

Romans 8:5-11: The Spirit of life

In our last study, we showed the contrast that Paul had introduced between the sinful nature (sometimes translated 'flesh') and the Spirit. Both terms are difficult because they can have more than one meaning. Sometimes, Paul uses 'flesh' simply to mean ordinary physical life (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:3) but usually he uses 'flesh' to mean human nature, corrupted and weakened by sin. This partly explains why the Greek word sometimes translated 'flesh' (Gk *sarks*, σαρκς) is notoriously difficult to translate. A complication arises because the variety of ways in which Paul uses this word forces translators to use several different paraphrases.

Some people have the idea in their head that the way languages work is that one word in one language has one simple equivalent in another. Working on that assumption, all you have to do is translate word for word and all will be well. Even the most modest linguist knows that is not the case. I don't think we use the wonderful expression, 'it's raining cats and dogs' so much these days – not for want of opportunity! We know that it means that it is raining very hard indeed. As soon as we translate into another language we are faced with a choice. Do we translate it literally and risk the reader thinking that we are simply being ridiculous or do we translate the idea, so that the reader has the sense without the colourful expression? I think most people would agree that we have to take the colour out to make the meaning plain. You might know that the Eskimos have no word for rejoicing in the Inuit language – so conveying the news that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents is difficult to do. However, Eskimos know when their famous Husky dogs are happy by the wagging of their tails.

In the same way, I tell you, there is *much wagging of tails* in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

(Luke 15:10)

Here, the colour has to be added so that the meaning is understood. When we come to this word (*sarks*) variously translated 'flesh' or 'human nature', in Romans, translators face a dilemma. If it is translated literally as 'flesh' the misunderstanding is that it refers only to sexual sins, whereas it refers to what is human as distinct from the spiritual realm. We do not want to miss the point that it means 'human nature'. Neither do we want to miss the point that, in Adam, human nature is inherently sinful. The variety of constructions in which the word is used makes it difficult to translate consistently, a problem that surfaces in the *NIV*. In order to navigate our way through, I am going to use the *English Standard Version* which consistently uses 'flesh' when, if you are following in the *NIV*, your version will have 'sinful nature', 'human nature' or 'sinful human nature' according to the context. The weakness of the *English Standard Version* is that it does not read as smoothly as *NIV* and smooth reading is also an important part of translation, so I am not suggesting for one moment that you abandon the *NIV*, which is the most popular of the modern translations and, I think, deservedly so.

Paul's use of 'Spirit' (Gk *pneuma*, πνεῦμα) is less complicated but there are often three possible meanings. The first and most obvious of these is 'Spirit of God'. However, often it needs to become clear as to whether Paul means Spirit of God, or the spirit in the life of the human being (in the more general sense) or spirit in terms of the divine life-principle (the new nature communicated to the believer).

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.

(Romans 8:5, *ESV*)

The little word 'for' shows that what follows is related to what went before. Here, from verse 5 onwards, we have a more detailed explanation of verses 1-4. Paul contrasts two groups of people. There are those whose lives are determined by the flesh. Their thoughts are shaped by human nature and its bias to sin – they do not simply think in a certain way but their minds are set in a particular direction, which we could only capture in English by using both 'mind' and 'heart', which is well captured by the *NIV* translation 'desires'. This probably includes both the wilful choosing of the selfish and self-indulgent option of sin and a pattern of choosing that has become ingrained in the life of the 'fleshly' person, who might not even recognise this as sin any longer (cf. Romans 1:21-28). Then, there are those whose lives are determined by the Spirit (for the fruit of the Spirit see Galatians 5:19-23), which refers to the Spirit of God and not the human spirit.

The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;

(Romans 8:6)

A literal translation would be 'for the flesh's way of thinking is death' but we might use the expression 'mind-set' (Gk *phronema*, φρονημα). The mind-set of the flesh (that is the sinful human nature) is death, for death is a hallmark of the fallen, sinful and mortal human being. In contrast, the mind-set of the Spirit is life and peace. Peace in the biblical tradition has the sense of total well-being (echoed by the familiar words of Charles Wesley, 'Tis life and health and peace, *HP* 744, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing'). To speak in more old-fashioned terms, it is the distinction between the carnally and spiritually minded. The unbeliever and the believer, therefore, think in different ways for the unbeliever is spiritually dead but, at the new birth, the believer has become spiritually alive.

In the contemporary Christian Church and in the Methodist Church we have often thought a great deal about mission programmes. Let me say that I am not against mission programmes as such but I think that we need to realise that mission programmes will be virtually pointless if they are conducted by carnally minded people using carnally minded methods or, almost worse still, by people who are truly spiritually minded but who have been misled into believing that we must use carnally minded methods. If they need them at all, mission programmes will simply be a special focus

among spiritually minded people because the quality, faithfulness, Godliness and spiritual fruitfulness of the people will be a constant mission programme all of its own.

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

(Romans 8:7)

Unlike the spiritual mind-set, which is constantly thankful to God, the mind-set of the flesh refuses to acknowledge its dependence upon God, the creator. For the spiritual mind-set, a sense of dependence upon God and thanksgiving are the hallmarks but for the carnal mind-set hostility to God, a rebellious spirit and an inability to submit to the law of God (either in the sense of the commandments or his will in general) are the hallmarks.

Over forty years ago now, when I was eight years old, my parents were given a New Testament by a friend. I think it must have been a Royal Naval issue as what attracted me to it was the blue cover and the gold naval crown embossed upon it. Being eight years old, I opened the New Testament at random, more or less to the middle, I guess, and came to the book of Romans and selected for my memory verse (we still did memory verses in Sunday School in those days), 'so then they that are in the flesh cannot please God' (Romans 8:8, *KJV*). Armed with my new verse, I said to my Mother, "Romans chapter 8 verse 8, 'so then they that are in the flesh cannot please God,' what does that mean, Mum?" She very wisely referred me to my Father. The *NIV* renders this verse:

Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

(Romans 8:8)

As in verse 6 *NIV* adds the word 'controlled' to give the sense of what it means to be 'in the flesh' but the New Testament has no equivalent word in the original. To be 'in the flesh' or in the carnal mind-set is to be controlled by it. To be in the Spirit or in the spiritual mind-set is to be controlled by or as we might say 'obedient to' Christ by the power of the Spirit. In this verse, Paul is summing up what he has said earlier and shows plainly the impossibility of focusing in two opposite directions at the same time. The hostility of the mind-set of the flesh that does not submit to God's law and the inability of those in the flesh to please God recalls the vicious circle of sin and sinning (1:18-32). It is impossible to please God without the spiritual regeneration that he gives.

The end of the paragraph in our translations marks a shift of direction. Paul now turns to his readers, 'you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit.' By God's grace in Christ, Christians have been delivered from bondage of the 'flesh' and set free into the realm dominated by God's Holy Spirit. The phrase 'if the Spirit of God lives in you' is not intended to raise any doubt but presupposes the truth of the statement. The Spirit of life (because of his regenerating and renewing power) is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Everyone who trusts in Christ receives his Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). As Paul seems to use the Spirit and Christ almost interchangeably we can conclude that the

presence and fullness of Christ are known in the experience of the believer by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

(Romans 8:9)

The *NIV* again adds 'controlled' to give the sense of the passage. The born again or regenerate believer is no longer controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit. This does not mean that the believer is delivered from 'the body of death' (Romans 7:24). In the previous chapter, Paul has described the tension between the desire to do what is good and the inability to do it (Romans 7:18) and his capacity to continue to sin (Romans 7:15-17) and the consequent frustration of failing to do the good that he wants to do and continuing to do evil that he does not want to do (Romans 7:19-20). Paul concludes that he is both a slave to God's law in his mind but a slave to sin in his flesh (Romans 7:25). So, it is not quite as simple as a description of a person before and after conversion, as though the weakness of the flesh were no longer a factor in the life in the believer (Hendriksen, 1980:250). The flesh is still a factor but it is not the decisive factor. For although the weakness of the flesh is still a factor, in the believer's experience, it need not be a victorious factor for Spirit of God, of Christ, dwells in the life of the believer. Therefore, for Paul, only those whose lives demonstrate by character and conduct that the Spirit is directing them can claim to be under Christ's lordship. Paul gives importance to a spoken confession (Romans 10:9), to baptism (Romans 6:4) and to moral transformation (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) but the crucial element is belonging to Christ and the Spirit of Christ in the 'heart' of the believer.

Paul normally speaks of believers being 'in Christ' (Romans 8:1) but here (Romans 8:9) he adds the dimension of the believer having the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit lives in every person who is genuinely a Christian. It is significant that for Paul, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ are one and the same. By his resurrection and ascension, Christ is marked out with power to be the Son of God (Romans 1:4). In the believer's experience, Christ and the Spirit are perceived as one. Christ is known only in and through the Spirit, the Spirit known only as (the Spirit of) Christ (Dunn, 1998).

The *NIV* renders Romans 8:10, 'But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness' but the *ESV* probably translates it more accurately as:

But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

(Romans 8:10, *ESV*)

The reason for this translation is that Paul has consistently used the word translated 'spirit' (Gk *pneuma*, πνεύμα) in this chapter to mean Holy Spirit and the word (Gk *zōe*,

ζω/η) the *NIV* translates with the adjective 'alive' is a noun and therefore better translated 'life'. To make sense of its translation *NIV* adds 'your' to 'your spirit' but the word does not appear in the original at all.

When Paul speaks here of the 'body' (Gk *sōma*, σωμα), a word that he has used before (Romans 6:6, 7:24), not flesh (Gk *sarks*, σαρκί), 'body' does not mean simply physical body but the body as it is characterised by this age and therefore in the realm of sin and death (as opposed to spiritual body). Even a believer is still caught up in the present age but union with Christ in his death confirms the divine sentence of death on the 'sinful flesh'. The final execution will come to pass when the mortal body dies and meanwhile the believer is still susceptible to sin. The Spirit of life has opened a new dimension to believers but the tie to the old dimension is not completely broken.

It is important for the believer to have the 'mind-set' of the Spirit. For many years now, being 'Spirit-led' and 'Spirit-filled' have been shorthand terms for Christians who have claimed a charismatic spiritual experience. Irrespective of the rightness of particular instances of use, it must still be the goal of the Christian to live in a way that pleases God. More difficult is to identify how to be 'Spirit-led' and 'Spirit-filled' in our daily living. Douglas Moo (2000:257) says:

These verses, therefore, raise a fundamental question: How are we forming our "minds"? What are we putting in them? What are we exposing them to? Christians, who read nothing but the latest novels, watch nothing but network television, and talk to nobody but unbelievers are never going to form the mind-set of the Spirit. All the input comes from one direction, reflecting the value system of the "flesh." No wonder we so often think and act in "fleshly" ways!

If we are serious about progressing in the Christian life, we must seek every day to feed our minds with spiritual food. Too easily our "quiet times" can degenerate into routine exercises in which the mind is hardly involved. We read Scripture, but we don't really seek to engage it by asking what it means or how it applies to us. We pray, but we follow the same pattern every day. Our daily times with the Lord can be one way in which we develop the mind-set of the Spirit, but only if the mind is really involved.

The paragraph ends by restating what had been said at its beginning.

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

(Romans 8:11)

Here Paul uses the most familiar name (Jesus) to complement the use of Christ. The Holy Spirit, dwelling in the life of the believer, begins a process and is a guarantee of its completion. The believer has a double reason to be assured of salvation, the resurrection of Christ and the experience of the Spirit. The phrase 'will also' suggests that just as the Spirit raised Christ from the dead, so the same Spirit will raise believers in the final resurrection. God accomplishes this life-giving work by his Spirit. 'Mortal bodies' just emphasises that the Spirit is giving life to bodies that are subject to death. Paul contrasted the regenerate spiritual body with the physical body (1 Corinthians 15:34). For the believer there is an essential continuity between the present indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the future resurrection (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7-5:5).

When I first spoke at these Bible studies in 1993, I made reference to this wonderful hymn of Charles Wesley. I can't claim to have sung it often since then, though in *Hymns and Psalms* it is set to a new and singable tune. I very much value the worship songs of the last 30 years – I just hope that great words like these do not get completely squeezed out of our devotional consciousness.

I want the Spir't of power within,
Of love, and of a healthful mind:
Of power, to conquer inbred sin;
Of love, to thee and all mankind;
Of health, that pain and death defies,
Most vigorous when the body dies.

When shall I hear the inward voice
Which only faithful souls can hear?
Pardon, and peace, and heavenly joys
Attend the promised Comforter:
O come, and righteousness divine,
And Christ, and all with Christ, are mine!

O that the Comforter would come,
Nor visit as a transient guest,
But fix in me his constant home,
And take possession of my breast,
And fix in me his loved abode,
The temple of indwelling God!

Come, Holy Ghost, my heart inspire,
Attest that I am born again!
Come, and baptize me now with fire,
Nor let thy former gifts be vain;
I cannot rest in sins forgiven -
Where is the earnest of my heaven?

Where the indubitable seal
That ascertains the kingdom mine,
The powerful stamp I long to feel,
The signature of love divine?
O shed it in my heart abroad -
Fullness of love, of heaven, of God!

(HP 291, I want the Spir't of power within)