

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Falling into Place - July 12, 2020

Romans 8:1-11

Last week, I spoke of the need for us to rest. The very twisted way we are living nowadays has forced most of us to make substantial changes in how we work, play, and just live our lives. Some have found that we have more time — a lot more free time — than before. Others, who are now working from home, are finding it hard to separate the boundaries between work life and the rest of life simply because our computers and phones are close at hand. Because of text messaging, we can be interrupted at any time and inside of many of us is a little voice telling us to respond immediately instead of waiting for the next day.

At the same time, we can find ourselves caught up in a never ending list of projects, whether work-related or personal, because part of us feels compelled to stay busy all the time doing something — anything.

Now I expect our current meshing of work and personal lives is not entirely a bad thing. We've probably gotten caught up somewhat on our domestic to-do lists, painting, cleaning, organizing, tossing out clothes or having a garage sale.

Nevertheless the compulsion to always keep moving can be driven by an inner voice nagging us that whatever we do, whether at home or work — it's never enough. If we're not careful, we can guilt ourselves into nonstop busyness that can make our lives prior to this Covid stuff seem almost calm by comparison. The question to be asked is what is that voice that drives us on the inside to do what we do?

I've been preaching from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans a few times recently. Paul is the great theologian of the early Christian church. In most of his letters, he is trying to take the gospel stories of Jesus' life and teachings and show us how following Jesus is just not about changing how we live outwardly, but how our faith transforms us inwardly — affecting and transforming our very spirits.

Human beings of all religions and for thousands of years have believed that what makes us human is not just our physical bodies, but something called our spirits. Our bodies, of course, can be identified as a collection of individual pieces which are visible, each having a distinct purpose. We know what arms do. We know what lungs do.

What does a spirit do?

I mean, our spirits do not reside in a certain place in our bodies like our hearts or toenails. Some researchers claim that there is a special spot in our brains that contains our spirit. I suppose if that

was true, we could explain the actions of certain individuals by claiming that part of the brain was missing. But I digress.

The point is not whether our spirits reside in a specific place within us or permeate every cell within our bodies, human beings have recognized that there must be another dimension to our living and being beyond our physical bodies. In other words, we human beings have a physical existence but we also have a spiritual existence both of which are united and inseparable. While, as Paul puts it, we are children “of the flesh” — that is our physical bodies, we are at the same time children “of the spirit” — inextricably united with God.

Having faith in Jesus Christ, is therefore the process of acknowledging that God’s spirit is part of us and the act of living life is increasingly conforming ourselves to the will of spirit. Therefore sin is whenever we reject the spirit living within us in favor of our own ideas and desires. Our struggle continues every day of our lives because none of us can perfectly follow how the spirit is moving and guiding and teaching us all the time. We constantly have to make choices between God’s way as revealed in the spirit that dwells totally within us or our own way, which dwells only inside our heads.

Now all this spirit talk may seem theoretical and not having much to do with day to day living. But isn’t Paul’s teaching about the battle between flesh — that is our personal desires — and spirit — that is, God’s desires for us — what life and living is all about?

To follow Jesus Christ means that we see every act, every thought we as being intertwined in our relationship with God. No question, much or even most of what we do is more or less in accordance with God’s will. We have to eat, we have to sleep, we have to work. We have relationships with others, families to relate to, and a wider world that we are part of. However, from a Christian perspective, everything we do in life, I mean everything, every thought, every word, every action is the result of our blending our personal desires with God’s desires. Having faith in God means that we acknowledge not just that there is a being “out there” who made the world but that the very same being who made the world lives inside of us and is always with us and never, ever leaves us.

Does that make sense? What this church stuff is about, at its core, is to make us aware of and help us build our permanent relationship with God to enable us to see that in Jesus Christ we have the perfect example of how to live our lives.

I hope most of you have had a chance to see our sign project in person, by walking by it or driving past it. I am very proud of what we are doing and hope to see every inch of our fences covered in signs. Now ours is certainly not the only fence to have signs on it. We in fact took our inspiration from the fence surrounding Lafayette Park in Washington, DC right in front of the White House. Once the

fence went up, many people used it to attach signs of all kinds, positive and negative, related not just to the Black Lives Matter movement, but any and every issue affecting our nation.

Some of the signs on the Lafayette Park fence are exactly the same as the ones on our fence.

But unlike the Lafayette Park fence, our fence is made with a spiritual purpose. Every sign on the fence must have a scriptural basis before we can put it up. Every sign, in other words, is tied to the Bible.

Now some have asked if they can put up controversial signs, signs that might upset some people. Friends, the Bible is a controversial book. The scriptures speak God's Word and God's will to human beings who are not always interested in doing what God wants. Of course there is going to be controversy! As Paul writes in today's scripture, there is Flesh and there is Spirit and we are constantly living our lives between obeying our flesh or obeying God's spirit and, even for people of faith, never following either 100%. Yes, people with faith strive to follow God's spirit, because they are aware of its existence inside them. People without faith have also God's spirit inside of them but ignore it. If they happen to do God's will, it is merely coincidence.

So our fence project has plenty of signs — signs that by themselves may truly reflect God's will and guidance for us. However, it is tying each sign to scripture which unites our human act of making a sign with God's purpose for humanity.

That is what the church can do for humanity. It is something that no other organization can do. We are here to link our human desires of the flesh with God's desires of the spirit and help us figure out which is which and what to choose.

No other organization, no matter how well intended, can do quite the same thing the church can do and that is what is missing from both our national and our personal dialogue.

There are many wonderful nonprofit organizations out there representing every cause, every interest, every need. Health, environment, equal justice, fair housing, education. They are all out in the world doing wonderful work. No question, they are helpful and certainly make a difference to millions and millions of people, each in its own way.

But what is missing from them is the why. Why do Black Lives Matter? Why should everyone have clean air to breathe and clean water to drink? Why should everyone have access to essential health care and adequate education and safe housing and so many other things? Just because it's nice? So what!

Friends what is seldom mentioned nowadays is that the rationale for all social activism and social justice is that first, last and always, God is at the heart of it all. Every pro-human cause out there, every group, every action should be firmly anchored in scripture; firmly anchored in God.

When we see the world through the eyes of the spirit living within us — when we accept that the spirit is really there — we realize that Black Lives Matter not just because they should, or it's nice, but because our God created all human beings to be equal and our God stands up for the oppressed and our God tears down everyone who makes themselves superior to others.

We have a sign that says Love is Love. Well, what does that mean? On what basis can we claim that human beings are created to love each other? Over the centuries, we have done a spectacular job of preventing certain human beings from being able to love other human beings on the basis of gender, nationality, race, religion, wealth, and so many other things. Clearly for many people Love is not Love. But the scripture says differently. God says differently. The Bible is full of verses telling us that God is love and that everything God does is rooted in love and that greatest thing we can do for each other is love each other. Period.

Here, friends, is where it all falls into place. Here is where we unite our human actions with God's spirit living within us. God's will for humanity, as revealed in the Bible, as incorporated into the spirit living within us, is foundational to telling us how we should live and why we should live that way.

Right now, we are living at a time of great activism and hearing cries for justice in ways not experienced in a long time. And that is very good. However, if we forget the ultimate source of our activism and our justice, these efforts will fail. They will fail because they only address the outside issues, the things we experience with our senses. But at the end of the day, they are still merely external.

No, it is a spiritual, scriptural, God-rooted foundation that will insure these movements succeed. Jesus reminds us that a house built on sand will quickly collapse, while a house built on a rock will endure. The spirit living inside us is our rock because it's not just us or our feelings or opinions — no matter how good they seem to be. No, the spirit inside us gives us access to the mind of God and the will of God and the power of God, uniting us with every believer in every time and every place living all over the world.

Once we are equipped with and can actively embrace God's presence in our inmost being, we cannot fail because we will be doing God's will. The desires of our flesh will fade away and we will place ourselves in God's hands, trusting, experiencing, and loving — and acting as we must.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.