

¹Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person’s lifetime? ²Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. ³Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

⁴In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

⁷What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” ⁸But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. ⁹I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived ¹⁰and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ¹²So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

¹³Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

Language allows us to communicate with each other, but it is also true that there are times when the complexities of language actually make understanding what another is trying to say more difficult. My favorite example of this is a story from World War II when generals from the American and British armies met to plan strategy. The meeting started and the British generals began by saying they wanted to table the discussion of a certain objective. The Americans were upset that the British wanted to table this discussion, because that was exactly the objective they thought had the highest priority. They were so upset that they were about to walk out of the meeting when an alert person was able to prove the adage that Great Britain and the United States are two great nations separated by a common language. In American usage, to table something means to put it off until a later time. In British usage, however, to table something means “to put it on the table” and make it the highest priority. It therefore turned out that the British and the Americans were in perfect agreement about the priority of this objective. Their disagreement came about because they had different understandings of the word “table”.

To understand what Paul is saying in the book of Romans, there are several key terms which have a variety of meanings, and it is necessary to make sure one understands the terms as Paul intends or else his message becomes distorted. In the past four weeks we have looked at three of these key terms: righteousness, faith, and sin. In chapters 7 and 8 two more key terms are introduced that need careful definition, and since we’ll be in these two chapters for the next four weeks, we better make sure we understand how Paul uses them. The terms are “flesh” and “spirit”.

The 66 books of the Bible were written over a period of almost 1200 years, so it is always dangerous to assume that a word will have the same meaning every time it is used in the Bible. “Flesh” is a good example. Sometimes it refers to human beings: “all flesh will see the glory of God” means “all people will see the glory of God”. Sometimes it refers to a human body: Jesus says in John 6 “the bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Sometimes flesh is a neutral term describing human existence: Paul uses it this way in Romans a couple of times, such as at the very beginning of the letter when he says that Jesus was a descendent of David “according to the flesh”.

It is a non-Biblical understanding of “flesh” that may be most problematic in understanding Paul in Romans 7 & 8. This is because “flesh” is here contrasted with “spirit”. Our western civilization is heavily influenced by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who understood human beings as a dichotomy of body and spirit. That is, he understood humans to have an immortal spirit or soul that existed before their life on earth and continues to exist after death. Plato believed the body to be mortal and inferior, and therefore the cause of all that is evil. The spirit, on the other hand, is the source of all that is good.

You might be nodding along, thinking “Yes, that’s what I’ve always been told is the Christian understanding of the human condition, that we have a body and we have soul and that at death the soul is freed from the body.” I will acknowledge that there are many Christians over the centuries who have believed this, but it is not a Biblical teaching. It’s Plato. Certainly the Bible speaks of body (or flesh) and spirit -- or body, soul, and spirit -- but these are different ways of describing the same unity. Biblically speaking, we don’t “have” a body and “have” a soul; rather, we “are” a body, we “are” a soul. We are fully integrated, unified creatures.

When Paul speaks of “flesh” here in chapters 7 and 8, he is not describing just a portion of us, as opposed to our spirit. He is talking about our total existence lived under the power of sin. “In the flesh” describes the situation we are in as a result of our attempts to be gods for ourselves, determining our own values and courses of action (as he described in chapter 1), rather than letting God be God. For Paul, life in the “flesh”, therefore, is life in the old relationship of rebellion against God.

The contrast to this life in the flesh, says Paul, is life in the spirit. Life in the spirit is a new way of relating to God, made possible by our baptism. By being baptized into Christ’s death, or putting it another way, by participating in Christ’s death through baptism, a new relationship to God is made possible for us. This new relationship is based not on what we do, but on God’s faithfulness to his promises, which have been fulfilled in Jesus.

Paul tries to explain this by using the example of marriage laws. A marriage relationship, which is binding on husband and wife, is dissolved when one of them dies. When they are both living, the law forbids that they have an intimate relationship with anyone else. However, when one of them dies, the surviving spouse is permitted to enter into a new relationship with someone else.

Using this analogy of a new relationship permitted the surviving spouse, Paul says we, like that spouse, are now free to take a new partner – namely, Christ. His death affected our relationship to our former master, the law. In that way, the death of another has in fact affected our relationship to that law. But more importantly, his resurrection made it possible for us to find in him a new master. Like a good teacher, Paul finds different ways of saying the same thing. Back in chapter 4, he described this reality by saying Christ died for our sins (the law) and rose for our righteousness (our new relationship to him). Here in chapter 8 he is saying the same thing, but using the terms “life in the flesh” and “life in the spirit”.

Paul senses that he is coming close to saying that the law is a bad thing, that the law is the same thing as sin. He is careful to clarify that this is not what he is saying. The law is a good gift of God given to order society and to guide our actions. But, he says, the law gets used by the power of sin to drive a wedge between us and God. Sin reverses the intent of the law and causes it to bring death to our relationship with God by leading us to depend on ourselves and our moral achievements rather than depending on God and his grace. And what sin has done to the law it has also done to human beings – it takes them, good creatures of God that they are, and enslaves them to its own evil purpose. Taking the good law it has corrupted, sin uses the law to corrupt God’s good creation, so that the good creation can no longer do the good it wants to do and knows it *should* do. And that is the puzzling reality that Paul will talk about in the rest of chapter 7, which we’ll look at next weekend.