

Law or Spirit?

^{CEB} **Romans 8:1** So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³ God 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. ⁴ He 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. ⁵ People 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. ⁶ The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. ⁷ So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't. ⁸ People who are self-centered aren't able to please God. ⁹ But 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. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. ¹¹ If 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.

Law or Spirit?

No condemnation for those who are in Christ? Set free from the law? Wow! Does this mean we can do whatever we'd like to do and there's no risk of judgment or guilt? Paul writes about "flesh" and "Spirit." Isn't this a good example of how our bodies are weak and sinful and we should strive to be good by being spiritual?

One of our legacies from Greek and Roman philosophy is the idea that we are made up of two distinct and opposite parts: our body, which is base and sinful, and our spirit which can aspire to lofty and pure thoughts that we must use to control and contain the evil urges and appetites of our body. This dualistic concept of sinful body and lofty spirit isn't Biblical at all, but it permeates our thinking and our assumptions when we read scripture. This passage isn't about two parts of human nature. It's about two ways of living. Paul doesn't use the word for bodies here. Instead, he uses the term flesh. It isn't our bodies that are the problem, but whom or what our bodies serve.

When we live according to the flesh, we're focused on ourselves. We worship things that we think will serve us and make us look good, things like money, financial security, youth, good looks, health, work, busyness, technology, and independence. Pick up a magazine and pay attention to the ads. Turn on the TV and watch what the ads tell you is important. As you cruise the internet, watch what is popping up in the right hand column of Facebook. So much of it is about you: how you can look younger, have fun, be the envy of your friends because of your car, weed-less lawn, or super smart phone, how you can win the lottery, be free of indigestion or other discomforts, and make faster stock trades. We are completely immersed, we are swamped, we are buried in a culture that constantly tells us that all of life is about each of us as an individual. We are repeatedly told to be focused on our digestion, our future, our house, our car, and our pleasure. We are indoctrinated in self-idolatry. We are brain washed to believe it's all about us! Taking care of our self is important, but we leave self-care far behind and fall headlong into self-indulgence. We give no thought to the blessings of aptitude, skill, and intelligence given each of us by God, and we imagine that we are self-made people.

Self-idolatry plays out in other ways. Jesus spoke about this in the Sermon on the Mount. ^{CEB} **Matthew 6:1** "Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their

attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” Jesus is saying that our motivation is important. If our actions, no matter pious or generous are done to get praise and admiration from other people, if we fast and do spiritual things so that we can congratulate ourselves about how righteous we are, then we have already received the reward that was our motivation. Piety for the purpose of feeling holy and self-righteous -- and giving for the sake of glory and recognition -- are all about self-indulgence and self promotion.

Paul speaks of the law as weak and refers to it as the law of sin and death. The law he is referring to is the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments which the Law of Moses interprets. But Paul's criticism is not of the law. He's not throwing it away or saying that it is cancelled. The problem with the law is us. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Don't even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven't come to do away with them but to fulfill them." (^{CEB} Matthew 5:17) Fulfilling the law doesn't mean canceling the law, but neither does it mean blind obedience to the law.

Let's consider an example. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy is one of the Ten Commandments. It's to be a day of rest. How do we obey that commandment? What is work? What is rest? And, what about the fact that we worship on Sunday instead of Saturday? We respond to these questions by coming up with interpretive regulations. As part of our resting, we might go out to eat for Sunday lunch. But we're expecting the cook and the waiter to work to put our meal on the table. The more we try to make sure that we're being obedient, the more detailed regulations and interpretations are needed. Our focus becomes exact detailed adherence to the law in order that we might be pure and worthy. Strict obedience becomes seen as the route to God's approval and salvation. Our strict observance is our perfection and worthiness. We are earning our salvation and it's all about our piety, our perfection, our worthiness our pride. We slide right into pride and thinking that we are self-made, and that we deserve recognition from those around us and from God.

The disciples were criticized for picking grain to eat on the Sabbath, that is, they were working, Jesus replied, "The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren't created for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27 CEB) The Sabbath is to serve our need for rest, reflection, and worship. We weren't created to be slaves to Sabbath regulations.

The pitfall that we can fall into is thinking that the law is the goal, that blind observance is the point and that it makes us righteous. We focus on ourselves, our observance of all the rules. In our pride and self-centered devotion, we lose sight of God. This is living according to the flesh, not the Spirit.

Jesus lived a life filled with God's Spirit. His attention was turned toward other people. If they were hungry, he fed them. If they were sick, he healed them. If they were grieving, he comforted them. If they were misguided or unknowing, he taught them. Jesus brought joy to other people's lives. He was known for his constant goodness and kindness. He was so patient with his disciples, teaching them again and again the life of love and peace and he did so with gentleness. When we imitate Christ by living in the way that he did, we call it "living in Christ." Paul would later write to the church in Galatia and tell them, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this." (Gal 5:22-23 CEB) There is no condemnation for living in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

In today's text Paul speaks of living in the flesh as contrasted with living in the Spirit. Living in the flesh is very much about being self-centered and it can influence us to move from being guided by the law to being legalistic. What do I have to do? Tell me exactly what I must

do and then I will do no more and no less. Don't talk to me about compassion or generosity. Just tell me what percentage I have to give.

How often have you heard about how some company has sold bad products, polluted the air, or consumers have been injured by the products that the company made. Almost immediately, the company will issue a statement declaring that they are in compliance with all laws and regulations. We didn't do anything illegal, they say. But being legal is not the same thing as being ethical. Obeying the law is focused inward; being ethical is focused on the consumer and the community. Saying "I did nothing illegal" is not the same as saying "I did nothing wrong."

When we live in the flesh, the earth is a place to be conquered, controlled, used for our comfort and wealth. The earth is a commodity. If we live with Christ's Spirit in us, the earth is a place to be lived with, loved, cared for, shared, and celebrated. One way of living is selfish and, to use Martin Luther's expression, curved inward. The other way of living is compassionate and focused outward.

Some people will search the Bible looking for rules and instructions. But we are urged to find inspiration, to welcome into our hearts the same Spirit that filled Jesus so that our actions are not controlled by rules, but are inspired by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." There is no condemnation in these things. Amen.

Sisters and brothers;
Turn your attention outward.
Don't expect legalism to transform you.
Follow Jesus, living a life filled with love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self control.
There is no condemnation in these things.