

The Work of the Spirit

(Romans 8: 1-17)

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It is in chapter 8 of Romans, the chapter which has been preached and commented on perhaps more than any other in the whole Bible, that Paul's explanation of our relationship to God reaches its magnificent climax. In it we find the essence of the gospel distilled in a few clear, logical verses. In some ways we might almost call it Paul's confession of faith, since the note of affirmation sounds stronger here than perhaps anywhere else in his writings, Romans 8 is a chapter to capture the heart and fire the imagination, for in it we find the full breadth and depth of God's love and purpose for us.

No Condemnation

Paul begins his exposition with the blunt affirmation that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. This sense of liberation is one of the greatest joys which any human being can experience. We know something of what it is like whenever we reach a point in our lives when we are subjected to some form of judgement – an examination perhaps, or a job interview, or an offence we may have committed. Rightly or wrongly, many people develop an almost pathological fear of this sort of thing, because they cannot cope with the exposure of their hidden strengths and weaknesses which such a test involves. Insecurity and lack of confidence can usually be concealed fairly well in most everyday situations, but when the moment of truth comes, our defences crumble and we are revealed for what we really are. Now if this is true on earth, how much more will it be true in the presence of God. Paul has already shown many times over that we have nothing to boast of in God's presence; he has given us every reason to feel insecure, and even to despair when we are confronted with the awful majesty of the law of God.

Here we are told that this condemnation is reserved for those who live according to the flesh, but for those who live according to the spirit, the punishment is removed because of what Jesus has done. We may be faced with the same challenges, we may be accused of the same sins, but the man who has the Spirit of God dwelling in him knows that he has been forgiven and restored to new life in a way which the man of flesh simply cannot grasp. It is here in verse 1 that Paul brings out the sharp contrast between these two types of peo-

ple by distinguishing them in this way. As with so many other things in Romans, it is not the first time that we have been forced to reckon with this contrast, but up to now it has been implicit rather than explicit in Paul's thought. Paul has a way of making these assumptions right from the beginning, but of leaving the explanation of them to a later stage. For us, that is perhaps just as well, since otherwise we might easily be confused by the language which he chooses to use to express his teaching.

Flesh and Spirit

To our minds, every human being has both flesh and spirit. Furthermore, every human being lives according to his spirit, because his flesh is just inert matter, incapable of informing the mind and the will of man. We therefore think we understand what Paul means when he talks about living according to the spirit, because any other kind of life seems to be meaningless, at least for a human being. When we try to understand what it might mean to live according to the flesh, we are inevitably reduced to thinking in more or less purely physical terms. A person like this must be somebody who indulges in physical pleasures of one kind or another. If as Christians, we are supposed to turn away from this kind of life, it follows that the way to do it is to abstain from doing certain kinds of things. The result is a life of self-denial which in some cases may be pushed to an extreme as it has been by the tradition of monasticism, for example.

Most of us recoil from the extreme, but the basic way of thinking is deeply embedded in our understanding of the Christian faith. Unfortunately, this prevents us from realizing that Paul's use of these words is metaphorical in both cases. This means that in order to understand them we have to lift them out of their everyday frame of reference and reinterpret them in the context of God's revelation. When we do this, we discover that to live according to the spirit means to live according to the Holy Spirit, and that to live according to the flesh means to live in opposition to that Spirit. The image of the flesh is used to describe this, because, like Adam's rebellion, the flesh is a temporal thing which is doomed to eventual death and destruction. But it is important

for us to realize that when Paul uses this term he is not setting up one part of the body against another, but describing a conflict in which the whole of our being is permanently engaged.

The Law

After establishing the fundamental nature of the difference between the two types of men, Paul goes on to say that each is governed by a law which stems from his own principle of being. There is a law of the Spirit, which is the law of life in Jesus Christ, and there is the law of sin and death, which is the law of the flesh. In using the word law here, Paul is introducing us to a new meaning of the word which is as different from the usual meaning as the metaphorical use of flesh and spirit is different from their usual meaning. As we might expect, this is not an accident, because just as human flesh and spirit reflect something of the heavenly reality, so the law of Moses also reflects something of the principles which govern that reality. Both the spirit of life and the presence of sin and death work themselves out in our lives according to the logic which is inherent in them, and this logic is here called a law. The law of spiritual life has set us free from the law of sin and death because that is the logical consequence of what it actually is. If the Holy Spirit comes to live inside us, then our life will be controlled by his life, and that control will be comprehensive and coherent with itself. This is what Paul means when he calls it a law.

Confusion may arise when we come to verse 3 and discover that Paul now reverts to his previous use of the word, which referred to the law of Moses. The sudden shift may be disconcerting at first, but a little thought will show us that this must be what Paul is doing here. The law which is weakened by the flesh cannot be the law of the Spirit of life, because the Spirit of life knows no such weakness. Nor can it be the law of sin and death, because then it would glory in the flesh and not be weakened by it at all. It must therefore be the law of Moses, which in theory is a foretaste of the law of the Spirit of life, but because it lacks the Spirit's power, it is weakened by the flesh when it tries to fulfil itself in our life. The sin and rebellion against God inside us is just too powerful, and the law becomes an irritant, goading us to greater rebellion, rather than a cure for the basic problem inside us.

God has solved this dilemma by sending his Son Jesus Christ. Here it is quite clear that Paul believed that Jesus was the Son of God before his incarnation, and not that he became the Son of God by some special divine adoption, because he says that the Son appeared in the likeness of the flesh of sin, and because of sin, so that he could condemn sin in the flesh. This sounds straightforward and logical at first sight, but there are a number of difficulties which the verse conceals from the casual reader, but which we need to take a look at now. First, what does the phrase *flesh of sin* actually mean?

Is it to be interpreted, as many translators do, in the sense of *sinful flesh*? This reading would mean that the flesh itself is sinful, and of course that is precisely the way in which many people have understood it. Even those who realize that we are not talking here about the body but about human nature as a whole do not often get beyond the idea that sin is an intrinsic part of it. Yet Paul's language here very carefully avoids saying this, and for good reason.

It is true that since the transgression of Adam our human nature is thoroughly corrupted by sin, but that is not the same thing as saying that it is fundamentally sinful in itself. After all, Adam was not created sinful, and the presence of sin in our lives is a corruption of what should be, not the natural state which God made for us at creation. If we think of the flesh as inherently sinful, we have the second problem in this verse, which is how to understand the incarnation of Jesus, who was without sin. Unfortunately, many commentators have relied on the word *likeness*, which they have interpreted to mean that Jesus is like a human being without actually being one! He is thereby robbed of an essential part of his humanity and his ability to take our place is brought into doubt.

This interpretation is in fact excluded by the last part of this verse, where Paul says that Jesus has condemned sin in the flesh. If his flesh were not the same as ours, this would not have been possible. But as the Son of God, he was like Adam at his creation, without sin. So how did he condemn what he did not know? The answer, as Paul explains elsewhere, is that on the cross Christ *became* sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). He did not just stand in our place and take a punishment he did not deserve; he volutarly assumed the guilt of our sin, so that God, in putting him to death in the flesh was acting justly as far as that burden of sin is concerned. Furthermore, it is because of that aspect of Christ's substitutionary death that our sins have not merely been paid for, as if the transaction at the cross is something now being held in trust for us, who will inherit the fruits of it at some later time; our sins have also been *dealt with*. The power of sin in our lives has actually been taken away, so that we are set free to be sanctified – made holy, in the image of God. From the long discussion about the law and the way in which we are made righteous in Christ, or justified, Paul now moves on to the next stage, which is the question of how, now that we have the Spirit of Christ, we can live as new human beings, or be sanctified.

The Principles of Sanctification

Paul now returns to the principle which he laid down in verse 1, and explains more fully what he meant there. Once more, we see something which is basic to his whole way of thinking, and indeed to the whole Bible. This is that what we are determines what we do. The legalistic, unspiritual way of thinking is the exact oppo-

site of this. If Jesus was seen healing people on the Sabbath, for example, it was obvious to the Pharisees that he must be a sinner. In so far as they thought about the inner man at all, what they saw was enough for them – outward behaviour was sufficient to condemn a man in their eyes. It is hardly necessary to add here that those who think in this way betray the fact that they are people of the flesh and not of the Spirit. The tragic thing is that it is possible to judge even the things of the Spirit in a way which is of the flesh. If you think, for example, that because someone really knows their Bible, or because someone is a gifted preacher, or speaks in tongues or whatever, that he or she must automatically be a deeply spiritual person, then you have fallen into the same trap. Of course these things may well be genuine gifts of the Spirit, but even the greatest signs and wonders can be counterfeit. Ultimately it is by the Spirit within, not by the actions without, that we know who is and who is not a child of God.

Spiritual Thinking

In verse 6, Paul goes on to spell out what we have identified already. This is that the law of the flesh and of the Spirit mentioned in verse 2 is really a way of thinking which works itself out from a principle known to our rational faculty. Because it is so deep-seated inside us, both death and life are all embracing. It is no good pretending that we can somehow straddle both sides of the divide, and think sometimes one way and sometimes another. Either we are born again in the Spirit (John 3:7) or we are not! It is especially important nowadays that we hold onto this, because the modern world is designed to promote compromise at every level. On a shrinking planet we cannot afford to be intolerant, since that might lead to disputes which will end in mutual self-destruction. In the church, we cannot press our point if others find it painful, even if the point is that we must be born again. The result of this is that we are stuck in a ludicrous situation in which we are expected to pretend that people who deny the teaching of Scripture, whose lifestyle is a mockery of Christian principles and whose approach to others is more like that of the Pharisees than like that of Jesus are perfectly good Christians with whom we ought to consider ourselves in fellowship. The first commandment of this new law is: 'Thou shalt not give offence for any reason', a position which leads not only to compromise but to open unfaithfulness to the Word of God. This is a spirit foreign to the Spirit of Christ, but sadly it is all too common in today's church, where controversy is often about as welcome as obscenity, and for much the same reason – it is not nice!

In verse 7, Paul spells out what we should have realized all along. The mind formed by sin is fundamentally opposed to God. It does not obey the law of God because it cannot. This is not because it is prevented

from doing so, as Paul says the believer is (7:17-24) but because it is grounded in a different principle and acts accordingly. Those who are in the flesh, i.e. in rebellion against God, cannot please him, whatever they do. In other words, even their good deeds are displeasing to God. This statement rules out both the idea that we can somehow earn favour with God by the things we do, and the popular idea that a moral life is the best insurance against the day of judgement. These two things are closely related, of course; the former is really only a more sophisticated version of the latter. Together, they are the religion of the majority who would call themselves Christians, but who in reality reduce Christianity to what we would normally think of as common decency. Sometimes a person like this will use the word *Christian* to describe an act of decency slightly or even greatly out of the ordinary – there is a standard of achievement, remember, in this religion, and those who work harder at it deserve more reward but the principle is the same. What is more it is a religion which in its own terms often far outstrips true Christianity. Those who are impressed by heroic deeds of self-sacrifice will often find better examples of it outside the church than they will find within it, and this reinforces the conviction of those who resist the gospel that they are just as good, and probably somewhat better, than those who are born again of the Spirit but whose lives betray the simplest demands of the gospel.

Christ and his Spirit

But in the face of all such phenomena, Paul is unwavering in his demands. We are not to be in the flesh, whatever attractions or compensations that might have. As Christians, we are people in the Spirit, who dwells within us. If we do not know him in this way, then we do not belong to him, and we are lying if we continue to call ourselves Christians. Paul elaborates further on this by adding that to know the Spirit is to have Christ dwelling in us. The close link between the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ is a feature of New Testament teaching which many of us fail to understand properly. Usually we are inclined to ignore one or the other, with the result that we end up with a lopsided understanding of the gospel. But as Paul points out in verses 9-11, the work of the Spirit is to emphasize the presence of Christ, the power of the Spirit is used to bear witness to Christ and to glorify the work of the Father who raised him from the dead. The Holy Spirit is thus presented as the Spirit of both the Father and the Son, and so in having him within us we also have them, and their work. The resurrection of Christ is the crowning event in the history of our salvation, and it provides the basis on which the Father, working by his Spirit, will give us the new life in and of Christ. Romans 8: 9-11 is therefore an important source of information about the Trinity, both because of what these verses tell us about the relationship of the three Persons of the Godhead to

each other, and what they tell us about our place in that relationship.

If Christ is in us, says Paul, our body is dead to sin and our spirit is alive to righteousness. Here we find ourselves once again having to decide whether the words *body* and *spirit* are being used in the literal or in the metaphorical sense. The probability is that we must take them as literal here because the body, though dead to sin, is still alive. If we were to think in terms of the flesh, taken as sinful human nature, we would expect Paul to say that this has died, and that the Spirit has given us life to replace it. But the construction of the Greek text suggests that in this case body and spirit co-exist in freedom from sin and openness to righteousness. Paul uses the word *body*, not *flesh* here, which may be a hint that we are to understand it in the literal meaning, though this distinction is not followed through with any consistency. Otherwise there is no difference between them, since both words refer to the flesh and soul taken together – in other words, to human nature in its fulness. This impression is reinforced in verse 11, where Paul says that the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit will bring new life even to our dead bodies, which must mean that although our bodies have died to sin they are still alive physically.

The real difficulty comes when we have to decide whether the word spirit in verse 10 refers to the human spirit, or whether it refers, as it does twice in verse 11, to the Holy Spirit of God. The parallel with the body suggests that it is the human spirit which is meant, and that interpretation actually makes excellent sense here. The human spirit is personal, and Christian theology links it with the Persons of the Trinity, a fact which makes it possible for us to share spiritual communion with each other. It is because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in us that our human spirit is liberated from its captivity to the flesh, understood as the power of sin, and given life. This new life enables us to live righteously, in fellowship with God. Our bodies too, have been freed from the power of sin, and like our spirits, will come to know the life giving presence of God. How then do we distinguish between body and spirit in man? The body is our animal nature, a composite of what by tradition have been called flesh and soul. It can be studied scientifically in all its many aspects, and it holds together as a coherent unity. The ancient distinction between body (or flesh) and soul is not valid, because the soul is no more than the life of the body, without which we are talking only about a corpse, not about a human being.

The human spirit, which is the locus of our personhood, is what distinguishes us from the rest of creation and unites us to God. In the language of Genesis, it is the image and likeness of God in us. Most theologians have traditionally believed that this image was either lost when Adam fell or else was so seriously corrupted that it no longer functions properly in us. Yet the Bible nowhere says this, and to hold to such an idea would seem to reduce human beings to what is virtually an ani-

mal state. Even after the Fall, we are not animals; we are still creatures created in the image of God. The distortion of this image is not some kind of physical or even spiritual defect; rather, it is a turning away from God and a submission to other powers, the powers of evil which are in revolt against the Creator. To speak of the 'loss' of the image is really to speak of a broken relationship with God, which has now been put right by the death and resurrection of Christ.

Now that we are no longer of the flesh we must take care not to live in a way which would give that impression. It would be nice to think that once we are in the Spirit we need have no further worries about the flesh, but unfortunately, we are still exposed to its temptations. This is because our resurrection in Christ is not yet complete. Though we have the Spirit in us by whom Christ was raised from the dead, we have not yet left the world in which the power of sin holds sway. We are citizens of the kingdom of Heaven, but we live abroad, and are therefore exposed to the laws and customs of an alien society. The only answer to this problem is to struggle against the deeds of the body by using the weapons of spiritual warfare. By emphasizing the word *deeds* in verse 13, Paul seems to be saying that in our present state, what we are in Christ may not always be reflected in what we do. It is sometimes said that as Christians we are called to 'become what we are', that is to say, become in practice what we are in principle. It would perhaps be better to express this by saying that we should 'act in accordance with what we are' since that is both less confusing and more in accordance with what Paul says here.

Concluding Remarks

Paul concludes the first section of chapter 8 by telling us that the Spirit we have received is not one of slavery, which would turn our relationship with God into a new legal system and induce only fear in us, because we would be in constant danger of slipping up somewhere and losing our salvation. The Spirit we have received from God is not like that, but is a Spirit of Sonship, or inheritance. By, the power of the Spirit dwelling in us we can cry 'Abba, Father'. 'Abba', the Aramaic word for Father, was preserved among the early Christians as the word which indicated the very special relationship which Jesus had with God his Father. For us to be able to cry 'Abba', not in our own strength but in the strength of the Holy Spirit, is the sign that we have been admitted to the fellowship with the Father which is enjoyed by Christ the Son. In other words, the Holy Spirit has admitted us to the inner life of God, where by grace we share the same status of children and heirs which belongs by right to Christ alone. Our union with Christ extends not only to being crucified with him on the cross and buried with him in our baptism; it reaches also to sharing with him in the glory of his heavenly reign. In verses 16 and 17 the accent is placed firmly

on this aspect of sharing, beginning with the common witness of the Holy Spirit and our spirit to this new status. This is the level and the means by which God communicates to us and gives us the inner assurance and conviction that what he says is true. It is a reminder that the new relationship we have with God must be acknowledged and accepted before it can bear fruit in the enjoyment of our inheritance. As always, being precedes doing, and nowhere more so than in the centrally important matter of our relationship with the Living God.

In verse 17, Paul brings out, by using the language of inheritance, not only the fact that we are children of God, but that Christ has established us alongside himself in his unique covenant relationship with the Father.

The link between our common suffering and our common sharing in his glory is not accidental. It is because we have suffered that we shall be glorified, just as it is because Christ suffered that he was glorified. We know from what Paul says elsewhere that our participation in Christ's suffering may have to be manifested in real human suffering as well. The servant is not greater than his Lord, and Paul regarded it as a privilege to be able to bear the suffering of the Lord Jesus in his body. If God calls us to follow that way, to take up our cross in a physical, as well as in a spiritual sense, we have the assurance of his Word that that suffering will not be forgotten, but will be glorified with Christ in eternity.

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