

*Preface to Scripture Reading:*

*Sarx and pneuma.* Flesh and Spirit.

All throughout Paul’s writings, and especially this 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, these two words keep repeating themselves and occurring again and again. We can’t understand what Paul is saying unless we understand the way in which Paul is using these words.

*Sarx- Flesh.*

- A. Literally, meaning bodily flesh. Namely Paul references circumcision.
- B. According to the flesh or looking at things from the human point of view.
- C. Living in the flesh. Flesh is a metaphor for the means through which sin is enacted. In reference to Christians, Paul talks of the days when we were in the flesh; those who walk according to the flesh in contradistinction to those who live the Christian life. What Paul means here is living according to the flesh. Flesh here means human nature in all its weakness, its importance, and its helplessness; human nature in its vulnerability to sin and to temptation. He means sinful human nature, apart from Christ and apart from God; everything that attaches a human to the world instead of to God. To live according to the flesh is live a worldly life, to live life dominated by the dictates and desires of sinful human nature instead of a life dominated by the dictates and the love of God.

*Sarx*, flesh, is the lower side of human nature. For Paul, the flesh is all that humanity is without God and without Christ.

*Pneuma- Spirit.*

- A. *Ruach*- Word for Spirit. Also, the word for wind. It has always the idea of power about it, power as of a mighty rushing wind.
- B. *Ruach* has the idea of something that is more than human, something that is not of man and not within the power of man. Spirit is a divine power.

When Paul became a Christian, into his life there was now a power that was not his power, and by this power he entered into victorious living instead of defeated existence.

This contrasting relationship between flesh and spirit came to life for Paul in the person of Jesus Christ. As Jesus came into this life, he came as a man in full humanity. Jesus lived as a man, yet Jesus was sinless. Actually, what we learn about Jesus is that he defeated sin, condemned sin, and through Jesus sin would be vanquished and conquered. Jesus brought to God (and us as inheritors) a life of perfect obedience, of perfect fulfillment of the law of God. Here is the ultimate equation Paul deducts. Because Jesus was fully a man, just as we are considered one with Adam (involved in Adam’s original sin), we can be now one with Jesus (involved in Jesus’ perfection). What we celebrate as Christians is that because of what Jesus did on the cross and in resurrection, there becomes a possibility for a life which is no longer dominated by the flesh, but by that Spirit of power, that Spirit of God, which fills a person’s life with a power not his/ her own.

Here we pick up in **Romans 8:5-11**. Paul is drawing a contrast between two kinds of life: one of the flesh and one of the Spirit.

*Sarx*, flesh, is a life dominated by sinful human nature; focused and centered on self; absorbed in things that fascinate sinful human nature; whose only law is its own desires; and takes what it likes where it likes. It may be passion-controlled, or lust-controlled, or pride-controlled, or ambition-controlled. When we are honest with ourselves (becomes sometimes we aren't), we all, in our humanity, tend to fall into this life "lived according to the flesh" to which Paul is referring.

*Pneuma*, Spirit, is a life dominated by the Spirit of God; the heart is the Spirit. As a person lives in the air, he/she lives in Christ, never separated from Him. As a person breathes in the air, and the air fills him/her, so Christ fills their lungs. A person's mind is not their own for Christ is his/her mind. A person's desires are not their own for the will of Christ is their only law. Spirit-controlled, Christ-controlled, God-focused. This life "lived according to the Spirit" to which Paul is referring, is available to us all as a way of overcoming and transforming our fleshly nature: through Christ, through the Spirit, our old life is gone, and our new life can begin.

What are we to make of this? Life "lived according to the flesh" and life "lived according to the spirit" work in diametrically different directions. Maybe you have felt the tug and pull at times. A life lived according to the flesh is on the way to death. There is no future in it. It is a life that moves further and further away from God. William Barclay writes, "To allow the things of the world completely to dominate life is self-extinction; it is spiritual suicide; it is, again in the most literal sense, soul destroying." However, the Spirit-controlled life, the Christ-centered life, the God-focused life is on the way to life. It is a life that daily comes nearer heaven even when it is still on earth. It is a life that daily becomes more Christlike, more one with Christ. What are we to glean from this? Spirit is life.

And when the Spirit is life, the meaning, and what many would say is the fear, of earthly death is transformed. All humans are involved in the human situation, and therefore all will die, but the person who is Spirit-controlled, and whose heart is Christ-occupied, dies only to rise again. William Barclay says, "A Spirit-filled life is on the way to life; death is but an inevitable interlude that has to be passed through on the way." Having received the gift of God's Spirit, we are challenged each day to decide whether we choose *pneuma*- Spirit- life or *sarx*- flesh- death. Choosing Spirit is to choose to live even in the face of earthly deaths.

I want to work now to unpack this a bit more.

I began today by suggesting that this text invites us to discern who we are and whose we are, and what that means we are called to give up, not only for lent but in our daily lives for our whole lives. One of the things the season of Lent invites us to do each year is enter a time of reflection upon the things on which our minds are set. Implied in this invitation is a recalling and a revival of our minds and hearts and lives to be Spirit-filled, Christ-centered, and God-focused.

One of the things I think Paul addresses is the manner in which our “mindset” impacts spiritual orientation. As Paul defines it, the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, cannot submit to God’s law, and cannot please God. Conversely, one whose mind is set on the Spirit is life and peace and is in the Spirit.

“The Christian life is a material life, therefore, setting our mind on the Spirit is not about an attempt to put our bodies to the side somehow and concentrate on the inner life of faith. Paul’s contrast between Spirit and flesh in this passage is not to be understood as a contrast between soul and body or between spirituality and sensuality. A life “in the Spirit” refers, among other things, to a way of conducting a bodily life: it 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”, our corporeal lives, in all their concreteness and messiness, becomes expressions and instruments of God’s grace and peace.” (Amy Plantinga Pauw, FOTW)

Like we might say about money or maybe even guns, the problem is not flesh itself but the misuse of flesh. The “self” matters, but as faithful children of God we believe one does not become one’s true self by limiting the focus of his/her universe to what the “self” can create, determine, and control. Rather one becomes one’s true self by turning his/her will and life over to the care of God. Choosing Spirit is to open the door for the Spirit of God to influence our earthly way of life to a more faithful revelation of God’s (Jesus’) will and way.

As we look to apply this to a particular concept today, I think the role of consumerism is one place we can look. For postmodern Americans enmeshed in a consumerist culture that encourages the satisfaction of every personal desire the denial of “self” can seem to be a challenging message and task. In an article “Church Shopping and Consumerism,” Becca Ehrlich offers some insights worth paying attention to.

She begins by referencing what she calls the “church du jour” or trendy church. “People are on fire about their congregation- until they aren’t. They then start going to a new congregation. The people who keep church hopping from one trendy church to the next are, in essence, church consumers. They see church as something to consume and once it no longer holds its luster, they lose interest and move on to consume somewhere else. They are serial church shopper consumers.”

“The practice of church shopping has perpetuated as a cycle of constantly rotating churches based on preferences and personal “needs” rather than settling into a congregation for the long haul, getting involved, and building relationships. To be clear, church shoppers are not those who move to a new town and are looking for a congregation to call home. Church shoppers are those (we know who they are) who are constantly looking for their perfect church and approach finding a church in the same way they approach finding a new pair of shoes or pants- looking around at all the

options, choosing one that fits their preferences, buying it, and then discarding it when it no longer suits.”

This is the real thing. I have talked with many people about this over the last decade or so. I will say that it is not only real, but also growing at an alarming rate. I will also add, I think it is slowly working to deteriorate the fabric of community and church relationships as God intended them to be. How so, you might be wondering?

The characteristics of church shoppers tend to be, as Ehrlich outlines,

1. Focus on Me. The focus on self has invaded church. The sermon not to our liking? Didn't sing our favorite song? Pastor/worship leader/ congregants not wearing what we think they should be? If worship is not “proper” in our eyes, isn't 100% what we want, we “shop” on. Or we complain tirelessly to leaders to make it what we want. There is a theory called the 75% rule and it suggests we should never like/be happy with more than 75% of what's going on in worship. Why? Because worship is not for you alone (about you alone). It is, but it is also about everyone else. It's for the person sitting next to you, and the person in the back who is there 2x a month, and the person who always sits in front, and even the person who isn't even here yet. Worship is about God, for God, and for everyone. If you happen to like 100%, the bonus is yours, but the goal of worship is not for everyone to be 100% happy.
2. Consumerism teaches us that things are expendable. We are encouraged to consume only as long as it suits us, and then discard it without a second thought. The minute something is not to our liking, or we just simply lose interest, we pull our tithes and offerings and leave. Congregations- which should be mission stations devoted to loving and serving God and others- have become consumable products that we can discard when we want. The church isn't a consumable product. It is a faith community built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.
3. Wants vs. Needs. Ads attempt to convince us that we NEED a product in order to get us to buy it. But 95% of the time, that product fills a WANT rather than an actual need. With church, we can confuse our needs with wants. Our actual spiritual needs are that the church is Jesus' beacon of light and hope, that the good news of God is proclaimed, and people gather together to worship, grow, love, and serve. Almost everything else is a want.

As followers of Christ, we are called to live out our faith in love and by focusing on what's most important. Our consumer culture has twisted our understanding of ourselves, expendability, and our needs. Jesus invites us to a different path found outlined in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

As we look ahead to our future, whether that is 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 days, or 5 years from now, our new horizon is not to be on the shoulders of flesh, but on the wings of the spirit. *Fear is not our future... Sickness is not our story... Heartbreak's not our home... Death is not our end, God is... so hello peace, hello joy, hello love... hello strength, hello hope, the Spirit is our new horizon.* ("Fear is not my future" by Maverick City Music)