

Where's Your Mind At?

a sermon
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Romans 8:1-11

Now, didn't that make perfect sense?

I'm kidding.

That Bible passage I just read was tough. It was dense. It was so typical of Paul.

Maybe you felt that you didn't understand a thing.

That's okay.

Maybe you felt confused.

That's okay.

Maybe you felt your mind wandering.

That's okay.

Maybe you felt unable to follow Paul's reasoning or get his point.

That's okay, too.

Maybe you expect that I'm now going to explain it all to you.

Not okay.

(help!)



There are, of course, several reasons why this passage is hard to understand. *I* think it would be fun to sit down with people over coffee and talk about each one, trying to make as clear as possible what's going on here in these verses, or at least making clear what it really is that is unclear.

(I understand that this is not everyone's idea of "fun.")

One of those reasons why these verses are hard to understand has to do with Paul's use of two words: flesh and Spirit. Again and again Paul talks about the flesh and the Spirit. He names them separately, and he names them together. And when he names them together, he sets them over against each other, opposing them.

Like this, in verse 6: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

And then again, in verse 9, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you."

But what does Paul mean by 'flesh'? What does he mean by 'Spirit'?

Some assume that by "flesh" Paul means skin and bodies and physical existence, and about these he means that these are all bad, that they are wicked, and so too are a bunch of things dealing with skin and bodies and physical existence,

things like eating and digestion and sex,
things like being born and growing up and growing older,
things like physical sensations of pleasure and pain,

that all these are all evil and to be ashamed of and suppressed or denied.

And by “Spirit,” some assume (usually the same people) that Paul means a higher realm of disembodied existence where we *really* belong, freed from the evils of physical being. And accordingly such people also believe that someone who, in this life, is truly “spiritual” will deny and suppress as much as possible everything about physicalness and embodiment.

But this is not what *Paul* means by flesh and spirit. Flesh and spirit, for Paul, aren’t locations; instead they’re guiding ideas. They aren’t about things touchable and untouchable; instead they’re about our relationship to God,

either as rebels or as servants,
as enemies or as friends,
as strangers or as children.

I like how Art Ross and Martha Stevenson put it, in a book they wrote on Romans:

The terms “spirit” and “flesh” do not refer to two parts of human nature but, rather, to two ways of living. The way of the flesh is self-centered rebellion and idolatry; it is not the way of the body or the individual as much as it is an orientation to the ways of the world. The way of the Spirit is life in bondage to the Creator, [life] in which Christ is freely acknowledged as Lord.¹



So when Paul talks about being in the flesh and being in the Spirit, he’s talking about an attitude, he’s naming a perspective. He has in mind what’s on our mind. He’s asking us, “Where’s your mind at?”

Now that can be a difficult question at times. It happens plenty that I’m not sure *where* my mind’s at. I’m sure you get that, not only because you have seen me confused, because *you* have wondered where *my* mind was at. You get it because you, too, have experienced it yourself.

It does no good to deny it. I’ve got your number.

“Where’s your mind at?” can be a tough question, because maybe you don’t know where it’s at. Or maybe you do know, and where it’s at is not where it should be at.

This might not be so bad. In its more innocuous forms, the mind-not-where-it-should-be problem is what has you turn left rather than right at the stoplight because that’s usually what you do when you’re going to work but not when you’re going to fill your tank with gas.

A bit more seriously, your mind being not where it should be can make you temporarily deaf to your spouse’s questions. Not a good thing if you can’t blame it on hearing aid batteries running out of juice, and your beloved knows that you are suffering not from hardness of hearing but instead from inattentiveness, or even a lack of concern.

¹*Romans*, Art Ross & Martha M. Stevenson (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press), p. 47f.

But in its more serious forms, having your mind in some places can lead to some very bad things. It can end up feeding corrupt attitudes that give rise to truly wicked actions.

Lying.

Betrayal.

Adultery.

Theft.

Violence.

The breakdown of community commensurate with a famine of compassion and a flood of self-centeredness. (And don't you think that this is somehow less serious than the others.)

These all have their origin in a mind not where it should be, in a mind set on the flesh rather than on the Spirit.

These all have their origin in the fundamental corruption that lies at the heart of, well, the *heart*, in a disease of the soul that none of us are capable of healing, in the stain that only God can erase.

"Where's your mind at?" Very often, we'd prefer not to be asked that question. And, quite honestly we're really glad that no one can see inside our minds to find out what's there.

No one, that is, except for God ... who knows the ugliness therein, as well as the beauty most have forgotten, or are unable any longer to see.

The mind set on the flesh is oh, so familiar.

It is all about the self.

It worships power, and craves success.

It is driven by fear, hounded by hunger, cowed by shame.

It can see little beyond its narcissism, its paranoia, its lusts.

Those who are in the flesh are unable to embrace their God-given possibilities. And that's because they have forgotten their God-given *limitations*, as they cultivate their conceit that they can do anything! ... and in the process they

plunder the weak

and corrupt the young

and rob the future

and poison the culture

and rape the environment

and destroy their enemies

(both the real and the imagined; for those in the flesh the difference hardly matters).

But the mind set on the Spirit is not as familiar. Yet those who are blessed to know Jesus should recognize it; in fact, they should know it very well.

It is all about God. It's focused on

the glory of God,

the beauty of God,

the majesty of God,

the will of God,

all these as shown and clarified in Jesus Christ.

And because of that, the mind set on the Spirit is also, accordingly, graciously, focused on *others*:

the weak, to help them;
the lost, to guide them;
the sick, to heal them;
the unknown, to welcome them;
the corrupt, to bear witness to them;
the estranged and hated, to embrace them;

all these forms of love as shown and clarified in Jesus Christ.

The mind set on the Spirit is the gift given to those who are blessed and saved by Jesus. It is that beautiful and fruitful state of being in which you can say to yourself, “I am in Jesus and Jesus is in me.” It is when we can and do participate in the life of God,

not because of our own goodness,
nor our own strength,
nor our own will,

but because, due to Christ’s merit and out of his gracious acceptance, the Holy Spirit chooses to take up residence within us.

The mind set on the Spirit more and more is able

to will what Jesus wills,
to seek what Jesus seeks,
to love as Jesus loves.

The mind set on the Spirit will live

in hope, not in fear;
with compassion, not with lust;
with love, not with hate.

The mind set on the Spirit will joyfully follow the way of Jesus,

building bridges, not walls;
planting gardens, not mine-fields;
forgiving old enemies, not making new ones.

The mind set on the Spirit

shares both love and wealth;
speaks both blessing and truth;
stands with God-given courage against the idols of our age:
power, control, celebrity, novelty, strength.



My friends, if you are in Jesus Christ, if you belong to him, then his Spirit has taken up residence in you.

You are given the gracious and grace-filled potential to live a life truly pleasing to God.

You are able to set your mind not on the flesh but on the Spirit.

You can, just as you should, be attentive to the opportunities all around you:

to live with compassion,
to speak with truth,
to struggle for justice,
to bear witness to your faith in Jesus,
to show others where your mind's at;

and these to take up as a servant of Christ...

which you can do, because you are in the Spirit, and the Spirit is in you.