IN Jesus!

Do you trust Jesus? Do you cast your whole weight of your life on Him and Him alone for salvation?

c. Body vs. Spirit

If you do, then you have the Spirit of God in you, because this kind of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. However, you still live in this body and the body is dead because of sin. This means a few things:

1. Your body grown old and dies because it still suffers the effects of the fall and sin.
2. You still have to struggle against the flesh and sin. However, you must not do so by your own strength but in the power of the Holy Spirit.

d. Life Now and Resurrection for Eternity

Though your body is dead because of sin, the Holy Spirit is still the Spirit of Life to you, giving you life because of the righteousness of Jesus. Next week, we'll learn more about what Paul means in verse 13 by putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit. For now, it's enough for us to see that the Holy Spirit brings us life and will raise our bodies from the dead by the power of the righteousness of Jesus and resurrection of Jesus.

So, in closing, let me just ask you a question: What about you? Is Christ in you?

If not, perhaps the Holy Spirit is drawing you to Him this morning. Turn and surrender to Him today.

If Christ is in you, rejoice. His Holy Spirit will not fail to fully apply His righteousness to you and to raise you from the dead in the fullness of His image. What a glorious day that will be!