

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Live According to the Spirit”
By Eric Howell
Romans 8:12-17
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A more stark distinction could not be drawn:

“Live according to the flesh, you will die.

By the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body—you will live.”

When the Bible uses the word Spirit, it is usually thinking positively. The Spirit, especially in passages like this one from Romans, is referring to the third person of the Trinity, the same Spirit that intercedes in our prayers, that came on Pentecost, that Jesus promised, and that theologians later would describe as the Giver of Life (Nicea). So things of the Spirit are good things—the way things are supposed to be. People experience the Spirit differently for sure—for some it’s very emotional and effecting, for others, it’s peace deep within. But the presence of the Spirit is the presence of God, of goodness, of the way you were made to be.

Conversely, when the Bible uses the word flesh and other words like it: body, this life, and so forth, it usually is thinking negatively. Those things represent what’s bad. It’s not that living is bad or that somehow we are supposed to not be living humans who have flesh. Remember, Jesus took on flesh and dwelt among us. But it goes to show how significant his incarnation was. Because ‘flesh’ stands for our sinful nature. To live according to the flesh is to live in such a way that you serve the impulses, desires, motivations, and hungers of sinfulness. So to live according to the flesh is not just to eat and sleep and walk and talk—physical things. Those things aren’t considered bad in and of themselves. What’s bad is when something good is turned from the way God intended it.

It’s when love is reduced to lust. It’s how stewardship becomes stinginess. It’s how eating and drinking become gluttony and drunkenness. It’s how self-protection becomes pre-emptive strikes. It’s how rest becomes sloth and how desire becomes anger. How hard work becomes greed. Those are the ‘deeds’ of the body that we read about here in Romans. Things that are good and of God twisted into things that are not good and not of God.

You see? The ‘flesh’ is the word for the fallen human nature, which is when something good is twisted. That’s the flesh. According to scripture, if your life is characterized by the flesh—in service to things that are twisted, you will die. If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. I think this means spiritual death and life.

Die. Live. The stakes could not be higher. This is life and death stuff. This is salvation and damnation stuff. There are many sharp-edged lines in the Bible that cut like this.

“Choose you this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

“You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24).

“God’s ways are not our ways. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8).

“The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Throughout the Bible, we read passages like this and we get the message: There is a choice between two paths and each of us has to choose God’s way or the world’s way. Life or death.

In one sense it seems that the choice has already been made if you are a Christian. Romans 8:9, just a bit before our reading this morning says, “You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit dwells in you.” So this makes it sound like it’s a done deal for Christians. That once you walk the aisle to become a Christian . . . well, we don’t actually ‘walk the aisle here.’ But I bet a lot of you have walked the aisle somewhere. Here, when you become a Christian, we ask you to meet and pray with the pastor, then to stand up at the end of a service, and we introduce you as someone who has received Jesus Christ into your life, that you believe in Jesus as the Son of God by whom you are saved, and you are committing yourself to follow Him. Then, sometime later, we baptize you into the life of the church out in the cow trough.

And this passage sounds like once you have done all that—accepted Jesus Christ as the Son of God, walked the aisle or stood up, been baptized in front of all those people—that any struggles are over. It’s a done deal. That there’s us and them and the line between church and world is the line between good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, holiness, and sin, Spirit and flesh.

I wish that were so. I wish that when I made it known that I wanted to be a Christian when I was a kid, that everything else was Spirit from that point forward. I wish that from then on I didn’t struggle with twisting good things into bad things. And then calling them good because I liked the twisted things. But I have. I wish I were so attuned to the Spirit that I always had a clear sense of God’s guidance and direction in difficult decisions. But I haven’t. I wish I had immediately been catapulted to what the monastics called the wordless state of mystical union with God, but I wasn’t.

I wish I could say today that I am fully ready to vulnerably live in *koinonia*-like communal relationships with other Christians, but I have areas of my life I don’t really want to share with anyone, and I have an attachment to my things that I don’t want threatened. And I don’t really want to be accountable to anyone and have someone else nosing around in my spiritual life, that I selfishly call private.

I wish I could say today that I am fully ready to embrace the life of disciple and discipleship, of *ascesis*—training in faith. That I want to practice the spiritual disciplines

every day. And that when I do practice them, that each and every time I have a moving spiritual experience. Man, I love fasting. You'll never hear me say that.

I wish I could say that I am ready to pour my life out into other people without a thought for myself. I wish I could say that I am pouring my life out like Jesus did. An emptying, a *kenosis*, of humbling myself and lowering myself to serve people, and to accept whatever comes, even to great sacrifice.

I wish I could say that I am fully experiencing *theosis*—becoming like God by grace. Don't know that I am.

What I do know is this. I need your help and I'm not alone in that. We need a community to help us remember what is good and to name what is twisted—out there and in here. We need the ancient spiritual disciplines to form us and give shape to our lives, to be a training ground where we are made more than who we think we are. We need places in life where we give everything we have. Without places like that, how can we say we really know anything of Christ who suffered and was crucified?

What we experience, I think, is that the boundaries between the realm of the Spirit and the realm of the flesh do not run simply and clearly between the believers on one side and the nonbelievers on the other, but go right through the believers, through each individual believer (Kuss). The line between church and world goes through each of us.

The flesh side of us is strong. We know it well. It's the world we live in, the air we breathe. And frankly, it's easier. It's just easier to go along and give in and not fight it or question it. And in this you have plenty of allies. Most everything that is readily evident in our culture is there to satisfy the flesh side of things. Taken together, it's a powerful force. And it makes it hard to imagine an alternative. Kenneson in *Life On the Vine* imagines what it would be in community to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, asking, "Why does the church in this time and place seem to have such difficulty forming disciples who embody in their daily lives the distinctiveness of the Spirit?" (17). Acknowledging this important question has no simple answers; he thinks through how we might cultivate love amidst capitalism and cultivate goodness in the midst of self-help, cultivate self-control in the midst of addiction, and cultivate gentleness in the midst of aggression. He's right to put it this way. The fruit of the Spirit won't come naturally or spring up without effort. They must be cultivated in a world that is pretty rocky soil.

Amidst the challenges of answering these questions in our daily lives, Kenneson names the key for us, "Christians desire to be faithful to their calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. As a result, their loyalty and allegiance is first of all to Christ, a commitment that makes relative all other loyalties and allegiances" (23).

You belong to the Spirit not the flesh. That's what happened when you became a Christian. God changed your identity. God adopted you. And that's why the flesh, the world, sinfulness, whatever you want to call it, is so nasty and plays dirty. It knows it's losing. And I know it doesn't always feel like that. Sometimes it feels like it can't help but win. It's got the momentum, it's got hold of you. But that's a lie. It doesn't. It doesn't have hold of you. Not the you that's really you. The authentic you. Oh, it may have hold of what we sometimes call your false self, what Paul might call your flesh. But

that's not the true you. That's not who you are. Who you are is a child of God adopted by your Abba, to an inheritance of abundant and eternal life.

In Christ, by the Spirit, God has adopted you into His family and as His child. Your identity has been changed. Whatever life throws your way, whatever challenges there are, whatever detours you've taken down the path, when you've been adopted into God's family, He doesn't let you go.

In this, perhaps our deepest challenge is to not reduce the Christian life to just living morally or doing the right things. When Christianity becomes simply following the rules, you've missed the essence of the otherness of God's ways and the significance of your adoption. There can be little sensitivity to the Spirit without obedience to God's laws, but the law is just the starting point; it's the helper to create space in our lives for the Spirit to move.

To live according to the Spirit is to be in tune with the life of the universe, that mysterious brush of wind that Jesus says you don't know where it's coming from or where it's going, but you can feel it when it's on you. That same Spirit that calmed the chaos of the waters of creation and brings order to disordered lives.

That same Spirit that at Pentecost enabled people from all over to understand each other and brings reconciliation between bitter enemies and erases old resentments.

That same Spirit that gives gifts both expected and strange and makes a bunch of individuals into the body of Christ.

To live according to the Spirit is to have the deep, true parts of you in tune with and responsive to the breath of God. People who live by the Spirit are those whose posture toward both God and the world is an open palm instead of a clenched fist. They have an intuition that in any conversation and relationship there's three people: you, me, and God. And they seem to know just when to call, just how to pray, just how to love. And they smile easily, even in the face of great pain. Their lives just seem to be ordered by a different set of priorities, a strange logic, an alternative call. Someone might say they march to the beat of a different drummer. But the drummer really isn't different. The beat is the heartbeat of the universe from the very beginning of time. It is the rhythm of the waves crashing on the shore and the leaves rustling in the highest trees, the cricket's song at night and the flash of fireflies as they rise after dusk. It is the heartbeat that sees the broken travelers as a neighbor and an opponent as a child of God. It's a way of life as different from the 'flesh' as life is from death.

Most of us struggle on to be more like Christ and live more in the Spirit than the day before or the year before. And sometimes we can look back and see how far we've come, how much we've changed. For most of us, getting there takes a lot of repentance and starting over and suffering on the way. But you are on your way. By grace, you are becoming who God created you to be.

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