

“Flesh and Spirit”

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⁵ 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. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Romans 8: 5-11)

Through the ages, there have been all kinds of “-isms” that distinguish between the material world and the spiritual world: Platonism; Cartesian Dualism; Stoicism; Gnosticism; Cynicism. In most cases, they hold that spiritual reality – however that might be defined -- is good, while physical matter, or the physical body, is evil.¹

In his writings to the various congregations that he planted and served, Paul spent a good deal of time resisting this simple dualism. As always, his resistance was rooted in the pattern of Christ. As the bodily incarnation of God, as the Word who took on flesh and dwelt among us, as Emmanuel who is truly “God With Us,” body and spirit were always woven together in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ – fully God, fully human – could never be divided into two distinct parts. Accordingly, Paul’s teaching always prioritized body and spirit. As he wrote to the Corinthians, “[D]o you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”² As human beings we are both flesh and spirit. We are both body and soul. And these two sides of us are so deeply connected in our being that they can never be truly separated.

However, that perspective seems to be challenged here, as Paul is clearly building a wall between a life lived “according to the flesh” and a life lived “according to the spirit.” The first is bad. The second is good. But I do not see this as a contradiction. I see this more as a rhetorical strategy, a teaching device. Paul is not trying to teach a lesson on metaphysical reality; he is advocating for an ethical choice. He is not a scientist trying to teach physics, nor is he a PhD at Oxford trying to explain philosophy. Here Paul is a preacher who is trying to explain to his congregations, as simply and as clearly as he can, that there are good ways to live and there are bad ways to live. This is a lesson is about the choices we make.

Or, to borrow the phrase that Paul repeatedly uses, he is talking about a “mindset.” What is our frame of mind? What is our basic perspective on life? “[T]o set the mind on the

¹ Barry Cooper, “Gnosticism,” <https://learn.ligonier.org/podcasts/simply-put/gnosticism>

² 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.



flesh is death,” Paul writes. “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

But there is another mindset, Paul continues, that is better in every way. “[T]o set the mind on the Spirit,” he says, “is life and peace.” If we have that mindset, we will make better choices – the kinds of choices that lead not to pain, brokenness, and emptiness, but rather to joy, love, and spiritual abundance.

I love the way that the 20th Century New Testament scholar William Barclay interpreted these two contrasting mindsets. On the one hand, he said, “[t]here is the life which is dominated by sinful human nature; whose focus and centre is self; whose only law is its own desires; which takes what it likes when it likes.” Such people, he said, “are absorbed in worldly human things.”³ Paul’s shorthand for this mindset is “life in the flesh.”

But Barclay’s soaring language for the better path is “life in the air.” “As men and women live in the air,” he writes, “they live in Christ, never separated from him. As they breathe in the air and the air fills them, so Christ fills them. They have no mind of their own; Christ is their mind. They have no desires of their own; the will of Christ is their only law. They are Spirit-controlled, Christ-controlled, God-focused.”

Now, let’s admit, this life in the air is rarefied air. If we are lucky, we might have a moment here and there where we feel like we rise to that spiritual height. Both of these mindsets – both life in the flesh and life in the air, are extremes. The truth is that we spend our time bouncing up and down between these two ideas. I picture our life as a small plane. We are the pilot, but we are not that experienced. The winds of life can get strong, and sometimes the weather gets bad. And our little engine is operable, but it’s not running smoothly. We are trying to get our planes up into that life in the air, but from time to time we sputter out and fall back down to the dirt. As Jesus himself said, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”⁴ So we have moments of soaring peace, but eventually we come back down to earth. And sometimes the landings are pretty bumpy.

And that’s OK, because that is life. It’s always a bit of a mixed bag for us. Our moments in the air are not that smooth. It’s not all good for us up there. But life in the flesh has its moments also. As I said at the outset, we do not believe that our bodies are inherently evil. There are parts of our lives in the flesh that are actually good, even beautiful. Savoring a fresh peach in summertime... that is a very good thing. Binging or overeating, or being wasteful with food when others are hungry... those are not good things. Stroking a dog gently on the head is kind and good and life-giving. That is why people bring dogs into hospitals; the simple love and gratitude of a dog it is great therapy. But kicking a dog, or neglecting its needs... those are awful choices. When Jesus was on the cross, offering him a cup of cool water would have been a great kindness. But offering him sour vinegar as a cruel joke brings a soaring possibility crashing down into the dirt.

We make choices almost constantly – choices that have both bodily and spiritual consequences. Some are big; some are small. But they all have consequences. And the only thing we can do is to try to make the best choices we can. That is why our mindset is so critical. That is why Paul wants to put it in the simplest terms possible. In each choice, are we setting our minds on our own selfish desires, on worldly things? Or are we setting our minds higher – toward a life in the breath of the Spirit, a life in the air?

³ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1975), p. 121-2.

⁴ Matthew 26:41.

Just over a year ago, when John Delfs was our featured speaker in the SEEKERS series, he told us a story that is foundational to the work of his non-profit, which promotes mental health and wellness through greater awareness of the ways that our brains can control our behavior. The story goes like this...

A wise old man was teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," the man told the little boy. "It is a fight between two wolves. The Bad Wolf is evil - he is angry, violent, envious, greedy, and arrogant. The Good Wolf is kind, compassionate, humble, thoughtful, and generous."

"The same fight is going on inside you, grandson. And inside of every other person on the face of this earth."

"Grandfather," the boy asks, "which wolf will win?"

"Simple," the old man said. "It is the one you feed."⁵

That is Native American wisdom, and it is also ancient Christian wisdom. Paul taught this very same lesson to his congregations. The Bad Wolf is absorbed in worldly things. Its life is in the flesh. But the Good Wolf strives higher... for life in the air... life in the Spirit. And we make choices – daily, hourly, even minute-by-minute. And how do we help ourselves to make good choices? We decide which wolf we want to feed. We train our minds to look for the good. We adopt a mindset that looks for light in the darkness. We transform ourselves by the renewing of our mind.

My favorite example of this teaching comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians. I love it because it is so simple, so obvious. "[W]hatever is true," Paul says, "whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [Think about] what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."⁶

For you, for me, which life will win? Life in the flesh? Or life in the Spirit? The answer is simple. The one we feed.

Amen.

⁵ <https://goodwolf.org/web/why-goodwolf/>

⁶ Philippians 4:8-9.