

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Epistle, Year A

SPIRIT-DETERMINED LIFE

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Romans 8:6-11

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

8:6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 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, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 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. 10 But if Christ is in you, though 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 from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Author's Note: These six verses are set in both a Pauline-theological and a Romans-occasional context. They draw both theological and practical conclusions from Paul's "crossing," in 5:1–8:4, of Israel's primary narrative (the Exodus) with Israel's contemporary narrative (her never-ending Exile), both being focused on Israel's Messiah/Christ. For this insight, I am indebted to the "New Perspectives" school of Pauline research as developed especially by N. T. Wright; see his recent *The Day the Revolution Began*. Two caveats: (1) In order for Paul's crossing to work for us as it did for him, we must accept the notion that Israel's history is paradigmatically human history writ large, not as a wild proposition but as the purpose for Israel's

election. Unless we, along with the recipients of Romans, see ourselves as Israel sees itself before God, then Israel's Messiah will not be our Messiah as well. (2) For Paul, the abstractions of sin, death, flesh, spirit, and even law, are not abstractions at all but real "powers" over us; they cannot be wished away or ignored or un-believed away. Because they "determine" our lives, they must be confronted head-on. Secondly: the letter's occasional context is Paul's anticipated mission to Spain which required the various factions in the Roman church to settle their differences regarding the place of the Mosaic Law in church life (see Rom. 14-15). For Paul, presenting a united front in "the gospel of God" (1:1) was essential for the success of the Spanish mission. For this insight, I am indebted especially to Robert Jewett; see his Romans in the Hermeneia commentary series, or the essays in The Romans Debate edited by Karl Donfried. The Romans letter "crosses" Paul's aim for a Spanish mission with his foundational story of the gospel (Adam/Exodus/Exile/Messiah), drawing formal conclusions in Chapter 8 and more practical conclusions in Chapters 12-16. For the analysis below, I am parsing verses 6-11 as Diagnosis in verses 6-8 and Prognosis in verses 9-11 (v. 5 is in nuce both Diagnosis and Prognosis). Paul is drawing conclusions that affect the Roman believers in their life together. The rest of Chapter 8 unfolds how the Roman believers already participate, bodily, in the birth pangs of the glorious new creation, that is, the Messianic Age.

DIAGNOSIS: Life Determined by the Flesh: A Matter of Life and Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Life Determined by the Flesh

Summary: Roman believers who are still set on "the flesh" (literally, "determined by the flesh" in vv. 6-8) are at odds with Paul and themselves over the purpose and continued

usefulness of the Mosaic Law.

The problem here is not only that the Roman believers are at odds with Paul, they are at odds with each other. In Paul's analysis, they fail to appreciate that the Mosaic Law, in its totality, was intended by God to display the horrific magnitude of Israel's sin. The totality of sin, both Jewish and Gentile, is personified by Paul as Sin, as a power that enslaves every human being. Sin gets its great power, its evilness, from idolatry—because worshiping a thing gives that thing power over you. But idolatry only shows itself as idolatry against the Mosaic Law which, among other things, demands faith in God alone. This was God's purpose in giving the Law. Sin was dormant, so to speak, until the Law exposed it for what it really is. Israel's continual idolatry heaped Sin upon her so much that she was enslaved by it. This enslavement corresponds to Israel's previous enslavement by Pharaoh, and is the root cause of Israel's continued slavery to the nations—which constitutes her continued Exile. In Paul's further analysis, Sin (so identified by the Law) uses the weakness of human "flesh," and the idolatry that ensues, to energize and to maintain and to magnify Sin. The consequence is that Israel is unable to free herself from her bondage to Sin and idolatry. In Paul's summary fashion, Israel continues to be "determined" by "the flesh," and the Mosaic Law offers no avenue for escape. Any of the Roman believers who think otherwise are deluding themselves. Squabbling among themselves as to life "determined by the Law" is a useless venture; it only proves that they are "determined by the flesh."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Life Determined by Sin and Death

Summary: Some Roman believers are unaware that life determined by the flesh is "hostile" (v. 7) to the purposes of God for humanity, and that such a "life" is [destined for] Death (v. 6).

Sin and its child, "the flesh," prove to be "hostile" to God in that it is invariably idolatrous, and inescapably so. Human life, determined and enslaved as it is to Sin, produces nothing but evil and leads inexorably to Death. This, Paul says, is because our flesh cannot withstand the power of Sin. Our flesh is "weak." The problem here is not our flesh per se but rather Sin that resides or dwells within us. The short-term result is a life (so-called) determined by the power of Sin, and therewith the fruits of the flesh which are evil. This life (so-called) terminates in its determined result: Death. Again, in Paul's shorthand, such life is determined by Sin and Death. This kind of "determination" is just another way of saying "enslaved." And who wants that?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Life Unpleasing to God

Summary: The Roman believers, if they have no part in the life of the Messiah/Christ, "cannot please God" (v. 8).

Life "under the Law" proves to be a death-spiral. Luther's well-known axiom to describe this affair, that is, the idolater's continual idolatry, was a life "curved in upon itself" (*curvatus in se*). Like a dog chasing its own tail, the Law, as *lex*, cannot achieve any sort of relief from the predicament that the Law presents to us. The Law exposes Sin for what it is, and Sin works idolatry and Death in us. In all this we are being "determined." Consequently, no one can "please God" while being endlessly accused of idolatry, and Death is no one's friend. Another axiom, "the Law always accuses" (*lex semper accusat*) summarizes God's intention in giving the Law, how it works on us, and its inescapability. But this was hardly self-evident to Israel or to some of the Roman believers who were asked to "keep the Law" despite Israel's constant chastisement and ongoing Exile. Such life "under the Law" is, accordingly, "cursed" as unpleasing to God. Therefore Israel, representing humanity

before God, continued to display her Sin as idolatrous, without end, and so to pile up Sin against herself—until . . .

PROGNOSIS: Life Determined by the Spirit: A Matter of Death and Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Life Pleasing to God

Summary: Israel's Messiah, whose life is determined by the Spirit of God, condemned Sin in his crucifixion and vanquished Death in his resurrection (v. 11)—making him “well-pleasing” to God (Mark 1:11) in his ministry and in his death—whose Spirit now “dwells” (v. 9) within the Roman believers.

. . . at the right moment, the entirety of Israel's Sin came to be focused upon Israel's Messiah at the point of his crucifixion. As Israel's Messiah/Christ, Jesus of Nazareth represents all of Israel, and through Israel all of humanity, in his body. This, according to Paul, is how God condemned Sin in the Messiah's sinless, Spirit-determined, flesh (8:3). Having put Sin to death on the cross, Death itself, as Sin's consequence, retained no power over the Messiah. Jesus' resurrection from the dead was not some miracle suddenly intruding into a world of cause and effect, but rather the reality of a Spirit-determined life when Death is no more. Jesus' resurrection, like his ministry, is what God's Life and Spirit looks like against the backdrop of Sin and Death. Indeed, it must be said that God himself, in the flesh of the Messiah, bore the full weight of Sin, that is, the world's full accumulation of Sin, and for all time to come condemned it to oblivion. In the Messiah, and in all those who are “in Christ,” God has inaugurated a new-creation, in the midst of the old, that will one day openly reveal itself, fully and gloriously, as God's new-creation partner, or as Paul says, God's “children” (8:14-39). In Christ himself, and for all those in whom he

“dwells” [this word signals the dwelling of God’s Presence, his Glory, among his people, as in the Tabernacle and in the Temple], the Exile at last is ended and the Messianic Age has begun.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Life in the Spirit

Summary: Being determined now by the Spirit of God, the Roman believers participate in the life of the Messiah, that is, in “righteousness” (v. 10).

The Power that determines new-creation Life is the Spirit of God—which is simply a story-telling way of saying, “God.” We moderns may have difficulty with the personification of Sin, Death, Flesh, and Spirit, but their reality as determinative “powers” were clearly understood by the recipients of Paul’s letters. It is easier for us to understand “Spirit” as a power than Sin, but that is because we have no doubts about the reality of God and the reality of Christ; verse 11 is an example of this incipient trinitarianism. And Death proves itself every day to be a reality that cannot be ignored. And yet the so-called abstractions we call Faith and Love are overwhelming powers in our lives. They, too, are powers determining our lives. Specifically, faith in Christ is nothing other than the life-determining power of God’s Spirit working the new-creation in us; see Paul’s opening thesis in 1:16-17. Such power may appear to others as feeble, but no more or less feeble looking than in Jesus’ own life and ministry. This is what enfleshed “righteousness” looks like! Nonetheless, as we know, and as the Roman believers knew, we who are “home” to the Spirit of Christ have already, by that very experience, passed from Death to Life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Life Determined by the Messiah/Christ Summary: Roman believers, no longer subject

to Sin and Death, now “belong to him [Messiah]” (v. 9), and thus are free to live and to love as the Messiah/Christ lives and loves – cruciform!

No longer subject to the power of Sin, nor captive to the desires of the Flesh, nor frightened with the apparent finality of Death, the Roman believers (and we) are now determined by the Messiah who lives in us and we in him. They (and we) are no longer captive to the flesh but to Jesus the Christ. The Law has done its job; its purpose is fulfilled. From now on, the Spirit will fulfill the Messiah’s purpose in us, for the benefit of the world. United in the same Spirit, we can set aside the demands of the Law that had promised, falsely, an escape from Sin and Death. Determined now by the Spirit of Christ, we can abandon the desires of the flesh and its idolatries (notably, for us, what we call “health”). We see how life determined by the flesh leads to Death, for we experience every day the death throes, the death rattles, that signal the freedom of our flesh from its bondage to Sin. Our bodies are now temples of the Spirit to whom we are in glad captivity (12:1-2; see 1 Cor. 6:19-20). We are determined by the Spirit, by the mind of the Spirit, by our renewed mind, to live for others as Christ lives for us. As Jesus was “sent” (8:3) into the world of Sin and Death, we also are “sent” into the sin-soaked world (10:5), not by compulsion but as Spirit-determined, free human beings, so as to bring the Messianic Age into reality. The world will heap its idol-worshiping powers upon us, just as it did to Jesus, and we will suffer the world’s evil in our own bodies. But, as we can see in Jesus before us and in us, this suffering (which in truth is Christ’s suffering) points the world in the direction of God’s new-creation. The kingdom of the Messiah cannot be measured as the world measures, but we know it and we feel it in our bodies. Our Spirit-determined lives, sent by God and suffering on behalf of others, are like bread crumbs showing the world the way to

human freedom, even to the Life of God. We don't know exactly how the Roman believers responded to Paul's letter, but nearly 2000 years after Paul was martyred the Roman church quickly became, and remains a symbolic focal point of the body of Christ.