

Therefore... How Are We to Live?
Flesh & Spirit, Romans 8:5-17
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One of my favorite musicals is *Fiddler on the Roof*, a story about a poor milkman named Tevye and his Jewish community in turn-of-the-century Russia. You may remember his song, “If I were a rich man.” He rhapsodizes about not working hard and having a big house with three staircases: (one going up, one even longer going down; and one going nowhere, just for show). Everyone in the audience is delighted with his fantasy of wealth, and maybe each one also wonders, what would my life be like, free from financial worries?

It’s a great question, probably one we have all asked at one time or another. Now let’s take that idea to a new level: what would your life be like, if you were freed from the concerns of the self? Vanity, pride, self-gratification, all those little addictions that continue to dog you, day in, day out? What would you *do differently*; how would you *be* different?

We are on week 2 of a 5-part series on Romans 8. This chapter is the crux, literally and figuratively, of the great letter of Paul to the Romans. Chapters 1-7 hammer out the problem of sin and God’s gracious response in Christ. Chapters 9-16 reveal the ways your new life in Christ get played out. Chapter 8 is the turning point. It begins by looking back, with a great “therefore,” to all that God has done in those first seven chapters: *therefore there is now no condemnation... in Christ Jesus!* Then it turns and looks forward to what lies ahead: your life in the Spirit. Now that you have been set free from the power of sin and death – purely by God’s grace – how will you use your freedom?

Last week we looked at the paradox of Guilt and Grace. God has wiped away your guilt through the free gift of grace in Christ. Everything hinges on grace – what God has done for you. Now therefore – given this freedom – how will you live your life? What choices can you make? 5 sets of paradoxes frame this series as we sort it all out.

Today we take on the paradox of Flesh and Spirit. In this life, we surely live in the flesh (we are flesh and blood, after all). But now – because of the cross – we also live in the Spirit. We are both/and: born of the Spirit, but at the same time, living out a flesh-and-blood life; a life still affected by sin. Here’s the paradox: we are bodily creatures, and yet, as Christians, we live by the Spirit. How does that paradox play itself out?

It is important to note that Paul uses the word “flesh” in a very particular way. In this passage he is not talking about the physical body; he is not saying that the physical body is evil. Instead he speaking about *the self* as a negative power, driven by fleshly desires. In contrast, a life driven by the Spirit is unselfish, unconcerned about matters of self, but instead is focused on the desires of God. So Paul is setting up flesh and Spirit as opposite *powers* in your life. He says, you have been set free. So let go of your old self-absorbed life, and take hold of your new, Spirit-driven life. In this passage Paul points to at least three ways the power of the Holy Spirit is working in you. Let’s dive into our reading.

First, when the Holy Spirit becomes the dominant power in your life, your mindset begins to change. Listen to verse 5 again.

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

So here's the question: On what is your mind set? What captivates you? What do you think about more than anything else?

If you are obsessed with the self, then your mind is filled with those things. We're surrounded by this stuff; the media is filled with things related to the self: feminine beauty, masculine strength, trendy clothing, fancy possessions. It's all about vanity, pride, power, position, prestige. It's basically stuff your body needs (good things, like food and water, clothing and shelter); but they get escalated into unhealthy desires. Do these things captivate you? Is this your mindset? What fills your mind?

Paul says if your *mind is set* on things of the flesh, then you are headed for a dead end. And Scripture warns, "As a man thinks, so is he." If the *self* is your mindset, you are thinking the old way. But God gives you a new mindset, governed by the Holy Spirit. If you are captured by grace, the old self-obsessed guy begins to die. Slumped over the steering wheel, the dying self loses its power to drive your life. Into this void of power, the Holy Spirit steps in and takes over the steering wheel. His first goal is to give you a new mindset.

A few months ago some Christian friends went on a prayer walk through the mall with me. It was very simple; we just walked or sat, praying silently for individuals who passed us by. After doing this for about a half hour, we met in the food court to discuss what had happened.

Everyone commented on the different mindset this activity gave us. Instead of being focused on things, we were focused on people. Instead of being distracted by store displays, we were attracted to individuals and their activities. We found ourselves praying for the employees who had come to work early to open up. One of us was able to offer a kind word to the harassed mom whose children just didn't want to be there. Another had a conversation in which she gave some support and encouragement to someone who needed it. Our minds were filled with different things and it made all the difference in both our *doing* and our *being* while we were there. What a difference a new mindset makes!

Well, how do you get there? Every day, ask the Holy Spirit to put to death the old mindset, the one obsessed by the self, and to give you a new one. Fill your minds with Scripture, like this text from Philippians 4: "...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

So first, ask the Holy Spirit to move into the driver's seat and give you a new mindset. Secondly, seek a new horizon. Look at vs 11:

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

If your horizons are limited by this life and this life alone, then when you die your dreams, security and happiness die with you. But if your horizons expand because you are now living in the Spirit, then your life won't end here. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is alive in you. If you are living in the Spirit, you are already affected by that resurrection power. Your future resurrection makes a difference now.

A minister was in Italy, and there he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead just in case there was a resurrection after all. He had inscriptions put all over the slab saying, "I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don't believe in it." Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave. So a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the grave and split that slab. It was now a tall, towering oak tree. The minister looked at it and asked, "If an acorn, which has power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that magnitude, what can the acorn of God's resurrection power do in a person's life?"

If you are living in the Spirit, an acorn of new life is already planted in you, giving you new purpose and hope. It splits the slab! N.T. Wright says,

... new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind, in the tomb of Jesus, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of this present world ... That, quite simply, is what it means to be a Christian: to follow Jesus into the new world, God's new world, which he has thrown open to us. [*Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*]

You are called to live a resurrection life. When you do, your new hope breaks open the slab and moves beyond the grave.

As you live in the Spirit, your mindset changes, your horizon changes and, as a result, your identity changes. Verses 14-15:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

When you became a Christian, God established a brand new relationship with you. He made you his child; you were given access to your heavenly Father in a new way. Some of us remember the stories of JFK's little son, John-John. Cabinet members made appointments and dressed in suits when they entered the Oval Office. But not John-John. He might toddle in at any moment, climb up onto his father's desk or into his lap. And so it is for you. In a sense, you can call God 'Papa.' It's a close relationship of a father and his much-loved child.

In Christ, your *identity* has changed. Now, in many parts of the world, you are known, not by your own first name primarily, but by your relationships. In Africa, I was either called by my oldest child's name (Mama Naomi) or, if we had a close relationship, by my youngest child's name (Mama Sharon). If an acquaintance didn't know my children but did know my husband, I might be called "Mama Pastor." At first this bothered me (as an independent, American woman), but

after awhile I grew to like it. Your identity is bigger than yourself. People see you through a larger lens. *Your* identity is now defined primarily by your relationship with your Father and Jesus as your Lord. Will you live into that relationship? Or will you remain in an identity that is self-centered?

In Colossians 3 that identity is compared to having new clothes:

Put on then as God's chosen ones, a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...forgiving each other.... And above all these put on love...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts....And be thankful.

You have a new identity. Every day, you are called to put on a new set of clothes, which makes you look like Jesus, our Lord; like God, our Father. Think of it! You, who were once a slave to sin, are now a child of God.

My friends, because of what Jesus has done for you on the cross, you can be changed. It's a daily process of change in mindset, horizon and identity. As you ask the Holy Spirit to change you, you begin to look and act differently. No longer bound to the power of the flesh, you can now be governed by a new and greater power: the Holy Spirit.

The paradox is this: even though we live in the body – still in this sin-sick world – the Holy Spirit can take hold of us and turn us around – even here and now. The power of sin – which once held us captive – is dying in us. As you turn daily to Christ, surrendering the self, the power of the Holy Spirit takes greater hold and transforms you. Little by little, you become a new creation – which will be complete once your body finally bites the dust. Then the inheritance God has freely given will be yours: eternal life lived fully in God's presence.

Teveye dreamed of riches and freedom from worry. You have been given freedom from the flesh and are called to a new life in the Spirit. Your freedom has been given you purely by God's grace. Now the question is: what kind of a life will you live in that freedom? Amen.

Next week: Despair and Hope. Read the book of Romans (again).