

Scripture Reading for May 23rd 2021

Romans 8:1-17 (NRSV)

⁸ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

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 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since 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, though 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 from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

John 8: 31-36(NIV)

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Sermon: Life in the Spirit

Paul's letter to the Romans is an *explosive* text in church history, resulting in major reform movements by inspiring people like St Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Karl Barth. The contents of this letter have therefore been deemed profound, but that doesn't mean they're easy to understand! Paul writes skillfully, densely, persuasively, and with nuance, alluding to imagery that made sense *then* but is confusing for us today, and his carefully reasoned argument spans over many chapters, switches back and forth at times, and so we need a good guide to help us appreciate his message.¹ Nevertheless, Romans 8 is a crucial chapter and it is worth spending the time coming to grips with it.² It is also appropriate for Pentecost because Paul mentions the Holy Spirit more times in this chapter than the rest of the book combined.

The chapter begins powerfully and boldly with, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."³ Three things immediately come to mind: first, the "therefore" shows that this is a pivotal point in Paul's argument and we need to look back to the preceding chapters.⁴ Second, this stunning mention of "no condemnation" is *fantastic* news! It was this that ignited those reformers I mentioned earlier. Those today who are plagued by perceived guilt are to be set *free* by such words.⁵ And those who imagine that the power of Sin isn't really a big deal need to appreciate the seriousness of Sin and the reality of God's judgment and remedy. Third, it says, "There is no condemnation *for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" Those who God sees as *belonging* to Jesus, or *in* the Messiah, are the ones who trust that God now views them as "pardoned" because they *trust* in God's provision of Jesus and in the outcome of the cross.⁶ When we are baptized, we are emersed *into* Christ, we are given a new identity *in* the Messiah.⁷ To be "in Christ" is, then, to be part of something far bigger than ourselves; not only does this mean a new loyalty and motivation, we have God's life-giving Spirit *in* us. We are going to expand on this a little this morning . . .

¹ Paul scholars still debate aspects of this too, so we need to be careful in being super-confident or definitive in our understanding. Those biases and differences of opinion are also evident in the various wordings (and nuances) in Bible translations.

² See also Gal 3: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Makes-You-OK-with-God.pdf> .

³ Rom 8:1. This is good news for Jews *and* non-Jews!

⁴ I will not be doing that today! See Rom 3-7.

⁵ Too many people hear these words and forget them, or not appropriate them into their being; they are still living in bondage.

⁶ See also 1 Cor 6:19-20.

⁷ Consequently, to be "in Christ" is categorically different from *not* being "in Christ." To be in Christ is *not* the result of something we do, is something that God *does for us*. Paul isn't encouraging us to "get our act together," rather to get "in Christ."

Paul talks a lot about “flesh” and “spirit,” and we need to clarify what he means. The Greek word for “flesh” is “*sarx*,” which is different from “*soma*,” the word for “body.” Paul is contrasting flesh⁸ and spirit, *not* body and spirit, and *not* physical and nonphysical.⁹ Paul is *not* dissecting humans into two distinct parts, as if our bodies were inherently evil.¹⁰ No, we are human beings made in God’s own image and given the divine breath of life. The physical world is good in itself but it can be corrupted if not used in the way the Creator intended. It’s *not* our physical bodies that are the problem, but *who* or *what* our we serve. The lyrics of a Bob Dylan song put it this way, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody . . . it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”¹¹ What Dylan sings here ties in with Paul: “Don’t kid yourselves,” he says, “We always serve somebody or something and those things have *power*. And not just have inherent power in themselves, we enable them to have power and influence over us.” Paul goes on to say you can tell the difference between those who are concerned with the “flesh” and those who are concerned with the Spirit by looking at what their minds are focused on.¹² What are they thinking about most of the time? This is where we can see that “flesh” means *more* than the physical world: someone who is proud, greedy, jealous, or slanderous is certainly concentrating on the “flesh” in this sense, even though this is nonphysical. In contrast, Paul reminds his readers that we are now “in Christ” and, consequently, we live in partnership with the life-giving Spirit. The alternative is an idolatrous allegiance to something that is *not* God, and that route means living in the realm of death, rather than life; That’s not true living, that’s not what we were created for – exclaims Paul!

Related to “flesh” in this passage is the word “Sin.” When Paul uses the word “Sin,” he is *not* talking about individual moral failings, but something larger and more pervasive. He means a personified power that resides in the world and in humans, an irresistible force that opposes God and God’s ways. Sin – with a capital “S” - is not merely human acts of rebellion, it’s a potent force that infects the best of intentions. And the outcome is estrangement from God, from others, and from God’s creation. According to Paul, if you are not “in Christ” your allegiance is really to the “flesh” or this power called “Sin.” You gotta serve somebody. This is hard for us to grasp because we think of ourselves as autonomous, independent, self-made individuals. Yet money, financial security, health, good looks, good deeds, etc. are just a few of the things that we can *worship*, or put No. 1, instead of God.

So, that active or tacit rebellion against God is part of what Paul means by the “flesh.” Another aspect is our *inability* to do what we *want* to do, and that can often feel burdensome, even slavery. We recognize that we have a conscience but in our human weakness, in our “flesh,” we often fail to do the

⁸ “Flesh” is a negative term that refers to people who, or things that, share the corruptibility and mortality of the world, and are often part of the rebellion of the “world.” On that oppositional “world” see John 17: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Jesus-Prayed-for-Us.pdf> .

⁹ Earlier in Rom 5:12-21, Paul contrasts Adam and Christ or Adam-humanity and Messiah-humanity, as N.T. Wright puts it.

¹⁰ This heretical dualism has caused enormous harm. We do *not* want to set up a mind-body dualism.

¹¹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wC10VWDTzmU> .

¹² Rom 8:5.

right thing. Paul earlier links that sense of right and wrong with the Mosaic Law,¹³ and we recognise that our conscience itself is a *good* thing, but powerless.¹⁴ Paul does not condemn the Law, the Torah, but sees it as a searchlight that illuminates our need of divine grace. What we need is divine rescue and *that's* what Paul celebrates!

Paul reminds us that if we are “in Christ,” then we’re *not* people of the flesh; instead, we are people of the Spirit.¹⁵ Moreover, if the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead lives within us, then because we are “in Christ,” God will give *life* to our mortal bodies, too, through his Spirit who lives within us.¹⁶ Note, however, that the Spirit’s life is emphatically for *now* and not merely hope for after we die, although Paul later says that is a given too - because of the resurrection.¹⁷ Just to reiterate, Paul describes his new identity in Christ like this: “I have been crucified with the Messiah. I am, however, alive – but it isn’t me any longer, it’s the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I do still live in the flesh, I live within the faithfulness of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.¹⁸ And that is symbolized in Christian baptism by full emersion; going under the water we die and we are raised to new life in the Spirit.

Let’s try to visualize this in other ways: Imagine that you want to paint, not in a beginner’s sort of way, but beautifully, like Michelangelo. No matter how many lessons you take, however hard you try, you simply can’t do it. Even if you very gifted, you will only create a facsimile of his masterful art. The only possible way to paint like Michelangelo is *to be* Michelangelo. Of course, you can’t do that either, *unless* the spirit of Michelangelo lives within you. Only then could you create such beauty. Now, we have the Spirit of Jesus the Messiah dwelling in us; we don’t deserve that, we can’t earn that, it’s God’s gracious gift to all who believe in Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, and in what God accomplished through his Chosen One. This is the “impossible possibility” of which theologian Karl Barth writes. Christ’s Spirit is within us, enabling us to live the Jesus-way, but never overriding our free will. It is this divine Spirit who assures of God’s promises, including that there is *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ.

Here’s another way of appreciating what Paul is saying: consider the twelve-step tradition from Alcoholics Anonymous. For an alcoholic, there are also two choices, the way of death and the way of life. The first step is to admit that we are powerless over alcohol and that our lives have become unmanageable. The second is to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. The third is to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. For Christians, we need to substitute the word “Sin” or “flesh” for “alcohol” and we will have the crux of Paul’s message. We are powerless

¹³ Rom 7:7-13.

¹⁴ Rom 7:14-25.

¹⁵ Rom 8:9.

¹⁶ Rom 8:11.

¹⁷ See Rom 10:9-13.

¹⁸ Gal 2:20, NTE.

over this irresistible force called “Sin,” and it’s killing us.¹⁹ With the divine Spirit we have the possibility, stronger still, the capability for life. But it’s a daily battle, because God has not eliminated the power of sin from the world once and for all - not yet. But as the resurrection demonstrates, Sin’s power, though great, cannot match the power of God’s Spirit. Without trivializing the challenges, we must never underestimate the difference of having the divine Spirit with us, something that is made stronger in *community*. And even if we fall, God knows our heart’s desire and we *remain* “in Christ”; we are not condemned. This, then, is the reliable hope in which we live, that God who raised Christ from the dead will also give us life.

Here’s another image: Debt is one of the great social problems of today’s world. We have credit card debt, student loans, and various financial liabilities when we, for all kinds of reasons - and some are quite legitimate, don’t live within our means. Millions of people are in debt, even nations do it! Our society even *encourages* us to live beyond our means. Sometimes our financial obligations get out of control and we are *slaves* to debt; it is a power from which we need rescuing. The Christian analogue here is to say that Jesus paid our crippling debts for us on the cross. God has taken the initiative and accomplished through the God-in-the-flesh Messiah what was impossible for us to do on our own. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ, because *the price has been paid*. If we don’t accept that gracious provision, we are still slaves to our debts. And if do accept that undeserved gift, it obviously *doesn’t* mean we are freed from the bondage of financial debt just to go back to our old spending habits! No, we have to “die” to our past and to our old way of living, and instead we turn our whole lives, values, and priorities around, and live our lives out of gratitude to God who planned and accomplished our rescue. It won’t be easy, bad habits and poor decisions have long-term consequences, but we have the Spirit’s help and we have a new identity; we are “in Christ.”²⁰

Paul then says, “All who are led by the Spirit of God, are God’s adopted children. . . . And if we’re children, we are also heirs: heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ.”²¹ WOW, if we are “in Christ” we share in his inheritance – *life* in all its fullness. Paul also says that when the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts, the first sign is that we recognize God as our dear Father, *Abba*.²² Moreover, there is the coming together of the Holy Spirit with our own spirit – the “who we are” part of us. It’s a common

¹⁹ Both physically and spiritually.

²⁰ Moreover, we are debtors to God who is leading us into the land in which we have been promised, the eventual “new creation.” We need to recognize that fact and live life accordingly. Debtors, after all, are under an obligation to their benefactor. Some Christians speak as if everything simply comes from God and all we have to do is sit still and receive it. But God’s gift and call to us is *not* for ourselves alone, but for the purpose of working with others to bring about a transformation of the world. Some people get anxious about implying that we have to do *anything* ourselves as Christians at *any* stage of the process; they think that taking such actions compromises the grace by which we have been saved. However, in response to God’s grace, we live in a way that anticipates the rule over all creation that we will eventually share with the Messiah. (More on this important differentiation between freedom *from* and freedom *for* on another occasion. That freedom is not a licence to do anything you want! See Gal 5:

<https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Freedom-From-and-Freedom-For.pdf>

²¹ Rom 8:14,17.

²² Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4 – 6.

Christian experience that while many of the thoughts of in our minds seem to come from the ordinary flow of human consciousness, sometimes we find we have other thoughts which seemed to come from somewhere else, hinting, gently but powerfully, at God's love, at God's calling to holiness, coming at particular times and seeking our attention and energy. Part of Christian discipleship is to learn to recognize that voice, and to nurture the facility of listening to it; over time, we learn to sensitively discern whether any given thought has its origin in God's own spirit. And one of the primary things the Spirit says is to affirm to us our new identity of being "in Christ" or, alternatively, as God's adopted children.

Let me conclude with two thoughts. First, if we take the time to persevere with Paul's style of writing, to see how his message is coherent in itself and aligns with the Jewish Scriptures, with God's historical rescue of his people in the Old Testament, then we too can experience a similar, powerful "*aha*" moment of new understanding, like those of the church reformers.²³

Second, some people wonder if Paul's theology is consistent with Gospel accounts, with the words of Jesus.²⁴ I will give just two brief examples to show that this is indeed the case, even if the language and terminology used is different. Rabbis often spoke about being yoked, like cattle, to the Torah – the mosaic law. Under the rigidity of the Pharisees, that yoke had become a dead-weight to many Jews. Matthew tells us that Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take *my* yoke on you and learn from *me*, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and my load is not hard to carry."²⁵ The vivid contrast between life under the law and life under Christ is evident. In our Gospel reading from John, he tells us that Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a *slave* to sin. . . . if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."²⁶ "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."²⁷

These words resonate with Paul's exhortation to choose *life*,²⁸ life in the Spirit. Let us pursue that life with all earnestness. Amen, let us pray.

²³ For too many Christians, the spirit of the Law (Torah) becomes, over time, fossilized and rigid; and we replace freedom of life in the Spirit with rule-keeping. Overachieving Christians even focus on good deeds thinking our efforts will win an A+ from God. Paul says this is wrong thinking, we cannot do *anything* to earn God's favor or blessing. Rather, as it says in Rom 3:23–24, we can't earn this gift; it is only through God's grace embodied in Jesus the Messiah that we are rescued or saved. The initiative begins and rests with God. Once we "see" that, freedom to live in the Spirit returns.

²⁴ They also forget that Romans, and the other undisputed letters of Paul, were written *before* the Gospels!

²⁵ Matt 11:28-30. This also (shockingly) speaks to the authority of Jesus as a replacement of Torah!

²⁶ John 8:34, 36.

²⁷ John 8:31-32. See also John 14:16-17.

²⁸ Just as Moses encouraged the Israelites to choose life; Deut 30:19.