

“Life and Peace in the Spirit”

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Romans 8:6-11 (NRSV)

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 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, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 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. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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.

To set the mind on the flesh is death. The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Whoa! These are some pretty strong statements that Paul is making. Does he really mean to say that there's a possibility that I'm unable to please God? That I'm hostile to God? Well, in a sense, the answer is yes. But we need to remember that these are not the only things Paul says to us in these verses.

Paul also tells us that to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. And get this...Paul goes on to say that we are not in the flesh; we are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in us.

So, according to Paul, we seem to have these two options: the spirit or the flesh. Sounds pretty simple, but I think we can all agree that, in practice, it's not really that simple.

We need to be careful to note that Paul is not differentiating between a spiritual realm that is good and a created, and a fleshly realm that is bad. Some early Christians in the first few centuries understood it that way, but the church has long agreed that God's creation is good. So we need to be careful that we don't go too far thinking that the flesh that God created is inherently bad.

No, what Paul is talking about here is mindset. Note the phrases: “To set the mind on the flesh is death. To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” Paul's concern is the status of our minds. He's not making a judgment about actual flesh versus a spiritual realm. So it might be important to think for a minute about what Paul really means when he speaks of a mind set on the flesh versus a mind set on the Spirit.

Again, we need to be careful. Our natural tendency is to look for lists of things to do or things to avoid. Paul doesn't give us a list here. Paul follows Jesus' example in this sense, and chooses to leave the discernment up to us as to what is of the flesh and what is of the Spirit. I think Paul and Jesus feared the potential that specific lists would turn into

the kind of legalism that was unsuccessful in keeping the Hebrew people on track throughout history.

But what about Paul's statements about being hostile to God and unable to please God? What exactly does he mean? I think it all goes back to our choices. In Paul's way of thinking, we can choose to set our mind on God, following God's will that we love God and love our neighbors, or we can set our minds on our own desires.

Paul seems to understand that part of our basic human nature is to be self-centered. I'm experiencing that reality in a new way these days. My twin boys are ten months old now, and they're both able to crawl around and pull themselves up by themselves. This gives them a new freedom to go where they want to go and do what they want to do. One of the results of this new freedom is that they both seem to want to play with the same toy. So Sandi and I frequently watch the tug of war and the battle of wills that takes place between them. I realized through this that sharing does not come naturally to them. I'm going to have to teach them to share. I'm going to have to teach them to think of the needs of others instead of thinking only of themselves.

You see, the bottom line of what Paul is trying to tell us is that it's hard to please God when we're too busy pleasing ourselves first. It's a matter of priorities. When we think first of ourselves, we are going against God's desire for us.

Now remember that Paul offers us hope. He tells us that we are not in the flesh, but we are in the spirit. So all that talk about not being able to please God or being hostile to God does not apply to us when we accept Christ and place our trust in him.

This isn't a once-and-done kind of thing. The fact that we are in the Spirit doesn't mean there's not still some work to do. John Wesley understood this. In his sermon titled, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" Wesley says that in the very moment we accept Jesus Christ, we begin to experience what he calls God's sanctifying grace. Now, "sanctify" is a big theological word that really just means "to make holy." So what Wesley is saying is that the very moment we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and as our Savior, we begin a lifetime of being made holy. Anybody out there still have room to become a little more holy? I know I do!

Wesley goes on to say that God, through the Holy Spirit, works to produce in us love to all humanity. Then he lists a number of things that the Spirit helps us do. For those who want a list of "mind set on the flesh" things, here it is. He says it helps us expel the love of the world, the love of pleasure, of ease, of honor, of money; together with pride, anger, self-will, and every other evil temper. The Spirit enables us to make a true transformation of our minds away from the "fleshly" things of this world toward the things of God. This is sanctification. This is being made holy by the transformation of our mind and our mindsets.

You see, when our minds are set on God, we are enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit to do what is right and what is pleasing to God. We are therefore no longer at odds with

God's will and God's purposes for the world. We no longer have enmity with God or hostility with God, because we are, day by day, growing closer to God's desire for our lives. We can be at peace with God because God's Spirit enables us to overcome our sinful desires. This is a truth that we can count on. This is how we have life and peace through the Spirit.

I came across an illustration this week that helped me understand how God's Spirit works toward this transformation. One of my favorite things to do is to fly in an airplane. I know, for some of you, it is one of your least favorite things to do, but I absolutely love it. When I have a window seat, you'll find me staring out the window, watching the landscape below whenever there are no clouds in the way.

But have you ever wondered how airplanes stay in the air? They're huge, heavy pieces of equipment. Especially those huge Boeing triple-sevens that have a second level of seats near the front of the plane. So how is it that they simply don't drop straight to the ground?

There's this stretch of interstate highway near Chicago's O'Hare airport where you drive right by one of the airport's main runways. There have been several times when I've been driving on that road that I've watched those huge Boeing triple-sevens land. They float just above the highway before they touch down. Every time I watch it happen, I just can't understand how those things work. The plane seems to be coming in so slowly, and since it's so huge, it just seems like it should drop straight down.

Well, this week, I learned about the Bernoulli Principle. Now I'm not a scientist, so I may not get this exactly right, so please forgive me if I misspeak. The Bernoulli Principle says that when air or fluid flows faster on one side of an object than the other side, the side where the air or fluid is flowing faster provides an increased amount of pressure than the air or fluid flowing on the other side. The wings of an airplane are designed in such a way that the air flowing on the underside of the wing flows faster than the air on the top side. So, according to Bernoulli's Principle, the pressure is greater on the bottom of the wing, so the airplane is pushed up.

So what does this have to do with today's text? Well, you don't hear the captain of an airplane say, "Now that the tower has suspended the law of gravity for our flight, please prepare for lift off." No, the pilots and everyone on board the airplane are trusting, whether they know it or not, in Bernoulli's Principle that the pressure on the bottom side of the wings will be greater than the pressure on the top side of the wings. In the same way, Paul is saying in today's text that a mind set on God's Spirit is more powerful than a mind set on the flesh. We can take confidence in that. We can rely on that. We can have life and peace because of that. May it be so. Amen.