

March 30, 2014
Lent 4

"In Christ Not In the Flesh"

ROMANS 8:1-10 (ESV)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ 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. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 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. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

Some of you sitting here this morning are familiar with using a GPS system for directions on where you went to go. You can put the address into your GPS device or smart phone and you will be directed where to go. Even if you miss a turn it will redirect you on the right route.

Because of the fall into sin every human being ever born into this world has an internal direction system that points them to trusting what their sinful flesh or sinful nature tells them. This sinful flesh that I inherited from my parents tries to direct me to my accomplishments and my efforts as the source of being loved and accepted by God. It is only when you are born again by the Holy Spirit that you are given a whole new guidance system that directs you to trust in Christ alone for your salvation.

In the words we just read from Romans 8, the word "flesh" is used ten times. The word Spirit is used seven times. How thankful we are this morning that the old guidance system of the flesh has now been replaced by the Holy Spirit that always leads us into Christ Jesus as the source of our salvation.

The Holy Spirit brought you into Christ

Life is sure looking a lot better for you and me now that the Holy Spirit has led us into Christ. Because we are in Christ we are free from the condemnation we deserve because we have sinned and violated God's laws. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ the law of the Spirit who give life has set you free from the law of sin and death." The position of the Greek words for this verse put the word "No" at the very beginning of this sentence for emphasis. "There is NO

condemnation for those who are in Christ.”

This is sure good news since we are keenly aware of how many battles we have lost with sin this past week, or even since we first woke up this morning. In the previous chapter Paul wrote about his personal struggle with his sinful flesh. “I know that nothing good lives in me that is in my sinful flesh. For I desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” I have tried so hard to love the Lord with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength. I have failed, but Jesus has not failed me. There is NO condemnation for those who are in him.

I recall how important the word “No” was when we went to the dentist as children. To come out of the dentist chair and say to my mom, “No cavities” almost made the smell of the dentist’s office and the drilling sound and the dentist’s bad breath worth it. It was a happy day when you could say, “no cavities.” As Christians we can look at each other and joyfully say of ourselves and those around us, NO CONDEMNATION.”

We can say this because Jesus condemns sin for us so it does not condemn us. “For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son the likeness of the sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” The law is powerless to save us because our sinful flesh causes us to fall short of what the law requires of us. The law says we must love the Lord our God perfectly with our whole heart, soul and mind at all times. Even if you started with a clean slate, how long would it take you to rack up a huge debt? Hours, minutes, seconds?

Have you ever tried to walk on the rail of a train tracks when the train wasn’t coming? Maybe you were able to walk ten feet or twenty feet, but then you eventually fell off the rail. “Going off the deep end” is not just doing something really bad and awful, it is failing to fulfill all the requirements of the law. My sinful flesh condemns me. You cannot pay off a loan at the bank with money from the Monopoly game. You cannot pay off the debt of sin by fleshly attempts to keep God’s law that only add to the debt that is already there.

What we were powerless to do our God did for us by sending us his Son. Our Father sent his Son in the likeness of our flesh. In a great sermon on John 1:14 Martin Luther said of Jesus. “He had our eyes, ears, mouth, nose, chest, stomach, hands and feet, just as you and I do. He took the breast. His mother nursed him as any other child is nursed... the only difference was that he was not born in sin as we are.” Here is Jesus, with human flesh similar to ours, yet always perfect in everything he did. Then God our Father puts on Jesus our sin and makes him suffer for that sin at the cross. 2 Corinthians 5 says that Jesus became sin for us. In his flesh he made the perfect sacrifice that enables our sin to be forgiven. He paid for it completely. The Holy Spirit leads you to trust in Christ instead of your flesh. That means the righteous requirements of God’s law have been fully met for you through Jesus.

Permit me to illustrate what it means to be in Christ and not in your flesh with these sponges. I can take this sponge and put it into a bucket of really dirty, filthy, toxic water.

Even if I squeeze out the sponge as best I could, I would not want to suck on the sponge that had been in the contaminated water. And if the sponge is placed back into contaminated water again and again, it will remain contaminated. That's a way of understanding what it means to be in the flesh. Now look at another sponge that is absolutely pure and clean. That represents Jesus who never contaminated his life with sin. However, there came a point in his life when all the sin and filth of the world was placed on him. Miraculously he was punished for that sin, paid for it and took it away completely. The Father even raised Jesus from the dead to show us the sin that was on Jesus has been paid for. The Holy Spirit has led you into Christ. Everything Jesus has done for you is now yours. "Therefore, there is now NO condemnation for those who are in Christ."

The Holy Spirit will continue to bring you into Christ

When you use a GPS system it can redirect you when you go in the wrong direction. We have the Holy Spirit who continually redirects us away from putting our hope in our flesh and putting our hope in Christ alone. "Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Holy Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."

Remember reading the story "The Little Engine that Could?" The little engine said, "I think I can, I think I can." We admire people for trying, but stay away from saying, "I think I can, I think I can when it comes to do something to earn God's favor. The sinful flesh is like a powerful magnet that keeps pulling at us and saying, "Put trust in yourself. God will reward you for trying." The Holy Spirit has created a new person inside you that sets its mind on what the Holy Spirit desires. It is the Holy Spirit who wants you to sing, "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me."

There are huge consequences for following the flesh and not the Spirit. "The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace." If my flesh tells me what to do I am doomed. My sinful flesh not only leads me into sin, it wants to lead me into thinking I can justify myself. But the mind governed by the Holy Spirit is life and peace. Later in this chapter of Romans it tells us, "The Spirit himself testifies with our Spirit that we are God's children." How often in one day doesn't the Holy Spirit direct your eyes to Jesus and reveal to you how precious it is to be God's dear child through Jesus. My sinful flesh says to me, "You old toad, you are never going to measure up to what God expects of you. Keep trying harder and harder and harder and maybe God will love you and care about you and bless you." Then my wonderful Holy Spirit whom Jesus calls my Comforter, directs me to Jesus and sees everything that has been done to allow this old toad to be God's dear child.

"The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God." The person who is not in Jesus but still in the flesh does not like what God says in his Word about his laws. They want God's laws on their terms. And this sinful flesh is also hostile to any suggestion that God would forgive sin through the gift of his son. The Pharisees hated Jesus for teaching them the truth about sin, and hated him more for teaching that sinners could find complete forgiveness in him.

What a huge blessing it is to know that the Holy Spirit has taken you out of the realm of the flesh and now brought you into Christ Jesus your Savior. "You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness." You live in a whole new realm, a whole new world, a whole new kingdom. You no live in the darkness of being controlled by your sinful flesh that tells you, "You can do it." You live in this amazing land of light, this kingdom of love, this place where you know you are righteous in Christ. The Holy Spirit takes you to Jesus and gives you life because of righteousness. He opens your eyes to see yourself wrapped in righteousness. He reminds you every day that in your baptism you have put on Christ.

I am amazed at how we can have devices in our cars or programs on our cell phones that can hook up to satellites and give us directions on where to go. This morning we are even more amazed at how hour by hour and minute by minute and even second by second the Holy Spirit is constantly redirecting our lives away from trusting in our flesh, and always towards Jesus. That brings us tremendous peace and comfort as we face another week of life here on this planet earth away from our home that Jesus has waiting for us. Amen.