

Sermon for Sunday, April 11, 2010
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CHILDREN OF THE LIVING GOD
Romans 8:5-11, 12-17

In this passage, Paul tells us that the Lord has given us life. His Spirit has so moved in us that our spirits are alive and our bodies will be after the resurrection and he is the controlling influence in our lives (8:9-11). We are now God's children and this brings Romans us to 8:5-17 which bids the believer to serve God with the whole person - the mind, the will and the affections.

1. The mind

Some people see the world in shades of gray, others in black in white. At the moment, it is considered "sophisticated" to embrace the gray, to live with ambiguity, to hold contradictory notions in equipoise, to eschew sweeping statements. In fact, we experience the world in shades of gray.

People who see the world in shades of gray can be proud of their subtlety, but they can be humble, too. If you tell them they did something good, they fret: it wasn't wholly good. Their motives were mixed, they confess. They can't say that they are "a good person." They certainly won't say someone else is "bad." If someone misbehaves, they try to understand what motivated them – surely there was a reason.

But there is a time to see the world in black and white. Good and evil, right and wrong choices. Good and bad deeds. Politicians are good or bad. Books or TV shows are good or bad. Spiritually, there is warfare between good and evil, antithesis between the flesh and the Spirit (8:5-11).

Most of us spend time in both worlds – gray and black and white. The movie *Avatar* is a test case. Some people thought it was a wonderful movie because of its technical skill, the sheer beauty of the world it envisioned. Others found it offensive because of its naïve nativism and environmentalism and its anti-military/industrial, anti-American message. I will not mention its lead-plated dialogue and plot. Is *Avatar* good, bad or both? Probably "both." Gray.

If we know the creator, it makes sense. James Cameron is a Canadian director, screenwriter, and inventor. His works includes *The Terminator 1 & 2*, *Aliens*, *The Abyss*, *True Lies*, *Titanic*, and *Avatar*. If you watch movies much, you recognize that his movies are risky and stunning at a visual level. But the plots are shallow and predictable: dark, anti-technology, anti-military. The plots are mostly vehicles for the stunning images he creates often using camera systems Cameron invented so he could capture impressive images. As an artist and inventor, he is a great creative talent. As a man, all accounts say, he is egotistical, vain, and pessimistic and a lost soul. And he produced an explicitly anti-Christian documentary.

As a cultural product *Avatar* is gray. Yet, from a strictly intellectual or spiritual perspective, it seems that Cameron has not, in Paul's words "set [his] mind on the things of the Spirit" (8:5).

Romans 8 says that in this gray world, there is a contrast, an antithesis. People behave differently of course, but the sharpest contrast lies not in our behavior, actions or feelings. It lies in our deepest commitments and convictions, our ultimate direction: Do we pursue God's truth or not? Do we want God as Father or not?

There are, Paul says, contrasting categories of people. Some set their minds on the flesh, others set their minds on the Spirit. When Paul says unbelievers "set their minds on the things of the flesh," he includes people who sin flagrantly - living for sensuality and immorality. But when Paul describes the way of the flesh he spends just as much time on mental or spiritual evils such as "discord, jealousy, rage,

selfish ambition." Pointless dissension, a love of quarrels, self will, and going one's own way - these are sins of the flesh, the way the flesh lives.

A person whose mind is set on the flesh may have a polite interest in religion. Others think it's balderdash. Some act as if their most recent thought, picked up from the internet, is just as valid as the wisdom of the ages. Some say religion is a crutch for mental cripples. Others are sincerely glad religion works for some people. Our atheist friends may sincerely wish us a happy Easter, and why not?

We, however, set our minds on the things of the Spirit (8:5). Many want to live God's way, even if they aren't very good at it. They curse like fiends, their minds may go to the wrong places far too often, but really want to do better.

Some of you are alive to the things of God even though you don't call yourself a believer yet. Biblical truth stirs you, resonates with you. You are drawn to it and want to learn more. You hope, you suspect that the truth is there. The pursuit of truth, God's truth, absorbs your mental energy. It gets your time and concentration. You want to find it, seize it, own it. You want to become a child of God.

The quest for the truth requires us to consider hard things sometimes. A prominent Catholic journalist, Peggy Noonan, recently wondered how the scandal of clerical misconduct was overlooked for so long - the facts were there!

- Some refused to believe the reports. Heroes of the faith couldn't do such things.
- Some were afraid of the work, afraid they'd suffer for criticizing the church.
- Some didn't see it as a story; they assume the church is corrupt, like every institution.
- Some saw that it truly is a scandal, an aberration and disgrace. It had to be discovered, confronted, exposed, reformed. ¹

Every mind has a direction. The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God. In this state of hostility, it does not, cannot submit to God's law and or please God (8:8-9). Of course, unbelievers and agnostics do many things that are morally good and praiseworthy. They tell the truth and donate blood but they cannot fully please God. To explain... Suppose that I am awake for a time-consuming medical procedure. Eventually it emerges that I am a pastor. The physician is an aggressive atheist who believes that religion causes terrible harm. He regards me as a dangerous fool. If that is so, no matter how conscientious and skilled the doctor is at a technical level, he cannot fully please God. (or: a skilled housekeeper who despises the family served). But as long as the unbeliever cares nothing for God, his deeds are partially good and cannot please God.

The final result is death. After the physical body dies, the spirit dies because it has no love for God and is separated from Him forever. But those who seek God and His truth find him. Jesus said, "Seek and you shall find." When we find Him, we find life and peace (8:6).

2. The will – and the renewed life

Changes follow. With the will, we want to please God. We struggle desperately with this at times. Our desires run out of control! Our emotions betray us. We ask ourselves, "Why do I act this way, waste my time on this?" My father did his own taxes but he hated paying taxes and he hated preparing them. He lost documents and fretted, he shouted that tax rates were unfair, that there was no point in working. It was very tense. I find myself getting tense when I work on my taxes, but I resist it. I want to submit to God's

¹ WSJ, 4.2.10 "The Catholic Church's Catastrophe"

will, to pay taxes faithfully, as the Bible says we should. So I feel turmoil – life is gray. But there is an ultimate black and white. It's my true desire, deep desire, to follow the Lord (8:7-9).

That's why Paul says, "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you" (8:9). The flesh doesn't govern or dominate. The settled, leading influence is the Spirit. This is true for all who belong to Christ. God's Spirit enables us to fight, even subdue sin. Jesus promised, "He lives with you and will be in you." ²

Paul says every believer "has" the Spirit. That seems too strong His presence is a universal blessing. And it is an initial blessing. Not the result of some level of growth or achievement. In fact, it is the Spirit himself who renewed our minds, enlightened us, so we believe.

This is the work of the triune God: He says "you are in the Spirit" the Holy Spirit – "if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you" (8:9). Finally, He says that all who belong to Him "have the Spirit of Christ." The Father, Son and Spirit are distinct, but they share one essence and one will, so that "wherever each is, there are the others also" ³

Renewed life in the body 8.10-11

"But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness." That is at present, our bodies are dead. They are mortal, subject to death, decaying and certain eventually to die. Because of human sin, God said, "To dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

But now [literally] "the Spirit is life because of righteousness." Now we have righteousness through Christ - his righteousness received by faith. God's Spirit has given life to our spirits and He will also give life to our bodies. The same Spirit quickens our spirit and our body. Romans 8:11 says:

"If [since] the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies".

Good news. Christ's resurrection is the first sign, harbinger, of what's to come. His resurrection – in real flesh – is a pledge and pattern for our resurrection. You recall that Jesus' resurrection body was recognizable – changed, yet like his old body. So too, our bodies will be like our old bodies, but better.

I'm essentially healthy, but in 2010, I've tweaked a hamstring, which led to back spasms. Then torn ligaments in my right wrist, tendinitis, allergies, and a procedure to scrape an evil calcium deposit off my left shoulder. And I'm doing well! Even at twenty or thirty, our bodies ache and break and the first gray hairs appear.

Yet our bodies are indispensable to us. We meet the world with our faces. We serve family, neighbor and God with our hands and voices.

3. New life as God's child is a privilege that brings obligations (8:12-17).

All this leads to a new life, new privileges and obligations. "We are debtors," we have an obligation, "not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh" but to the Spirit, to live in the way of the Spirit. If we live by the Spirit, we live for the Spirit.

² Stott 225 cf John 14.17

³ Stott 225, cf John 14:16, 21, 23

Life governed by the flesh can end just one way "If you live according to the flesh you will die." You are headed for death as a consequence of your choices. Why serve the flesh? Paul says, "But if by the Spirit you put to death [kill] the deeds of the body, you will live" (8:13).

To break with the old life and live a new way (8:12-13)

The phrase "put to death the deeds of the body" has a status in Christian thought. We must kill the flesh – present tense - continually. Someone coined the phrase "mortification of the flesh" and then started giving advice – how to kill or mortify the deeds of the body.

Catholic monks had a system: hours of prayer, separation from the opposite sex, deliberate poverty - fasting, rough clothes, no possessions. Self-deprivation - humble food and minimal sleep and obedience to superiors.

Protestants seek experiences, such as a retreat or a prayer vigil, a special blessing from someone. Some recommend methods of moral reform: Six steps to control of emotions, five ways to be faithful in relationships, four paths to controlling our appetites.

But the Bible never endorses such methods (asceticism). It certainly doesn't tell us to inflict pain on ourselves. Quite the contrary. Paul knows that some say, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch." Paul says such man-made rules have "an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and... severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:21-23).

Paul doesn't tell us how to put sin to death. This is why: we don't need someone to tell us how. We have motive enough: God has delivered us from death, he has given us Christ and life in His world. We have a new destiny and a new nature. We have every motive, every ability, we need. The Spirit of Christ lives within us. We have a good sense of God's will – the law of love, the Ten Commandments cover most issues.

What more do we need? We need to exercise our will and be ourselves, live our identity. We should repudiate and hate our misdeeds. We should kill them, mentally. We should "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:14).

Jesus said the same thing in a graphic metaphor: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (5:29-30). It's a metaphor not to be taken literally. Still the image means something: that sin might be horrible in our sight.

Jesus says it's better to go through life maimed than to enter hell whole, so we will shudder at the thought of sin as we shudder at the thought of losing a limb. If our eye tempts us to sin, we should try to act as if we had no eye and refuse to look. If a foot tempts us to sin, we should act as if we had none by refusing to walk toward the object of temptation.

This isn't a method. It expresses a will that believes God has done everything necessary to liberate us from the penalty and the power of sin. He has equipped us for every good work so we need to act, put sin to death daily. Yet there is another way to say the same thing – believers are led by the Spirit

3. Affection

We're led by the Spirit and adopted into God's family (8:14). Paul says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (8:14). We're adopted.

Adoption: In adoption we leave our biological parents and enter another family with all its privileges and responsibilities. In the Bible adoption is a major benefit of salvation. In adoption, God brings believers into His family and grants us all the privileges of a child and an heir.

In America, at the end of the adoption process, a judge tells the new parents that they have every duty, privilege and responsibility for their child, just as if he or she sprang from their body. So it is with God. When we follow Him, we have every right to become children of God.

We have a hard time accepting this. Do you recall the scene in the middle of the parable of prodigal son? In the depths of despair, when he is impoverished, without friends and feeding pigs, he gets an idea: He will go home and tell his father he is sorry. "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19). "I'm unworthy to be a son, but if I work hard, Lord, maybe you will make me a servant, let me sleep in the barn". It's how we think.

God says, "No way." He sent His Son, "to redeem those who were [born] under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-6). Not servants but sons and daughters. In America, we adopt adorable babies. In ancient Israel and Rome, childless couples adopted faithful friends or servants to keep the family name and land. They searched for a virtuous young man to carry on the family name and privileges. It's our custom to adopt the lovable children and worthy adults.

But God adopts neither babies nor worthy adults. He adopts unworthy adults, men and women whom He loves even though they will never merit His love. I do not say we are worthless or unlovable. Rather, we are a mix of attractive and unattractive traits, virtues and vices. But He chooses to see all that's good in us.

I urge you to see yourself this way – as God's beloved children! Lay off the self-doubt and self-criticism. I understand it. Many of us are perfectionists – hard on ourselves. We always see that we could have done better and probably so.

Or we have heard that we don't deserve to be loved. Someone important told you that you are weak, unattractive, hard to love. Who would want you as friend? But the Lord says you are loved and protected, now and always. Believe that and let that word of God outweigh anything else you hear.

That brings benefits that we should savor. The weather has been wonderful lately, but we need to go outside, enjoy it. So, too, with our adoption. We have received "the spirit of sonship" so that we cry and call God "Abba! Father!" Do you call God "Father"? A true story about adoption: A man traveled to another country with his wife to adopt an orphan girl. She was a few years old and hesitated to bond with her father. "Then one day she appeared at his side... with one of her shoes in her hand. 'Daddy,' she said, 'I need another shoelace.' That was the first time she had ever called him by that name." She approached him in her need and called him father.

We realize that God is our Father when we see that He has affection for us and strength to help us. No other religion teaches its people to think this way. Even in the Old Testament, God revealed himself as creator and king, not as Father. He is Yahweh - "I am," the self-contained God. He is holy, awesome, and merciful God – but not "Father".⁴ But in the Incarnation, God draws closer to us and says He is "our Father in heaven." He knows our needs, hears our prayers, forgives our sins (Matthew 5:45, 6:1-6, 7:11, 10:29; Mark 11:25).

We say Abba means "Daddy" – roughly true. It's a warm, simple, family term, but it's more than baby talk or childish talk. It's family talk that adults can use. Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father, take this cup from

⁴ Packer, *Knowing God* 181 ff

me" in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Again, do you approach God this way? Do you let God lead you this way? His leadership is gentle – like a loving father. He enlightens and persuades; He doesn't drive or compel.

We should know God as our Father

At the end of our passage, Paul explains what this means. First, when we approach God, we should feel confidence, not fear. We are confident because He has forgiven our sins: "We have confidence to enter [God's presence] by the blood of Jesus, so let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:19, 22).

We must picture a large estate. When a slave approaches the master, he is hesitant, worried. When the son comes to his father, he is joyful. Today? The principal's office. If the principle is your friend... But if you are a student who just misbehaved – fear.

So we have the spirit of a son or a daughter and "the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (8:16). People wonder how this works. The language suggests that two voices are in agreement. In our spirit, we know that we belong to God. And the Holy Spirit confirms it within us.

We don't always feel this – we don't always feel like a child of God. If we grew up in the faith, went to church and Christian schools, we heard that we must own the faith, that we can't rest on our parent's faith. But we wonder, "Do I really own it? What if I were born in Morocco, would I be Islamic? Was this really my choice when I told the Lord 'I believe' or was it social pressure?"

But if we came to faith as adults, we remember that we felt something, some hidden force, nudging us to ask certain questions, to entertain answers that seemed absurd two years ago. We prayed. Perhaps a feeling swept over us – a glowing sense that our brokenness is healed, that a flood of truth swept away our proud skepticism. A sense of calm or joy or excitement followed and it seemed that you know God in all His holiness and grace, and He knows you.

But doubts intrude. People ask, "How can one prayer, one set of words, change everything?" It seems impossible. Besides, after the feeling fades, how much has changed? We're like impatient gardeners, waiting for seeds to sprout, judging them too small and ready to die.

But when we say we believe, it isn't just words. Yes, the world looks gray, but words, spoken with knowledge and sincerity matter.

When someone enters the army and vows to defend our country, it really changes things – even if the soldier is frightened at times. When someone enters political office and swears to support the constitution and the law, it changes things, even if the politician can't decide how to vote on this or that.

So too, when we say we believe, it isn't just a word, it's a resolve, a commitment of the person. We become children of God, heirs of life with Christ – provided that our faith is real, that we are willing to suffer with him that we might taste glory with him as well.