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Mindset

Romans 8:5-11

In case you are visiting, I'm Mark Toone and I'm the Senior Pastor of this church. Once in a while I pretend that I'm in charge of what goes on around here. Then there are moments, like two Thursdays ago, when I remember who is *really* in charge. Who is that? I know "God" would seem like the right answer, but I was going for Cyndi, my wife. She called my assistant Kathy and said, and I quote, "I'm making an executive decision here. Mark is *not* going to presbytery. Mark is *not* going to be preaching. He is sick and you need to find someone else to fill in for him.

So, Pastor Megan filled in for me at presbytery, and Pastor Ellis preached and taught our membership class...and once again, our church was reminded what a wonderful team of leaders we have. So, thanks everyone for stepping up!

I had the privilege of meeting with some of our new members this last week. One couple shared this with me. "The thing we love about Chapel Hill is that we sense the Spirit of God moving throughout the church. This is such a relief; we are coming out of a place where it felt spiritually dead." I told them, "You could not offer a more meaningful compliment. Whatever else we are...whatever else we offer...if this is not first of all a place where the Spirit of God is alive and well, nothing else matters."

When we turn to Romans 8, we find ourselves in a little Holy Spirit oasis. Paul has spoken about the Holy Spirit before; he will do so again. But here in 8, the Spirit appears 21 times...more than any other chapter in the New Testament. We've been dealing with a lot of deep doctrines: justification, sin, law, propitiation...and in a few weeks, we will tackle election and predestination. But for this moment, we get to luxuriate in the Spirit. What does it mean to live in the Spirit of Christ? What are the benefits? Last week we heard the first benefit: Freedom from sin! "There is therefore now *no* condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." How wonderful is that promise? No judgment. No guilt. No shame.

And Paul's just getting started. But as we will see today, the work of the Spirit does not go unopposed. The Spirit has an enemy. See if you can figure out who that enemy is as I read this passage. There will be a test afterwards.

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. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 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.

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. But if Christ is in you, although 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 Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Did you hear how often the Spirit appears in this passage? But the Spirit has opposition, right? What? The Flesh. Paul uses that word 13 times. The word in Greek is "sarx." From it we derive an English word: sarcophagus. Which means "flesh box." The container where a dead body is placed.

Paul uses flesh in opposition to Spirit. Flesh is bad. Spirit is good. Flesh is death. Spirit is life. It is easy to think of these as competing spiritual instincts. Our "good" side and our "bad" side.

This is how some understand this passage. "Spirit" is like the angel on one shoulder, whispering the good things that we should do. "Flesh" is like the devil on the other shoulder, whispering the naughty things he wants us to do. And we are trapped in a tug of war between competing forces. Sometimes the flesh wins. Sometimes the Spirit wins. Does that make sense? Well...it's entirely wrong! There's another image that would offer a starker and truer picture of what Paul is talking about.

A couple months ago we signed up for a 30-day trial of Amazon Prime mostly because it would mean that we could binge-watch a very provocative TV series called "The Man in the High Castle." The premise is simple: The allies *lost* World War II. The Nazis dropped an A-bomb on Washington, DC, America surrendered and the nation was divided in two. The west coast became part of the Japanese Empire and the East coast became part of the Third Reich. Everywhere you look, the swastika is present. For me the most disturbing image was this one: the American flag with the Nazi emblem replacing the stars.

I of course did not live through World War II, but I was surprised at how disturbing I found it to see the swastika so prominently displayed and to imagine how horrific it would have been if the Nazis had won that war. For example, in the show community "health" vans pick up children with genetic disorders. They are taken away to be "humanely" exterminated so that they will not be a burden upon society and so their "faulty" genetic material will be expunged.

It was ghastly. It ought to be. The Nazi flag stood for pure evil. The Third Reich was a kingdom built in opposition to all that was holy and good and righteous. There was no dabbling in both. Either you were a part of the Reich...or you were in opposition.

That disturbing and visceral image is precisely what Paul calls forth in this language. Spirit and flesh are not two competing aspects of our personality...our better and lesser selves. Spirit and flesh represent two competing kingdoms. The "flesh" is human nature in rebellion against God. It's Paul's way of summarizing all he has been saying about our sinful nature and our fruitless attempts to earn God's favor by our good behavior. To put it crassly, good works is like spraying deodorizer on a turd. No matter how you try to disguise it...underneath, it is what it is. If we are in the flesh...we belong to a kingdom that is in opposition to God and no amount of perfume is going to cover the stink.

But great good news comes in verse 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."

This was good news for Paul's readers 2000 years ago. It still is. If you belong to Jesus Christ...if you have confessed your need for him and submitted your life to his saving Lordship...then the incredible promise is that the very Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you! I realize that different denominations have different emphases on the Holy Spirit. Presbyterians tend to be a little stiff. Pentecostals are wild and crazy. May I just say: I hope that we are Pentecostal Presbyterians! If Pentecost means the coming of the Holy Spirit, I *want* us to experience the fullness of life as God intends to offer it.

So...if we are Christian...if we follow Jesus...then we *do* have the Spirit within us. And yet, Paul goes on to talk about how that righteous, life-giving Spirit has taken up residence in these mortal, sinful bodies. Even though we are saved...even though we belong to the kingdom of the Spirit and not the Flesh...we still *live* in these human bodies tainted with sin. So...trapped in these flesh boxes...how do we live life in the Spirit? How do we become more and more what we were created to be...what Christ has set us free to become?

Well, we have an incredibly powerful tool at our disposal. Did you notice? Our minds. Our mindset.

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. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God...

The way we think...the things we choose to focus on...have a greater power to shape our walk in the Spirit than any other single thing. Were you aware of that? Lots of preachers have taught this. Norman Vincent Peale-the power of positive thinking. Robert Schuller-possibility thinking. Joel Osteen-the power of positive affirmations. We might snicker and make fun...but there is truth behind this! Do you know how often the Bible speaks of our minds as being a tool for releasing the work of the Spirit in our lives? In Philippians 2, Paul says, "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus..." In other words, think like Jesus thinks! In Colossians 3:2 Paul says, "Set your mind on things above, not on things that are on earth." But my personal favorite comes in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, 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."

One of the best indicators of whether you are living life in the Spirit is the content of your thought life. What do you focus on? What do you worry about? What do you obsess about? What consumes your thoughts? What do you set your mind on?

When I lived in Bakersfield, I had a German Shepherd named Caleb. He was a funny dog. For one thing, Caleb *hated* the water spray. I had a high power nozzle on my hose and when I pulled the trigger, Caleb went crazy. If I aimed it at him, he would "eat" his way right up the stream of water. If I moved the spray around, he would chase it and *leap* into the air to try and catch that water stream. I don't know why...but he just despised that sprayer. So when we went outside, when he saw me reaching for it...everything else disappeared. I would pick up the nozzle...and he would stand there, dead still, completely focused on that spray gun in my hand. If I moved it...his attention followed. He was focused... ready...waiting... to attack that water stream.

This is what Paul means when he says to "set your minds." It is intense, unwavering, focus on something. Either the things of the flesh...or the things of the Spirit. And if we are in Christ...we are freed up to focus on the things that give us peace and life

I have spent my entire Christian life learning how to set my mind on the things of the Spirit. It does not come easily. I tend to be a worrier. I tend...God help me...to be a pessimist. I know...there is no excuse and no reason for a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus to worry and be pessimistic. But this is the Spiritual battle I have fought all my life. It's why I memorize scripture! I want to fill my mind with good things. It's why in my prayer life I will simply repeat the name of Jesus over and over again. I want to set my mind on him who is my savior and redeemer. It is why in my prayer life I will often *list* back to the Lord all the good things that he has done for me. It's not like I think he's forgotten. It's because I

forget... and need to remind myself of the faithfulness of God. I've had to train myself to set my mind on the things of the Spirit.

And the Spirit is making progress! When Rachel and Ellis were trapped in England, I worked hard to get them out. And I prayed a lot. But for a change, I did not despair. I didn't worry very much. From the beginning I chose to set my mind on the fact that God is God, that he is in charge, that no bureaucrat was going to stymie his will. From the beginning, I *set my mind* on the things of the Spirit...on the things of Life and hope and peace...and I know it helped me to walk in faith. To trust God.

No one except for you and God knows what's really going on in your mind. Only you know whether your mind *tends* to be filled with obsessions about this life. About anxiety or lust or resentment or covetousness or bitterness or shame or greed. You can hide it on the outside, but your *mindset* reveals which kingdom is prevailing in your own life. So...which is it? And only you can choose to refocus your thought life...can move your attention and focus to the things that you know please God and bring life. It really is that simple. When you find your mind being drawn to things of the flesh, you reject it. You fight it. You refocus with Caleb-like intensity on whatever is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable and excellent.

A speaker at MOPS recently shared this piece of research. A group of deeply depressed people was given the assignment of writing down three good things that happened to them every day. It might be as simple as finding a good parking spot. But three good things captured in writing. By the end of one week, they **BEGAN** to look for good things. They began to **EXPECT** good things. The way they set their minds began to shape their life.

One of the greatest enemies of the Spirit-led, Spirit-filled life is stinkin' thinkin'. One of the most powerful weapons for a Spirit-filled, Spirit-controlled life is a mind set on the things of the Spirit. The way you think...the things your focus on...are the single greatest weapon in the battle for your own spiritual life and health.