

September 20

Lesson 3

Life in the Spirit

Focal Passage: Romans 8:1-11

Background Text: Same

Purpose Statement: To cultivate willingness to allow the Spirit to work in us, transforming our selfishness and enabling us to experience peace

Romans 8:1-11

¹So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³God has done what was impossible for the Law, since it was weak because of selfishness. God condemned sin in the body by sending his own Son to deal with sin in the same body as humans, who are controlled by sin. ⁴He did this so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us. Now the way we live is based on the Spirit, not based on selfishness. ⁵People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit. ⁶The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. ⁷So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't. ⁸People who are self-centered aren't able to please God.

⁹But you aren't self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, they don't belong to him. ¹⁰If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. ¹¹If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.

Key Verse: "The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace" (Romans 8:6).

What image comes to your mind when you hear the word *selfish*? Do you think of a child who refuses to share? Do you think of a greedy business leader who tries to crush the competition? Do you think of a man who objectifies women and thinks they exist only to satisfy his desires? Do you think of an adolescent girl who looks down on her fellow students because they don't hang out with the popular crowd? Do you think of rich corporations that don't pay their fair share of taxes? Do you think of people who never give a dime to church or charity?

Selfishness takes many forms and manifests in many ways. What lies at the heart of selfishness? Do selfish people consider themselves selfish? Would they explain their behavior in some other way? What consequences do selfish people face, if any? Do selfish people have trouble forming real relationships? Would they rather have what they have instead of real relationships?

What a long list of questions! The purpose for raising all of these particular questions is to encourage us to begin thinking about the term used in Romans 8:

selfishness. Paul's writing helps us think through selfishness and points us in new directions in our understanding of it so that we can allow God's Spirit to work in us, removing selfishness and replacing it with peace.

The Struggle Is Real

Paul's teachings in the first part of Romans 8 fall between what has happened on our behalf in the past and what awaits us in the future. Romans 7 has proven notoriously difficult to interpret. Here, Paul describes an internal struggle with temptation. This struggle involves knowing the right thing to do but lacking the ability to do it (Romans 7:15-20).

Those who have studied this passage don't know for sure whether Paul intended his words to describe a person before becoming a Christian, his own personal struggle, or the struggle of every Christian even after accepting God's grace. All three possibilities have merit. Most of us resonate with Paul's struggle, whatever he intended. We have felt the internal tension between wanting to do the right thing and failing to find the strength to do the right thing.

As some of the early-church teachers discovered, we feel this internal struggle, even when we have become Christians and joined the church. Paul emphasizes in the first part of Romans that Christ has done for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Paul talks about sin and the Law in the chapters leading up to Chapter 8. Paul considered sin a force in all of creation, which affects us on every level. God intended the Law, understood as the teachings of the Old Testament, to guide God's people in overcoming sin.

Because of sin's power, however, the Law only exposed our inability to break free from sin. As Paul puts it, "The commandment that was intended to give life brought death" (Romans 7:10). Christ's death and resurrection broke the power of

sin. We have peace and righteousness through the work of Christ (Romans 5:1). That is Christ's work that has already been accomplished.

When have you been aware of wanting to do the right thing but being unable to do it? To what did you attribute your inability?

New Creation Awaits

In front of us, in our future, God's new creation awaits us. In one of the most encouraging verses in Scripture, Paul declares, "I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). This verse has appeared on many posters, coffee mugs, and social media posts. It has inspired many sermons. It has brought comfort to countless Christians through the centuries.

Paul envisioned the new creation as the time when God defeats the powers of sin and death (verse 21). God will reconcile the whole world back to a relationship with God (2 Corinthians 5:19). We will experience God's transformation with spiritual bodies (1 Corinthians 15:44-58).

This admittedly lengthy explanation sets us up for what we read in this portion of Chapter 8. Behind us lies the work Christ has done to break the power of sin, restore us to relationship to God, and enable our salvation. Before us lies God's new creation, a future reality that has already changed the present. In this part of Romans 8, Paul teaches us how to live in this in-between time. How do we know what to do?

How does the future reality of God's new creation change the way you think and live in the here and now?

In the Meantime

Right at the opening verse, Romans 8:1, Paul assures us that we no longer stand under condemnation. We do not fear God's wrath, because Christ has inaugurated the new creation. Christ has set us free from the law of sin and death. The fullness of the new creation awaits us. Paul then answers the question of what we do in the meantime.

We might misinterpret Paul if we think that he had no use left for the Law. Christians understand the Law (Torah, teaching) of the Old Testament as God's instructions to the people of Israel on how to grow into their role as the chosen people.

Exodus refers to the people of Israel as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). As a kingdom of priests, they mediated God's presence to the rest of the world. The Law provides the instruction on how to do that.

The Ten Commandments come in Exodus 20, beginning the process of using the Law (teachings) to enable the people to live into their identity. The people of Israel never understood following the Law as earning their salvation. Instead, they considered the Law a gift that taught them how to become the people God called them to be (Psalm 19:7).

Christians see in the Law of the Old Testament guides for how to treat others. Leviticus 19, for example, contains the words that Jesus considered one of the two greatest commandments: "You must love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37-39). In the same chapter of Leviticus, we see teachings about honest business practices (Leviticus 19:36) and how to treat sojourners or immigrants (Leviticus 19:33-34). Paul considered the Law for Christians to be like a child's tutor (Galatians 3:24, where the CEB uses the word *custodian*).

So, Christians study the Law of the Old Testament, not following every word to the letter. We do not follow the food laws, for example. We study the Law for guidance, for teachings that help us think about the right way to live.

What laws from the Old Testament inform how you live?

The Way of the Spirit

For Paul, the Holy Spirit provides the real guide for ethical behavior and the means to sustain our faith as we wait for the new creation. In this part of Chapter 8, Paul puts emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us make decisions and lead ethical lives. The Holy Spirit helps us to recognize the right thing to do and gives us the moral strength to live up to what we know to do.

Paul contrasts two orientations that we can choose. We can base our lives on the way of selfishness or the way of the Spirit. The CEB translates Paul's term as "selfishness." Paul uses the term that we might translate as "flesh." In that way, Paul contrasts life in the Spirit with life in the flesh.

The NRSV translates Romans 8:5-8 as: "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. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

The CEB's use of *selfishness* has several advantages over *flesh*, however. We can misunderstand *flesh* to indicate only the sin of lust, indulging the desires of the flesh. Paul means much more than lust by this term. We can also misunderstand the use of *flesh* as suggesting that our bodies and the material world are bad, whereas our spirits are pure.

Plato taught a similar idea, which crept into Christian thinking through the centuries. Paul considered the material world and our bodies as part of God's creation. When Paul affirmed that we will receive a spiritual body, he affirmed that the new creation will transform all of who we are, including our bodies.

We can understand Paul's contrast between living in the Spirit and living in selfishness as the difference between living a life open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and a life turned in on the self. Paul understood the life of selfishness as giving in to the weak and rebellious nature to which we are susceptible. All of the foibles of human nature come under Paul's umbrella term *flesh/selfishness*.

Elsewhere, Paul gives a comprehensive explanation of life lived by selfishness. Galatians 5:19-21 contains a long list of the behaviors and attitudes that derive from a life turned inward in selfishness. Starting in verse 22, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, a familiar passage.

Paul considered a life lived in selfishness as a life turned toward the old creation, trapped in the power of sin. Because of what Christ has done for us, we have left that world behind. Paul knew that the old creation, even though Christ has broken its power, still tempts us. Paul calls us to embrace the new creation, which has begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:11). We embrace the new creation by allowing the Holy Spirit to work inside us, bringing out the fruit, and teaching us the ethical way to live.

What examples can you name of selfish behavior that arises from a person's weakness?

At Work in Us

We might recognize the promise and the pitfalls of these teachings about how to live an ethical life. We can affirm that we can more likely make good choices if we become better people. If we allow the Spirit to create love, joy, peace, and especially self-control in us, we can more easily see the right path. Many of our bad choices come from feeling hurt, bitter, or fearful.

If the Spirit changes us from within, we can find the resources to treat others more fairly and justly. If we feel grateful for what we have, we may more likely

show generosity. If we feel at peace, we more likely will not act in jealousy. We can see Paul's wisdom in telling us that ethics begin with following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We also know that we are sometimes reluctant to let go of our selfishness, even with the promise of the peace and joy of the fruit of the Spirit.

But we can see that relying on the Holy Spirit's guidance may still leave us not knowing what to do. If we have an important decision to make, we may long for the guidance of the Holy Spirit but wonder how we will experience that guidance. When I served as a pastor, people frequently sought out my help talking through a tough decision. They honestly didn't know what God wanted them to do in a particular situation. They hoped to find the way to discern God's will for their decision.

Sometimes when we face moral quandaries and ethical decisions, we may not clearly hear the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We know as well that we often have trouble distinguishing between our own voice and the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Christians today take different sides on important social and ethical issues. In some cases, neither side wants to listen to the other. Both might claim the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The other side cannot see it that way. We have to acknowledge that, even though we gratefully receive the guidance of the Spirit, and that the fruit of the Spirit enables us to grow into people who can act more ethically, we cannot easily solve all of the problems we face in ethics.

But even though we acknowledge that relying on the Holy Spirit does not solve all of our ethical dilemmas, we affirm with Paul that the Holy Spirit works inside us. The prophets also spoke of how God worked within us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Ezekiel assured the people that God "will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you" (Ezekiel 36:26). God's work within us, through the Holy Spirit, enables us to grow, to mature, to develop the fruit of the Spirit. This work of the

Spirit sustains us as we await God's new creation and teaches us how to live.

How do you understand the promise that the Holy Spirit sustains us as we await God's new creation? How have you experienced spiritual growth as the result of God doing for you what you could not do for yourself?

We thank you, O God, for the promise of the new creation. We rejoice that the glory of the new creation will transcend our suffering now. Help us to rely on the Holy Spirit to grow during these in between times; in the name of Jesus. Amen.