

Romans 8:1-17

1. The concept of “flesh” (Gk. *sarx*) is central to Romans 7-8. Paul uses it first in Romans 1:3 and 4:1, where it refers to our physical nature: Jesus is descended from David “according to the flesh.” The next use is quite different: in 7:5, Paul says that “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members.” Here we start to see flesh as related to physical desires, an idea supported by Gal 5:19: “...the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

The “flesh”, though, is more than just physical desires. Consider the following:

- John 8:15: “You judge [**according to the flesh**—*kata ho sarx*]; I judge no one.”
- Gal 3:2-3: “The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now **ending with the flesh?**”
- Gal 6:12a: “It is those who want to make a good showing **in the flesh** that try to compel you to be circumcised”
- Phil 3:4b-6: “If anyone else has reason to be **confident in the flesh**, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”
- Col 2:18: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by his [**fleshly mind**—*sarx nous*]”

Certainly “flesh” includes physical passions (Gal 5:19). What *else* does it include? What concept unifies these?

2. Paul is addressing an implicit question on the part of the Jewish believers: Torah has been the key cultural boundary marker uniting and preserving the Jews scattered across the globe. If the law is gone, what will now bind them together, and even unify Jewish and Gentile believers? Paul gives new boundary markers held in common by *all* believers, including: minds set on what the Spirit desires (5), lack of fear of God (15), radical familiarity in prayer (15), hope of glory (17), life according to the law of the Spirit (written on their hearts) rather than the Torah (4), and radical purity (13). These are the new “glue” binding together God’s people.

Last year Susan and the boys and I had lunch in a Midwest airport on our way further into the Midwest. As we sat down, a woman and her two children asked to join us. They were returning from the mission field and had discerned that we were believers, despite our not having said grace yet, not having T-shirts with evangelistic slogans, not wearing crosses and not humming praise songs. Certainly no halos! Somehow, the mom still knew.

What if anything would you add to Paul’s list? Can you tell a Christian when you see one?

3. In our discussion of Romans 7 we talked about the importance of the grace mindset rather than the law mindset in experiencing freedom from sin. In this chapter Paul describes two ways we can open ourselves to the power of the Spirit to free us from sin: (1) setting our minds on what the Spirit desires (vv. 5-8); and (2) mortification of the deeds of the flesh (v. 11; Lord’s Day 33). The fuel for #1 is the recognition of who we are in Christ (8:1; LD 1), a point powerfully made in Col 3:1-5ff which describes our clothing ourselves with the “new self” and with love

(also Rom 13:14). *We are empowered by the Spirit as we focus on our position and identity in Christ.*¹ Listen to Keller's "Mortification Through Joy", 27'01"-32'32'. What special movies, books and experiences has the Spirit brought you to help you set your mind on your life in Christ?

4. Paul tells us, "present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (6:13), since "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand" (5:1-2). We are so confident in the work of Jesus that "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (8:15).

This is the language of prayer. We can come to God in prayer with the confidence of someone who is *declared innocent*, not merely pardoned, someone who has been adopted by God (and in Roman times the adopted child was not considered in any way lesser than the natural child). We "stand" with this confidence in God's presence and address God with the closeness that's reflected in "Abba".

Do your prayers ever slide into an unhealthy focus on accomplishments ("God, I know I haven't been good about such-n-such, I'll be better about that") or un-childlike groveling? Do you tell the Prodigal Son he's welcome to live in the family house, but whenever he talks to his dad he's required to start by saying, "I know I am unworthy, I am the son who ran away"? How do you approach God as Paul wants without becoming arrogant and entitled?

5. In v. 17 Paul includes suffering as an evidence of salvation and one of the new-covenant boundary marker. Read the quotation by Miles Stanford. Now listen to Dennis McCallum, "Walking According to the Spirit (Part 3)", 22'20"-27'20". What have *you* found helps you in hard times turn toward God rather than away?

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Fun fact: Luther's favorite description of the "flesh" nature is "deeply curved in on itself."

Bonus fun fact: Verse 13 refers to "misdeeds of the body" (NIV), but "misdeeds" doesn't appear in the text at all.

Praxeis, is actually neutral and "body" is *soma*, not *sarx*. NRSV, NASB, ESV, KJV, etc. do better with just "deeds."

"Unless a grain of corn fall into the ground and die..." [Jn 12:24] For most of us it has been a long season of growth from the tiny green blade up to the "full corn in the ear." So many seek to settle for this stage; saved, with heaven assured—plus a pacifying measure of Christian respectability, at least in church circles. Here we have the believer as a normal kernel of wheat containing life inside a more or less shiny golden covering, in fellowship high up on the stalk with similar kernels of wheat. This is but a stage, not the goal. And, like middle age, this can be a dangerous stage: one of seeking a "much deserved" rest; of basking aimlessly in the fellowship of meetings, classes, etc.; of ignoring or forgetting the struggles and growing pains of the tiny green blades down at one's feet, and expecting and exhorting them to shape up and mature without delay.

This is all very cozy, but costly; snug, but sterile. "The seed corn may be beautiful, but it is hard. The germ of life is locked up within its shell and cannot get out. Therefore it produces nothing. Here is the reason why so many Christians, even preachers, are so unfruitful. We often come across Christians who are bright and clever, and strong and righteous; in fact, a little too bright, and a little too clever—there seems so much of self in their strength, and their righteousness is severe and critical. They have everything to make them saints, except. . . crucifixion, which would mold them into a supernatural tenderness and limitless charity for others.

But God has a winepress prepared for them, through which they will some day pass, which will turn the metallic hardness of their nature into gentle love, which Christ always brings forth at the last of the feast. There is a further stripping, right down to the germ of life, right on down until there is nothing left but Christ, who is our life. Down, down into death.

—Miles Stanford, *The Green Letters* (Zondervan, 1984)

¹ Gal 5:16 gives us another tool when it say we are not to "gratify" the desires of the flesh, i.e. we should starve our sinful desires.

Leader's background

I have asked again for everyone to read the passage five times ahead of time. It worked spectacularly last time. We'll see if it does this time. This is the first question, then, to ask before all others: *Did anything strike you in your multiple readings of Romans 8:1-17?*

The first question addresses what the "flesh" is—for Paul it's not just passions and desires, which the English word calls to mind. Both the dissipated college student on a beach during spring break, deep in debauchery, and the college student witnessing to him, can both be "according the flesh", if the latter is witnessing out of a legalistic obligation.

Romans 7 and 8 break at a particular poor spot; Romans 8:1 certainly continues the argument at the end of 7, and in fact Romans 8 as a whole provides the climax that has been building since 5:1. Paul's argued that the OT shows the law *never* was able to *make* us holy, and further that having a list of rules has the opposite effect. Holiness comes through the Spirit which is unlocked by the freedom we have in Christ. In Romans 8 he works out a practical question which isn't stated directly, namely what about all the ancillary functions of the law? The law wasn't just a way to know God better or have a good society. The law also marked out the people of God. It was how you knew you were a Jew and how you knew to remain a Jew no matter where you got carted off to. So a Jewish Christian might reasonably ask, let's say some random Gentile wanders in off the street. How do I know he's for real? Isn't this the problem you have when you don't just use the obvious solution and tell Gentiles to follow the law the way we've been doing? (So that the difference between Judaism and Jewish Christianity is that now Gentile converts are fully part of the body so long as they behave like Jewish Christians.)

So in addition to talking about how the Spirit does what they'd hoped the law would do, sanctifying us, Paul also talks about how we know who's a Christian. But note: Paul is clearly eager to find common ground. He's not going to be giving a test he expects the Gentile Christians to fail. That's why he employs the "two paths" rhetorical device throughout the chapter. After all, there are two paths, and the Jewish and Gentile Christians are on the same path, and here's how you know it. Now maybe Paul would look at our congregations and say, "use this test on yourselves, I think many of you aren't believers." I don't know. But it's unlikely that's what he was doing in Romans 8.

It's worth pointing out one more thing. Romans 8 is surely one of the most famous and important passages in all of Scripture. No one in the group will be unfamiliar with it or its themes. So we are unlikely to be surprised by the themes of the passage tonight. What we aim to do is ruminate on them, turning them around in our minds, thinking of them anew to try to get a fresh perspective on something very familiar. That's what we'll pray for as we start out.

Notes on Romans 8:1-17:

Themes:

- God's solution to our inability to fulfill the law: the "law of the Spirit who gives life", by whom we live "according to the Spirit" (1-4)
 - ...which was possible because of Jesus' being a "sin offering" and taking our condemnation upon himself
- Evidences of the Spirit:
 - Having the mind of the Spirit—i.e., desiring the things God desires (5-8)
 - Crying out "Abba, Father" as a sign by the Spirit of our adoption as children of God (15-16)
 - Sharing in Jesus' suffering (so we can share in his glory) (17)
- Motivations to right living
 - Our obligation (12)
 - Our freedom from the law of sin through Jesus' sacrifice (2-4)
 - It leads to life (13)

Question ideas

- *Sarx*—list verses and inductively decide what it means
- Evidences of the Spirit
- Abba, Father and what Rom 5-8 says about our prayer life
- Keller 10-13 on *why* we sin—because we are looking for salvation from someplace other than Jesus
- Dennis' quote on suffering
- Keller, *Cleansing*, 31', talks about focusing on our identity in Christ for mortification of the flesh

Thoughts and observations:

- Paul is talking about signs of salvation but there can be no doubt or it would serve his goal of Jew and Gentile unity—so to take this chapter as a list of signs you have to display to show you are a true believer isn't a great fit with the context
- We are under the law when we return to sin and when we effectively call something else our savior Keller 10-13
- We open ourselves to the power of the spirit by having the mind of Christ
- Two steps to unleash the spirit: setting your mind; mortification. Remember these are things we know but need to be reminded of

Some verses using *sarx*:

- Mk 14:38: The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak
- Jn 1:13: "which were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God"
- Jn 1:14: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us"
- Jn 3:6: "What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit"

- Jn 6:51: Jesus gives his flesh as the bread of life
- Jn 8:15: “You judge by human standards; [according to the flesh] I judge no one.”
- Can mean just “all people” as in Jn 17:2, Acts 2:17, Rom 3:20; or one’s (bodily) self as in Acts 2:26, 2:30-1, Rom 1:3, 2:28
- Rom 6:19: The “infirmity of your flesh” which makes Paul have to keep things simple
- Rom 7:5: When we were “in the flesh” the “motions of sins” brought forth fruit for death
- Rom 7:18: In the flesh dwells no good thing
- Rom 7:25: Contrasted with the mind: in the flesh he serves the law of sin, in the mind the law of God
- Rom 8:1: Contrasted with the Spirit: there’s no condemnation for those who walk after the Spirit, and not after the flesh
- Rom 8:3: The flesh weakened the law and made it ineffective
- Rom 8:5: Those who are “after the flesh” mind the “things of the flesh”, contrasted with those after the Spirit
- Rom 8:6: Fleshly mindedness leads to death; 8:7, the mind of the flesh is hostile to God and *cannot* please him
- Rom 8:13: If you mortify the deeds of the body (soma) you will live
- 1 Cor 5:5: Excommunication so Satan can destroy the flesh so the spirit might be saved
- 1 Cor 6:16: When you sex it up with a prostitute you become of one flesh
- 2 cor 10? flesh contrasted with spirit in terms of warfare
- Gal 3?:3: Having begun in the spirit are they now going to try to be perfected by the flesh—i.e., by works of the law. Also Gal 5:13
- The rest of Gal 5: A profile of the spirit vs. the flesh, the latter being sinful behavior
- Gal 6:12-13: “Those who want to make a good showing in the flesh” tell you to get circumcised. So here “flesh” refers to the desire for popularity
- Phil 3:3-4: “The flesh” here means attempts to earn God's favor, by which he means here his bona fides as a faithful Jew!
- Col 2:18: “fleshly mind” here referring to boasting in spiritual accomplishments (visions, etc.); NRSV: “human way of thinking”
- Col 2:23: Rules and regulations can't “check self-indulgence” (NRSV) lit resisting “gratification of the flesh”

Here is a quote from Watchman Nee which is relevant to v. 17 and suffering, used by Dennis in part 3 of his teachings on Romans 8:

No one can be a true servant of God without knowing the principle of death and the principle of resurrection.

It is in this sense that Paul, writing to the Philippians, expresses the desire “that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed unto his death” (Phil. 3:10). The mark of death is upon the soul all the time, to bring it to the place where it is always subordinate to the Spirit and never independently asserts itself. Matt. 10:37, 38 – You note that to follow the Lord in the way of the Cross is set before us as his normal, his only way for us. What immediately follows? “He that finds his soul shall lose it; and he that loses his soul for my sake shall find it” God must bring us to a point—I cannot tell you how it will be, but he will do it—where, through a deep and dark experience, our natural power is touched and fundamentally weakened, so that we no longer dare trust ourselves. He has had to deal with some of us very strangely, and take us through difficult and painful ways, in order to get us there. You are living by the natural life, and that life varies a great deal. It is the slave of your temperament. When emotionally you are set on his way you go ahead at full speed, but when your emotions are directed the other way you are reluctant to move at all, even when duty calls. You are not pliable in the Lord’s hands. He has therefore to weaken that strength of preference, of like and dislike, in you, until you will do a thing because he wants it and not because you like it. You may enjoy it or you may not, but you will do it just the same. Every true servant of God must know at some time that disabling from which he can never recover; he can never be quite the same again. There must be that established in you which means that from henceforth you will really fear yourself. You will fear to move out on the impulse of your soul, for you know what a bad time you will have in your own heart before the Lord if you do. You have known something of the chastening hand of a loving God upon you, a God who “deals with you as with sons” (Heb. 12:7). But when this is really established in you, you have come to a new place which we speak of as “resurrection ground.” Death, in principle, may have had to be wrought out to a crisis in your natural life, but when it has, then you find God releases you into resurrection. You discover that what you have lost is being given back, though not quite as before. The principle of life is at work in you now; something that directs and empowers you, animating you with fresh divine life. From henceforth what you have lost will be brought back, but touched now with new values because under heaven’s control. When the body becomes our life we live like beasts. When the soul becomes our life we live as rebels and fugitives from God—gifted, cultured, educated, no doubt, but alienated from the life of God. But when we come to live our life in the Spirit and by the Spirit, though we still use our soul faculties just as we do our physical faculties, they are now the servants of the Spirit; and when we have reached that point God can really use us.

—Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*