



Sinful Flesh?

Romans 8:1-16

This morning we had a look at what Scripture said about living by the Spirit and what implications that had for our lives. The truth of Scripture is simple, when we accepted Christ we were made into new people, regenerated, given life, hope and all the rest of it. We have been changed from a psuchikos (natural) person into a pneumatikos (spiritual) person. We have the Spirit of God in us who enables us to live and act like spiritual people.

The trouble is that it's something that most Christians seem to have problems of getting their head around the idea of living holy lives. As I said this morning, we put up or get hindered by all kinds of barriers that keep us far to "fleshy" as believers. And we rationalise it don't we? Surely we have to accept that the "old man" is within us and our lives are going to be less than holy as believers? This is what one commentator, Harold Brokke says about this:

A strange contradiction exists in the mind of many believers who desperately desire to live righteous lives, but think that to claim victory over sin is heresy. What would happen if a believer testified, "I have found freedom in Jesus from the power of sin. I have walked in victory today. Jesus took charge and I had victory over all my temptations?" Many Christians would object, "That sounds like a spiritual pride and self-deception. No one can live in victory over sin - even for a day. The Bible says, 'In my flesh, dwells no good thing.' As long as we are in the flesh, we sin daily in thought, word, and deed!"

The problem is that when we came to Christ, we indeed died to sin. Paul says: *Roma 6:2b (TEV) We have died to sin--how then can we go on living in it?* But the problem is that we can and do go on living in it a carnal or fleshy Christians. Shouldn't we all just give into the fact that we are all prone to the flesh and that to a greater or lesser extent we are carnal Christians and that a Spiritual Person is an unachievable goal on the Earth.

Not so, Paul in Romans 8 stresses the point that God intends us to live as Spiritual People now and living and acting in the flesh just is something we should not allow in our lives as we have been re-created into something better. As we read in Romans 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.* Paul mentions "fleshy" Christians and talks about the flesh so that we understand that it should not be part of our lives and our vocabularies – God desires us to be what He has made us in Christ – spiritual.

Let's clarify things a bit here. What is the flesh that Paul is talking about here? In modern translations like the NIV it is translated "spiritual nature" or in the TEV as the "human nature". The actual word Paul uses is sarx which means flesh. This word had caused lots of problems over the centuries, but to understand it, helps us understand why if we are believers, are called to be people of the Spirit – spiritual people – not people of the flesh.

So what's the problem with this Greek word sarx. Understanding it is the reverse of the way we understood agape. You remember "love". In English just one word can convey a whole load of emotions from the love of God, through liking something, through liking somebody, through to romance and sex. When someone uses the word "love" how do we know what they are talking about? The meaning is determined by the context. So when I say "I love prawn cocktail flavour crisps" you know that I just like to eat them and have no romantic intentions towards them!

It's the same with sarx. W E Vine lists 14 different ways sarx is used just in the New Testament. Context tells us what is being talked about. Sarx is a Greek word that literally means flesh – physical flesh. You know John 1:14 don't you:

John 1:14 (NIV) *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* So what does flesh mean here? you've got it – the Eternal Word became a human being.

Now go back to Romans 8, you'll find that use of the flesh in this passage as being literally our flesh but something a bit wider. – *sarx is seen as the nest of emotions and more specifically, desire. Desire comes from sarx itself (specifically, from the belly, koilia,) and if there is an opportunity to satisfy sarx, the life of sarx makes the choice to pursue sarx. In this sense, the word sarx doesn't mean so much "flesh" in the physical sense, but rather, a profligate lifestyle unrestrained by authority where sarx acts as a catalyst for decision-making. (Kevin Cauley).*

It's interesting the connection with the belly. It's the same kind of idea as gut reaction. We act from something deep within us. That's why this morning I referred to the flesh in terms of the way of thinking and doing things that as human beings we do without God – things we do according to our own judgement and initiative which are ideas which have come from our own beings, our gusts, or minds – our own flesh. When we do something in the flesh we are doing it of our own accord without reference to or the counsel of the Holy Spirit. All unbelievers operate in this realm but believers only operate in this way if they choose to, through ignorance, deception or their own stupidity.

As an aside, some translations, including the NIV use the term "sinful nature" for sarx. It's a minority view in translation terms. It's a hotly contested issue and I've preferred to go with the AV, RSV and NRSV tonight because flesh better reflects something more complex than just our natures – it's a matter of our will as against The Holy Spirit's will. Some other translation like the TEV go for human nature which is a bit nearer the meaning of sarx.

What is the translation "sinful nature" a bit problematic? Sarx is never equated in the NT with sin. In Hebrew writings human flesh can be sinful, but it may not be either. It depends on the sinfulness of the person whose flesh it is.

Butt was a common idea in classical Greece that flesh was inherently sinful. Many Christian heretics, particularly the Gnostics believed that and the idea has been floating around the church for 2000 years. So the these folks would have equated sarx with sin, but that connection in truth doesn't exist.

Let's consider it from a NT point of view. This is best illustrated by the statement that the Word became flesh and lived among us. Jesus' flesh was never sinful which cuts across that whole Greek idea and in fact there was a heresy called docetism that said because flesh was sinful, Jesus obviously wasn't really human. But the Word of God is clear: He was flesh. He is described by Paul in tonight's passage as *in the likeness of sinful flesh*. He was flesh, but it wasn't sinful flesh – it would only have been sinful flesh if He had sinned. He looked like sinful flesh, but it was only a likeness because unlike us, He did no sin, knew no sin and in Him no sin was found.

And our flesh is still with us even though we have been made into new creations and are under a new law. 1 Peter 1:4 gives us an idea of what is happening: *Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.* We are righteous people before God. We have been made holy – but we still have the flesh. We can either choose to live by the Spirit or we can act in the flesh as we once did according to our human nature – and it's those actions that are sinful – and we are responsible for them.

One of the neatest solutions to get over what sarx means in the context of this passage is the Jerusalem Bible. Here's its translation of verses 3-4: *What the Law could not do because of the weakness of human nature, God did, sending his own Son in the same human nature as any sinner to be a sacrifice for sin, and condemning sin in that human nature. This was so that the Law's requirements might be fully satisfied in us as we direct our lives not by our natural inclinations but by the Spirit.*

So God wants us to act and think in the Spirit. That is the goal of maturity and day to day life of all mature Christians. But we know how easy it is to think and act in the flesh. One of the most frustrating things I see in people as a Pastor as they grow in the faith is how they start to do things in the Spirit, but then pride gets the better of them as they are deceived into thinking that they are responsible for being that talented or clever – and they quickly start to do things in the flesh. Ouch! The bump as the laws of aerodynamics fails them and gravity sets in can be a harsh one!

Let's remind ourselves of a bit of this passage tonight. *5 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. 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.

The long and short of it is this – living in the flesh is about death. If we have the Spirit of God in us we are alive and we live according to the Spirit. To tolerate living in the flesh in our lives is a contradiction in terms – we just shouldn't entertain it. That's why Paul addressed the Corinthians as carnal or fleshy believers – because he wanted them to face up to the fact that acting in the flesh – acting sinfully – is a contradiction in terms and we just don't do it.

That's why we have been saved to be people that live according to the Spirit. We don't do flesh. We don't live according to the flesh in our individual lives and we certainly don't in the life of our church. The scholar FF Bruce said this: *The Spirit not only makes the benefits of Christ's saving work effective in (believers) but also enables them to appropriate and enjoy in advance the benefits of the age to come.The prime function of the indwelling Spirit in the believing community, as in the individual believer, is for Paul the reproduction of the Christ-likeness in his people, until the whole body corporate attains "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).*

So our aim as believers and as our church should be to be people who live by the Spirit. We need to learn all the more to heed His challenge as we pray and as we read His word, to deal with the bits of fleshly thinking that so besets our minds and lives – to repent of those things and seek to live by the Spirit. How do we do that? To walk with Him. And that starts with our prayer life, our worship life – spending time with Him to learn the rhythms of His grace, to get used to the sound of His voice, being prepared to have our minds renewed – moulded by God so that we do His good, pleasing and perfect will.

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