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According to the Spirit Romans 8:5-11

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As I was reading our passage from Romans 8 this past week, I couldn't help but think of this lantern I acquired back in June. It's a neat lantern. Actually, it's fairly unusual. It was made in 1945, in the midst of wartime materials restrictions, so instead of the fount and collar being made of steel and plated with nickel, almost everything on this lantern was made of brass and then painted. Now, when I first picked it up, most of this was hard to tell because it was so filthy. I just knew it was from 1945. The guy selling it told what model it was. At the time I couldn't tell otherwise, because the collar, where the model number was stamped was so dirty that nothing was legible on it. I took it home, filled it with some Coleman fuel, turned the valve, lit a match and...I had an instant fireball. The whole thing burst into flames. Thankfully I did this outside. I grabbed the hose and put out the fire. When it was cool, I inspected the lantern more closely. That was when I cleaned the collar off and found the model number. As it turned out, it wasn't what the guy said it was. It was a similar model designed to run, not on gas, but on kerosene. The two models look identical, but the "guts" are different and the kerosene requires preheating with alcohol before the it will burn. Once I figured all of this out, I was able to clean it up and get it running beautifully. It's one of the best lanterns I have and probably the brightest. But with the wrong fuel in it, it was one big accident waiting to happen.

Paul's been following a line of thinking through Chapter 7 and now into Chapter 8 that makes a similar point about human beings and the law. He's been explaining that the law that God gave to Israel through Moses, even though it was a good and beautiful thing that came with a promise of life, could bring

only death. The problem wasn't really the law. The problem was Israel, who suffered from the same problem as every other human being. We human beings are fallen and in bondage to sin and with that foreign element in the mix, the law could never make good on its promise of life; it could only make good on its promise of condemnation—of exile and death—for those who failed to keep it. Paul has been writing about those who walk or live by the flesh. The formula goes like this: law + flesh = death. Kind of like my lantern filled with the wrong fuel. But, Paul wrote, God has done what the law could not do. In Jesus the Messiah he has given his Spirit and the result, he wrote in verse 4, is that the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in those who walk, not by the flesh, but by the Spirit. This morning we'll be looking at Romans 8:5-11 and, here, Paul fleshes out what this means. It's sort of the end of the argument he's been making about the law all the way through Chapter 7.

Here's what Paul wrote back in 7:14: "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin." The rest of the chapter was Paul talking about Israel's struggle with the law and with sin: "I know the good thing I should do, but instead I do the evil thing that I hate. It's not me. It's sin living in me." This is what he meant by this idea of the "flesh". We'll come back to what "flesh" means in a bit. The flesh, trying to live or to walk the law, is something like filling a kerosene lantern with gas. It will explode. With the lantern there's *potential* for death. When you mix flesh and law, death isn't just potential; it's inevitable. For the law to deliver on its promise of life, something in human being has to change. The flesh has to go and, Paul writes, it must be replaced by the Spirit.

Of course, this is what the prophets had been saying all along, all the way back to Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It's helpful—actually, I think it's essential—to understand where we are on the map in order to understand the good news about Jesus. If we take the gospel off the map—and many Christians have done this—and separate the cross and the empty tomb and even the gift of the Holy Spirit—from the bigger story of

redemption, from the law, from the Prophets, from the story of Israel it's easy to lose sight of what God has done in Jesus. Paul introduced Romans by explaining that the gospel, the good news reveals the righteousness of God. People have struggled to understand what that means and that's largely because we've often unhitched the story of Jesus and the Gospels from the bigger story that goes all the way back through the Old Testament. The good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness of God, because it shows how he is faithful to his covenant promises. This is about God making good on what he promised to Abraham, what he promised through the law, what he promised to David, and what he promised through the Prophets. This is about a renewal of the covenant so that the people of God can truly be the people of God—and, ultimately, so that human beings can be restored to our original vocation to serve the living God in his Creation.

So in the first four verses of Chapter 8, which we looked at last week, Paul shouted with joy that, even though the law condemned Israel to death, there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus does something. It's more than just forgiveness for sin. Through Jesus' death on the Cross, sin itself has been condemned and fleshly hearts are transformed by the Spirit of God in order to fulfil the law. Look now at verses 5 and 6:

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.

There are two kind of people, Paul writes, fleshly people and spiritual people. Our translations puts it in terms of "living" according to the flesh or "living" according to the Spirit. Other's put it in terms of "walking" instead of "living". Both get at the idea, but for Paul it's something deeper and more integral to who we are than walking or even living a certain way. It's who we *are* at the core of our being. Paul writes

simply about people who “are according to” the flesh or the Spirit—our translations add the bit about walking or living. In other words, our very being is defined by one of these two things: the flesh or the Spirit. And, of course, this is why choosing to submit to the Lordship of Jesus means such a radical and dramatic change. Our core identity changes.

But what does Paul mean by “flesh” and “Spirit”? “Flesh”, in particular, is misunderstood so often that I sometimes think we should replace it with something else, but it’s the term that Paul uses and there really isn’t anything better. We just need to be reminded often what he really means by it. The problem isn’t Paul and it’s not the word itself. The problem is that in the early centuries of the Church, a pagan philosophy known as Neoplatonism crept into our collective thinking. On the positive side, it gave the Church Fathers the philosophical vocabulary they needed to hammer out key doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation. Our creeds are full of this language. But the down side was that Christians started thinking, as the Neoplatonists did, that the material or physical world was bad and that the ideal state was a purely spiritual one. Neoplatonism gave them the idea that sex was necessary to promote the species, but that there was something unholy about sex and that celibate monks and nuns were holier than everyone else. It’s also the philosophy that gave rise to the idea of salvation as going to heaven when we die and living a disembodied spiritual existence. Gradually, the worldview of the Old Testament and the hope of the law and the prophets was displaced in favour of themes and ideas borrowed from Greek philosophy. These ideas have a lot of traction and they’ve proved incredibly hard to displace. Because of this, a lot of people read Paul talking about the flesh and think he’s talking about our physical bodies and, like those Neoplatonist philosophers of ancient times, they think Paul’s talking about the need for our physical bodies to die so that we can be freed to live a spiritual existence. We’ve baptised it and put it

in Christian terms, but this idea of flesh and spirit is still pagan and a far cry from Paul’s understanding of things.

No, when Paul wants to talk about our physical bodies, Greek has another word for that—*soma*—and Paul uses it. Paul uses the word *sarx* here and what he’s referring to is the corruptibility and mortality of fallen human beings and the way in which we’ve dragged God’s Creation down with us. Our physicality itself isn’t bad. Paul was a Jew, steeped in the Old Testament, and knew that God’s created order, the physical world, was an unquestionably good thing. The Jews and the Greeks—like everyone else in the world—understood that something is wrong in Creation. People are wicked and things are broken and not as they should be. The Greeks’ solution was to do away with the physical so that only spirit remained, but Paul knew better. The solution wasn’t to do away with the world or with our bodies, but for God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, to restore them and to make them new. This is what the covenant—running all the way through the Old Testament—was always about and it’s what the renewal of the covenant in Jesus has accomplished—or at least set in motion.

It’s important, too, that we understand that when Paul writes about “Spirit”, he’s writing about *the* Spirit, with a capital “S”—God’s own Spirit—not just some kind of general spiritual existence over against our physicality. He’s talking about the presence and life of God in us. It’s tabernacle or temple language—God dwelling, not this time in a building on a mountaintop, but in his people, making them—making *us*—his temple. And it’s also language of re-creation. In both Hebrew and Greek, the words for wind or breath and Spirit are the same. God breathed life into human beings when he created us—enlivening us with his own life. We rejected it in our rebellion. Now, through the work of Jesus and the Spirit, he breathes life back into us in an act of re-creation.

Paul highlights two types of human beings. On the one hand you’ve got Adam’s family: fallen, enslaved to and

corrupted by sin. They’re fleshly. And on the other you’ve got the Messiah’s family: true Israel, not just forgiven, but regenerated, renewed, transformed by the indwelling of God himself in the Spirit. Again, it’s an identity at the core of our very being. If we are in Christ, in the Messiah, we “are according to the Spirit”, as Paul writes. And, he says, you can tell these two different kinds of people by what their minds are focused on. What do they think about? What do they live for? In what do they put their trust and their hope? This is why Paul puts our attention on the mind here. The mind is where renewal takes place. The flesh once shaped our thinking and now Jesus, through the Spirit, has reshaped and redirected our thinking. And our thinking works out in actions. Think of what Paul says in Galatians 5 about the works of the flesh over against the fruit of the Spirit. The thinking of the flesh works out in sexual immorality, strife, anger, jealousy, drunkenness and the like while, as the Spirit renews the believer’s mind, that thinking produces actions characterised by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And Paul puts this in the context of the covenant and God’s redemptive plan for the world. As he said back in Chapter 1, to live in idolatry and rebellion is to be exiled from God’s presence and to die. But, as he says, to set the mind on the Spirit is to know life and peace. This is what the law was supposed to do. It promised life and peace, but flesh got in the way. Now the Spirit makes good on the law’s promise. Paul looks back to 7:14 in the next two verses.

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.

Paul is fleshing out—pardon the pun—what he said in 7:14, “We know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.” The fleshy mind can’t do what the law demands, but the implication is that the mind renewed by and set on the Spirit can and so that

person knows the fulfilled promise of the law: life and peace.

So this is who we are—we're of the flesh or we're of the Spirit. There are no other categories. There's no in-between. But what does this mean? Where is all of this heading? Look at verses 9-11:

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.

Those who are of the flesh—stuck in Adam's fallen family—cannot please God and can know only death. In contrast, here's what it means for those who are in the Spirit. But first, notice a couple of things. First, notice how Paul uses Spirit and Christ and Jesus interchangeably. He writes about being “in the Spirit” just as, in other places, he writes about being “in Christ”. He writes first about the “Spirit of God”, but half a verse later about the “Spirit of Christ”. He describes the Spirit and Jesus in these different ways to emphasise their unified and joint action. The Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of God and of Jesus the Messiah. This is the Trinity at work, Father, Son and Spirit. But it also highlights another point we see expressed throughout Paul's epistles: that to be in Christ is also to be in the Spirit or, as Paul usually puts it, to have the Spirit in you. You can't separate being in Christ and being in the Spirit, because the Spirit is the one who unites us to Jesus—to his death, to his resurrection, and to his life—in the first place, and—this is why it's important to see Jesus and the Spirit as part of the bigger story of redemption—the reason Jesus died in the first place: not to forgive us and send us to heaven, but to finally make us the people we were intended to be and he does that by

pouring the Holy Spirit into us. Jesus and the Spirit work together inseparably, which is why when Paul visited Ephesus as reported in Acts 18, and when he noticed that there was a problem with the believers there who had never even heard of the Holy Spirit, he didn't tell them to pray for the Spirit. He asked whose baptism they had received. As it turned out, it was John's baptism. That baptism was a sign of repentance and it prepared them for Jesus, whom John promised would follow later, but that's just it: it was only preparatory. They were ready for the good news, but they hadn't actually heard it yet. They didn't know about Jesus. They had heard only John's prophetic announcement that he was coming. Paul's solution was to proclaim the gospel to these people and to baptised them into Jesus. When he did that, they found themselves not just in Christ, but in the Spirit at the same time. Again the purpose of the Cross was to fulfil God's promise of life—not just forgiveness—but the life promised by the law and made possible by the life and transformation brought by the Spirit.

This is the point of verse 10. The body is dead because of sin. Here Paul uses that other word, *soma*, that refers to our physical bodies. Because of sin we are dead—or will be eventually, but if we are in Jesus the Messiah we experience the life of the Spirit. And Paul writes that this is because of “righteousness”—something that needs to be unpacked. Remember that for Paul “righteousness” is God's covenant faithfulness or covenant justice. If we are in Jesus—if we have trusted in him and passed through the waters of baptism in faith—then we have been rescued from death and have been given the life that God has promised all along. Now, that doesn't mean we won't die physically. Sin's damage has been done. But this is where Paul not only speaks of this new life of the Spirit that enables us to be the people God intended us to be right now, but he also points *ahead* to something in the future. Because our bodies are dead, there's only so much of God's promise that we can experience in this life. And so Paul points ahead to the resurrection. The Holy Spirit isn't just one who

renews our minds and regenerates our hearts today and turns us to God. This is also the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. That Spirit is now in us, uniting us to Jesus in both his death and resurrection, and that means that just as he raised Jesus from the dead to inaugurate God's new age and to set in motion the forces that will make all things new, we should be living in hope of the final day when this work is completed and the Spirit raises us from the dead too. Today's life in Jesus and the Spirit is a sort of preparation for the full life of the age to come.

Again, this is God's renewal of his covenant. The law promised life to those who would live it and, Paul writes, this is what the Spirit enables. Now, to be clear, keeping the law by the Spirit doesn't mean being circumcised, making sacrifices, and not eating bacon. That aspect of the law is history. There's a deeper meaning at work here and Paul won't flesh it out for a couple more chapters. He hinted at this back in Chapter 4 when he wrote about the uncircumcised Gentile who keep the law even though he's never heard of Moses or of *torah*. The key is faith, just as it was for Abraham. And so there's hope here in the promise of law—a promise of life for those who keep it.

Resurrection is the goal. And we've seen, in Jesus, resurrection is God's way of vindicating his people. Jesus dealt with sin when he died, but God raised him from the dead to overturn the verdict of the people that he was a false messiah. In the resurrection, God declared: this is my Messiah, this is your Lord. And the final moment of our vindication, the day when God vindicates our faith and declares, “You are truly my people”, is the day when he will raise us from the dead just as he did Jesus.

So Paul started this section declaring that there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus the Messiah and here he answers how that works. We have a promise that one day, because of our faith in Jesus, we will be declared to be in the right and the evidence of that verdict will be our resurrection from the

dead. But how is that future verdict declared in the present? The Spirit does this as he works in the hearts of all those who believe in Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord. It's the Spirit who creates and grows our faith. It's the Spirit who writes the law on our hearts and produces good fruit and good works. This is why there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus—because through Jesus the Spirit has fulfilled the law and its promises in us. The Spirit is life and he is life because God is righteous, because God has fulfilled his covenant promises.

Think of my lantern again. Somewhere, there's an instruction sheet that gives a promise: fill this with kerosene and it will burn with a bright, clear light for everyone to see. But somewhere along the line, someone lost the instructions and tried to fill it with the wrong fuel. It exploded. Soot caked everything until even the model number was unreadable. That happened over and over and the lantern got crustier and crustier. Eventually I figured out what was wrong, poured out the wrong fuel, filled it with the right fuel, lit it according to the instructions, and now it does what it was made to do. Human beings aren't all that different. God gave his people a promise in the law. If they would keep it, they would burn brightly as witnesses to the nations of what it looks like to be God's people and to live in his presence. But the flesh got in the way. Instead of a bright and clear witness, Israel's history was just one disaster after another. Her neighbours mocked her and mocked her God as she became uglier and uglier. Many were ready to give up. Something was wrong, that was clear. That's why that guy sold me this lantern cheap. He thought it was irreparably damaged. But Jesus came and he points us back to the promise in the instruction manual. You really can be the bright and shining witnesses you were made to be. And when we believe and trust in Jesus as the Lord who died for our sins and rose to give us back that life, he washes us clean—cleaning off the soot, scrubbing off the rust, cleaning the glass to make it sparkle again. And he does away with the flesh and fills us with his Spirit so that we can shine

brightly again. And, like my lantern, there's still some damage that I can't fix. There are chips and some rust on the vent. The collar is supposed to be painted, but all of that was burned away when it exploded into fireball after fireball. We're like that too. Sin has done permanent damage, but the Spirit offers hope. Jesus was once born in the likeness of our sinful flesh, but the Spirit raised him from the dead to live the life of God we human beings were made for, and we have the promise—if only we wouldn't forget it—that if we are in Jesus, the Spirit will one day do for us what he has done for our Lord. Brothers and Sisters, we've repented—dumped out the wrong fuel—and as we've turned to Jesus in faith in our baptism, he's scrubbed us clean from sin's filth, and he's filled us with his Spirit to make us not just his people in name, but to cause us to live, to act, to walk as his people. Now we're called to follow through. Don't let anyone turn the knob down so that your light dims. Don't let anyone pour that useless fuel of the flesh into your tank. Live for Jesus and only for Jesus. And live for Jesus in hope. Our light is meant to shine so that the world can see a glimpse of God's kingdom here and now, in the midst of a world that's as scarred by sin as we are. We're all scarred by sin; one day each of us will die; but we live for Jesus in hope of the life of the age to come, knowing that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will one day raise us and, in that, God will declare: "I am your God and you are my people."

This is what we prayed in the Collect this morning. Let's pray those words again: O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*