

Set Your Mind on the Spirit or Life in the Spirit

Romans 8:6-11

Lent is traditionally a time for Christians to focus on the problem of sin and to engage in fasting and repentance in preparation for Easter. That is why the Gospel stories of the temptation of Jesus are lectionary readings for the First Sunday in Lent: there we see how Jesus faced temptation and persevered, and ask how we might persevere in our own times of trial. This Epistle lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent focuses on the obstacles to our doing God's will and the way that the Holy Spirit gracefully empowers us to please God.

Our scripture is from the second half of an argument that begins back in 7:5-6, where Paul described two alternative ways of living: "While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit." In 7:5 Paul showed what a life lived "in the flesh" looks like. It is life lived in service of one's own selfish interests and desires.

Paul argued that the power of sin perversely uses Torah against God's good purposes to further sin's own aims (7:9-13). Thus it comes about that even humans who try their best to obey Torah are unable to do so (7:14-25). In our scripture is the second half of the argument. Paul delivered the good news that Jesus Christ has set us free from our bondage to sin (8:1-2). Liberated, we no longer compulsively set our minds on the passions and

desires of the flesh. Rather, we live according to the Spirit and set our minds on the things of the Spirit (8:5; cf. 7:6).

Paul sketched out the consequences of these two ways of living. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (v. 6). To "set the mind on the flesh" means to live a life in which one routinely succumbs to the push and pull of *any* of the sinful passions and desires. These include anger and hatred, and a lust for wealth, prestige, power, or approval (see also Gal. 5:19-21). Life governed by such passions is life lived in obedience to sin, and it issues in death (see Rom. 6:23). Such persons cannot possibly please God, because their first allegiance is to their own passions and desires, which never incline to the purposes of God.

On the other hand, "to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (v. 6). The presence of the Spirit signifies the Christian's participation in Christ's victory over the powers of sin and death (vv. 2-4). This victory is not a simple and straightforward one. Yes, we are freed from sin and no longer obliged to obey its dictates, and yes, we enjoy a new way of life governed not by the works of the flesh but by the marvelous fruitfulness of the Spirit. Though Christ has already completely triumphed over death, we will not enjoy the effects of that triumph in our own bodies until after the end of "the present evil age" (Gal. 1:4).

I must confess that one of my issues of the flesh is my enjoyment of visiting resale shops. My Friday job is right down the street from a resale shop. It seems my car always turns in that direction – whether I need anything or not! I am afraid I will miss out on some wonderful buy!

I am not alone. We who are believers participate in two ages at once: the present age, in which our bodies are still subject to obsessions, suffering, death, and decay, and the age to come, ruled by the Spirit of life. Though we

still suffer and die, the full transition to the coming age is imminent (vv. 22-23), and those of us in whom the Spirit dwells wait for it with confidence. God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to our bodies through the Spirit, which dwells in us (v. 11). Then our mortal bodies—and indeed, all of creation—will be fully liberated from captivity to death and decay (vv. 19-23).

The news for Christians, as Paul saw it, is unequivocally good. Once we were slaves to sin and death, but now we are free and living in the Spirit of Life! **Susan R. Garrett**

This life "in the Spirit" is manifested in how we use our physical energies and our material resources, how we care for our neighbors and for our planet. When "the Spirit of God dwells in [us]" (v. 9), our lives, in all their concreteness and messiness, become expressions and instruments of God's grace and peace. We enjoy "the new life of the Spirit" (7:6) only because of our union with the crucified and risen Christ. Life in the Spirit is shared and common life together. The hallmark of the Life in the Spirit is the presence in our lives is love: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (5:5). The Spirit dwelling in the community binds believers to God and to each other in loving union. **Amy Plantinga Pauw**

For Paul—and for generations of Christians—the reception of God's grace is identical to the reception of God's Holy Spirit. God's Holy Breath gives hope for eternal life: "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" (v. 11). Recognizing that we have received the Holy Spirit grants the Christian hope for true and

satisfying life *now*. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is *life and peace*" (v. 6).

As I studied this passage I found this story called Valentines. I little boy named Chad asked his mom if he could make Valentine cards for all his classmates. Although she agreed she wished he would not. Chad was usually left out when his classmates played or walked home together from school. However, they made the Valentines and Chad was excited on the day he took the cards to school. His mom set out hot cookies and cold milk to cheer him when he arrived home. She thought he would come home disappointed and with few or no Valentines in return. As the children came home from school, as usual, Chad walked alone at the back of the group. However, Chad came into the house, walking a little faster than usual. He said "not one, not one, I didn't forget to give a card to anyone!"

I want to live in the Spirit and be more like Chad – more concerned about doing for others than thinking about "what's in it for me?" Maybe next time I visit a resale shop I will bring items that don't belong in my closet that may bless others!

Let us set our mind on the Spirit in a disciplined fashion so that we might know peace—true peace, the peace that passes all understanding? **Douglas Travis**

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