

Paul begins his description of the life of the Spirit by contrasting it with the life of the flesh or sinful nature. We know what it means to be alive in the Spirit by considering the life that is lived and must be lived by those who are not.

“The Bondage of the Will”

Romans 8:1-8

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Text Comment

- v.1 Condemnation is the opposite of justification as Paul has said already in 5:16 and as he will say again in 8:33-34. The “therefore” in v. 1 thus harks back to the entire argument up to this point. Paul has not been talking about justification—the sinner’s pardon—since chapter 5.
- v.2 The “law of sin” is found in the last verse of chapter 7. The phrase obviously refers to the rule of sin as it continues to be experienced even in the Christian life. In chapter 6 Paul said that the one who had died in Christ was set free from sin’s mastery. But the liberation from sin is only partial in this life. In chapter 7:14-25 Paul conceded that there was still a part of him that was very much subject to the mastery of sin. But as chapter 8 begins he returns to the assertions of 6:11 and 6:14 and, especially, of 7:6. The Holy Spirit, who is Christ’s gift to his people, works in them to enable them to break free of sin’s control. Not perfectly, obviously; at least, not yet. We cannot forget what Paul has just said about the battle between flesh and spirit in the Christian life. The Spirit wars against the flesh as Paul puts it in Galatians 5. But the Holy Spirit is far greater, than our sinful natures.
- v.3 That is, the law has no power to deliver man from his natural bent toward sin. As Ebenezer Erskine put it in his *Gospel Sonnets*:
- To run and work the law commands,
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands;
But better news the gospel brings:
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.
- v.4 Verses 3 and 4 look back over the argument that Paul has made to the effect that Jesus Christ has delivered those who trust in him both from sin’s guilt – that is, our liability to be punished for our sin – and its power – that is, its grip on our thinking and our behavior. The final aim or object of Christ’s saving work was the establishment of the law of God in the life of God’s people. As Augustine put it: “Grace was given that the law might be fulfilled.” [*On the Spirit and the Letter*, 34]
- v.5 The life of the Spirit, that is, the life that Christians are enabled to live by the working of the Holy Spirit within them, is first described by way of contrast, as, later, the opening words of verse 9 make clear. “You, however, are not controlled by the flesh...” We learn

first about the life of the Spirit by being reminded what life is like without the Spirit at work in us; the old life that was ours by nature; the life of everyone who is not united to Jesus Christ by living faith *was a life controlled by the flesh or the sinful nature.*

The 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans has sometimes been called "the acropolis of the New Testament," that is, the crowning point, the apex, the summit. And no wonder. It is full of the most glorious truth about the Christian life, arising as it does from the love and grace of God and continuing, as it must, to the eternal world of glory. It gives us an account of what God has done *for* us, is doing *in* us, and will give *to* us in due time. It is a grand account of the certainty of the believer's salvation no matter the trials and tribulations that he or she must face in this world. And all of this put in the most memorable language!

The chapter begins with what is sometimes called "Janus material." If you remember, Janus was the Greek god who had two faces and looked backwards and forwards at the same time. Janus material, therefore, is material that looks back to what has gone before and forward to what is yet to come. It is, in other words, transitional. So in these opening verses we look back to our justification – "there is now no condemnation" – and to our sanctification – "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" – subjects that Paul has thoroughly expounded in chapters three through seven.

But, having looked back to gather up the threads of his argument to this point, Paul now turns forward to expound the freedom of the Christian, the new life that is his or hers through Christ: a life lived by and in the Spirit of God. And he begins, as we said, by contrasting that new life with the old. Do you wish to know what new life in Christ is like? Well then consider that it is in principle, if not yet perfectly in fact, the opposite of the life all human beings live and must live according to their original nature. It is the opposite of the life that most of the adults who first heard Paul's letter to the Romans would have lived themselves before they became Christians. And what was *that* life?

Well *that* life, that life that is according to the flesh or the sinful nature; that life that unbelievers invariably live is a life in which the mind is set on the things of the flesh or sinful nature. The will of God is not important. What is more the life of the Spirit is not beautiful or appealing or desirable to them. The great interests of such people are not the glory of God or the knowledge of God or the will of God or the salvation of God. They hardly ever think about such things. They don't think about God as someone to love and serve. There is, in fact, in that life of the flesh, an actual hostility to God and to God's will as there is a love of what is sinful. That life of the flesh is, in fact, full of resentment toward God and toward his law. It regards God's law not as something liberating, a guide to goodness and happiness, but as something confining and enslaving. They think that God's commandments ruin our fun and make life harder than it ought to be.

Now, to be sure, they will often not *say* this. Usually they will not even *think* this. Comparatively few people would ever say what Richard Dawkins, the modern apologist for atheism, wrote in an article a few years ago.

“I think a case can be made that faith is one of the world’s great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.” [Cited in W.A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design*, 294 n.3]

Perhaps fewer still would go so far as to say, as Adolph Hitler once did,

“The reason why the ancient world was so pure, light, and serene [– we wonder what ancient world Hitler was talking about –] was that it knew nothing of the two great scourges: the pox and Christianity.”

But whether or not they confess an overt hostility to God and to God’s laws their lives demonstrate this to be their controlling sentiment. The fact is they do not like God’s commandments. They resent them. They do not like the requirement of chastity or of honesty. They do not like to be required to love their neighbor as much as they love themselves. They do not like the requirement of God’s law that they be content with what God has seen fit to provide them. They don’t like the fact that their speech is to be in all things pure and circumspect: loving toward men and reverent toward God. And on and on. Their behavior – in its constant violation of God’s commandments – is the proof that they do not and will not and cannot submit to God’s law.

And the fact that they rarely seriously regret their violations of God’s commandments is further proof of the same. They may regret the consequences of their sins, but they rarely if ever regret the fact that they have offended God. They never think of their behavior in such terms. The general willingness of human beings to justify their behavior; their lack of shame; their indifference to their disobedience to God’s law; all of this is the demonstration of what Paul is saying here about the mind of the flesh.

Now, to be sure, unbelievers do not view themselves this way. They do not think that they are hostile to God; they do not think they are rebels against God’s law. And they certainly don’t think that they are in bondage to the law of sin; that they live as they do because they cannot help it. There may be unbelievers here this morning and I would assume it a virtual certainty that you do not see yourself in Paul’s description of you in vv. 5-8. You think of yourself as a good person, by and large. You would admit that you sometimes make mistakes, but so does everybody else. And, so far as you can see, you do about as well as other people do.

We fully understand the way you think. Many of us in this sanctuary this morning thought precisely the same way about ourselves at one time. In fact, Paul thought just that way about *himself* before he met the Lord Jesus Christ. He told us as much in 7:7-13. He was quite confident of his own goodness. He compared himself to others and thought he fared quite well. And he was a deeply religious man. He was proud of how religious he was. At that point in his life he would have deeply resented and scorned the suggestion that he not only did not love God but was hostile to him. But he came to realize that he had been fooling himself all along; fooling himself about his own goodness and fooling himself about his feelings toward God. And there are, as I said, a good many sitting here who would say the same thing about their former life. They were measuring themselves by themselves and by others instead of by the law and the will of God.

The comprehensive sinfulness of man is a fact that Paul already spent some time demonstrating earlier in this letter. We read that part of his argument in chapters 1 and 2. And it is important, here in the middle of his argument, to remember that this negative moral evaluation of the human race remains the essential foundation of Paul's exposition of the Christian faith. Anyone who wishes somehow to build the Christian faith upon some other foundation will discover that it is impossible to do. The Lord Jesus himself and his apostles, as Moses and the prophets before them, took it for granted that man was sinful, deeply and ineradicably sinful, a determined rebel against God and God's Law. The gospel is, in fact, the solution to man's intractable problem with sin. It is *that* or it is nothing.

The longer I live in the world, the more inevitable that conclusion appears to me. I just finished reading a new history of the D-Day invasion and the battle of Normandy, the battle that effectively settled the issue of the Second World War in the West. I don't suppose that this was the author's intention, but one of the overwhelming impressions that I carried away from reading Antony Beevor's fascinating history is that insofar as the humanity of the soldiers involved on both sides is concerned there was little to distinguish them. We Americans, of course, want to believe that our men were heroic and that the enemy were scoundrels. But it wasn't so then anymore than it is now. If I were to speak only of the sins of German soldiers, we would nod our heads and utterly miss the point. There were allied generals, British and American, who were willing to sacrifice lives, many lives, for what others in their own staffs could see was perfectly obviously an interest in their own reputations. Everyone wanted to be thought a great commander and better than the next guy. The green eyed monster of jealousy was alive and well in the command posts of the allied armies in France. Generals claimed credit that they did not deserve and they blamed others so as to deflect criticism from themselves.

A keen observer of human frailty, the British general Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke wrote about one row he observed between commanders, "It is astonishing how petty and small men can be in connection with questions of command." Those were the generals who largely remained far behind the fighting line.

But it was no different with the common soldier. Put under pressure they did all manner of things that we are ashamed to hear about now. It was so on both sides of the front line. For example, there were plenty of cowards in both armies. What is more, the shooting, literally the murder of unarmed soldiers who had surrendered, often mere boys, went on throughout the battle. Thousands of prisoners were executed by individual soldiers. Unarmed men were shot in the head or chest at close range who posed no threat to anyone whatsoever. It was simply revenge, or hatred, or mere convenience. One young man with a gun looked in the eyes of another a few feet away from him who had no gun and shot him dead. It happened everywhere and all the time. The rules of the Geneva Convention were largely ignored in Normandy. Those rules are the solemn reminder that we know that it is wrong to kill soldiers who have surrendered; but it was done everywhere, all the time. According to Beevor,

"The French were...taken aback by the casual manner of some American troops when it came to killing. In one small town, a French-woman asked what she should do about four Germans hiding in her house. 'There was no one to take care of them,' reported a

lieutenant with the 10th Tank Battalion, ‘so we put them up against a wall and shot them.’” [438]

And not simply the treatment of the enemy once he had surrendered. British and American soldiers regularly looted French towns and villages. Some French folk said afterward that their possessions had been safer when the Germans were in charge. Beevor notes that American boys who before would never have broken into someone else’s house to steal property, regularly did so in Normandy. Drunkenness was also commonplace. And what of this? Replacements, often 18 years of age, poorly prepared for their new assignment, afraid, lost, unsure of what to do or how to do it, were regularly shunned by veterans for fear that a rookie’s mistake might prove dangerous to themselves. It is not a pretty picture of humanity.

We’ll say little about the widespread sexual use of French women by American soldiers. I am personally acquainted with an American veteran who, as a young soldier, fathered a child by a French girl and left them both behind when he returned to a hero’s welcome in the United States. This man later became a Christian and looked back upon his behavior with contempt and near despair that he could and would have done what he did. But he did it and so did countless others. Their guard was down and it became very natural for them to treat others as they would *never* want to be treated themselves.

There were, of course, sterling exceptions, and more often than not they were the serious Christian men on either side of the line. One captured German medic who was helping tend to allied wounded was heartbroken and began to cry when he learned that German soldiers had shot unarmed American prisoners. What the Germans did in starting the war, in prosecuting it, in the murder of millions as a state policy was, of course, unfathomably despicable and without the slightest justification. But even then it is worth our remembering that the people who committed those terrible crimes were in most cases ordinary folk, with wives and children and pets, who loved Christmas and often did kindnesses to others. How easily they came to do such great wrong! Take the point: the life of the private soldier *on either side* was far too often no recommendation whatsoever of what he took his cause to be. And is this not, in a way, simply a picture painted in broad strokes of human life all the time?

Man is a sinner. He is small and petty in his thinking and behavior. Much of what he thinks and does is contemptible. That is Paul’s simple point. There is a great deal in his life that is disreputable. He does not live as he should. His mind, as Paul puts it in v. 5 is set on the desires of the flesh, the desires, that is, of a nature that is bent away from God and away from that way of life that both God and our consciences approve. American soldiers and German soldiers held the same behavior that was customary among them in contempt when it was the behavior of the other side! We tend to give the soldier a pass because he is fighting our war and we especially tend to give him a pass if he wins it. And that is very often the way people in America think today about the morality of themselves and others. The pettiness of a person’s life, his small-mindedness, his selfishness, his peevishness, his temper, his unfaithfulness, his unwillingness to submit his desires to the welfare of others, his spirit of complaint and excuse, his unkindness to others, as well as all the dishonesty, the hard speech about other people, the sexual infidelity with other people or with mere pictures of other people, and so on, all of this we tend to excuse if a person has the right public convictions or ideas. We saw this recently in the case of Senator Ted

Kennedy. In his personal life he did considerable harm to the people around him but he was lionized after his death for his so-called public interests. And people on the other side of the political divide in our country very often do the same with their standard-bearers. They defend or ignore the often disreputable personal details because the man or woman stood for the proper public political positions.

We all do this. It is a form of compensation. We know down deep that we do not behave as selflessly or nobly as we should. We don't put the interests of others before our own. We are often abysmally selfish and petty. But we are for gay rights or against them; we are in favor of helping the poor or champions of fiscal responsibility; and so on. But when the law of God condemns our personal sins, as it does – lying, irreverent and unloving speech, lust, envy, hatred, indifference to others, the entire world of the self-interested person – we know very well that we are found in the crosshairs of God's law; that it has exposed us for what we are and for what we do and that no commitment to so-called social righteousness excuses us for the actual life that we have lived.

But that is not all of Paul's point. He also says that man is condemned to this life of pettiness and greed and self apart from the intervention of God. Man is stuck. He is what he is and he neither can change nor wants to. He remains content with himself as a sinner, a rebel against God. Indeed, he is more than content. He is defiantly determined *not* to submit to God. As W.H. Auden put it, "We would rather be ruined than changed." That is what makes the Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God, so vitally important to every human being. Only he can liberate a human being from this blindness to himself, this cheerful slavery to what is base and unworthy, this determined opposition to the standards of the God who made us and who will one day pass judgment upon our lives.

Jesus, you remember, said the same thing in a different way when he so famously told Nicodemus in John chapter 3, "Unless a man is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God." That is, as he also put it, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of...the Spirit." To most people in Jesus' day, as for most people in our day, the new birth is not a subject that people feel is of any great importance. No one in Washington D.C., or hardly anyone, is talking about the new birth, or new life by the Holy Spirit. But Jesus thought that the absolute necessity of a new beginning in human life, a beginning that can be brought to pass only on account of what Christ has done on the cross and only by the power of the Holy Spirit, was *the essential thing* to know. When Nicodemus, the Jewish leader, came to him to discuss his teaching, Jesus started with the necessity of the new birth, of a divinely wrought new beginning in human life. The life we live naturally is death. That life must be brought to a halt and a new life begun in its place. And only the Holy Spirit can create in us that new life that will lead at last to the glory of God.

As more than one person has pointed out, if we have got the wrong sum at the beginning of a series of calculations, we cannot improve matters by simply going on. We will be wrong all along the way and wrong at the end. And that is man's predicament. He has started in the wrong place and in the wrong way. Try as he might he can't get to the right place by simply going on. He must make a new beginning. But he neither wants to nor can.

Well that is what Paul is talking about here. You get the life that your nature is capable of producing; that life and no other. The man of the flesh, of the sinful nature, will live a sinful life. It is impossible that it should be otherwise. As the tree, so the fruit. But when a new life is created, when a new heart replaces the old, the behavior changes as well. It must because the man with the new nature *wants* to live differently; he *can* now live differently, and he has the Holy Spirit within him to move him in a different direction. His mind, her mind is now set on the things that the Holy Spirit desires. His mind, her mind is now aligned with the will of God.

Because of the imperfection of the Christian life in this world, the difference between the two natures and the two lives that come from them is not as dramatically visible as someday it will be. Christians themselves can be tempted to feel that the difference is not that great. But the difference *is* there; and it is *considerable*, it is clear enough, however we may wish it were clearer still. Consider the difference in this way. The sinful mind is most perfectly on display in the life of the Devil. He is the quintessential enemy of God, the defiant rebel. He hates God. And what did he do because he was such a being? He undermined and then destroyed the life of mankind by his temptations of Adam and Eve in the Garden. He is utterly uncaring of the welfare of others. He harms in every way he can. But compare the Devil to the angels of God that did not fall? They love and serve the Lord in glad submission. They protect, they serve the welfare of men and women as God's servants. Two minds, two lives, arising from two natures; they could not be more different one from the other. And so it is with us. We have a mind set on the things of God. We want to please God. We want to live for him. We would gladly give up anything to live a completely consecrated life for God and to enjoy intimate and constant communion with God. That is the new mind the Holy Spirit has put within us and it is a very different mind than the mind of the flesh. Paul is telling you what you are, as a Christian, by reminding you what you are not! He is encouraging you to believe that you have been set free from the power of sin by the work of the Holy Spirit by reminding you how dramatically your heart and mind differ from those who do not have the Spirit of God. We forget that when we find within us the desire to do God's will because it is God's will; when we want ourselves what God wants for us and in us; when we find within ourselves a mind that is for God and for God's will, *that is the Holy Spirit*. Men and women do not think that way apart from him. They don't and they can't! Those desires, those thoughts are the surest proof that Jesus Christ has delivered you from sin and death by the Holy Spirit he has given you!

It is an important part of our gratitude to remember and not forget that we do not think like unbelievers. We hardly know why, but we do not think and we do not feel as unbelievers do. We have a new nature, that of the Spirit, and it is profoundly different from that nature in which we were conceived, the dregs of which still remain to discourage us. But those dregs are but dregs; they are not our true self as Paul was careful to say in the previous paragraph. The true I, the true you, as the Christians we are, is what the Holy Spirit has made us and is making us and will make us to be!