

The Spirit Is Willing, the Flesh Weak

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Genesis 25:19-34

¹⁹ These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is to be this way, why do I live?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,

'Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.'

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰ Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' (Therefore he was called Edom.)

³¹ Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' ³² Esau said, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?' ³³ Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Romans 8:1-11

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of 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 to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just 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 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.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not

have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!

¹⁸ ‘Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

The story of Jacob and Esau might seem out of place but I assure you their story is a great example for the day. We don't talk much, if at all, about birthrights these days so Esau's actions may seem insignificant or peculiar at worst. Starving figuratively, not literally, Esau is willing to do anything for some of the stew his brother, Jacob, is cooking. Myself being one of those people who is not a lot of fun to be around when I am overly hungry, I can sympathize with Esau's desire to get food, as soon as possible. Jacob, with his own judgment issues, is willing to make a trade. He offers a bowl of stew to his brother for his birthright and Esau, with a greatly exaggerated statement, gives it up freely. You see, a birthright wasn't simply dibs as the oldest. Being the eldest male meant he would receive every piece of property his father owned at the time of his father's death; every item his father valued would become his. There would be no divvying up of the assets, no selecting special mementos by each sibling. One becomes wealthy, and thus the master of his sibling if he chooses to remain on the property, and the other serves the master. For a bowl of stew, Esau gave this all up.

Without a doubt, Esau had set his mind on the flesh, as Paul would say, worrying about human comfort over following God. God's commandment to "Honor your father and your mother" was broken when Esau showed no respect for all that his father had worked to pass down to him. Jacob, of course, had his own mind set on the flesh, just in another way. Looking out for his own wealth and status, he, too, broke the commandment of honoring his father, for to turn the tables on his father's plans without consent or even communication was a sign of great disrespect. Sins of the flesh, both.

In our ongoing reading of the letter to the Romans, Paul offers great words of consolation and assurance in the opening of the chapter saying, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And then he goes and muddies the matter with talk of sins of the flesh. Sin, sin, sinful, sinful. One line of good news followed by many more with apparent bad news makes it easy to forget Paul even proclaimed condemnation done and gone. Not only might we forget that we are free of condemnation, through Christ, but we could easily begin to think the whole problem is in these mortal

bodies of ours. “Sinful flesh,” “sin in the flesh,” “the mind that is set on the flesh is death,” “those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

This text is particularly tricky in English for *we* equate flesh with our bodies. Paul, and the Greeks, did not. *Sarx*, flesh, is not the same as *soma*, body. A scholar has said, “It is not our bodies that are the problem, but whom or what our bodies serve.”¹ Remember, we are created in God’s image inside and out. Our bodies themselves are good. So what exactly is the flesh Paul is telling us about?

I’ve done a great deal of thinking about how to explain the difference between *sarx* and *soma* in a way that is clearer than just words. What I offer is the difference between a body and a person. As persons we are physical, mental, and spiritual all together, the freckle behind your left ear, the wound you carry from a friendship long lost, the simple and pure joy you know when you recall the words to *Jesus Loves Me*. These and many more physical, mental, and spiritual components make up who you are as a person. But our bodies can become idols, distractions from God as we try to elevate or numb them from their created states, seeking wealth beyond our needs, seeking substances to block our natural and God-given feelings. If we set our bodies as our focus, and how can we not, surely death awaits us. If we look to our persons as God uniquely made us each, then we cannot help but look to God and to Christ as our true example of a person not driven by the needs to elevate or numb his body or otherwise set it apart from God.

Within us then can be both death and life. Paul says, “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” So then how is it that we are “in Christ?” If Paul tells us, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” then that’s how *I* want to be; how about you? What do I *do* so that Christ is in me? We learn more in our third reading.

The reading from Matthew today is one of the many parables Christ tells, along with the explanation of that parable. A sower goes out and throws seed, a valuable commodity, everywhere. The conditions for growth are right only a quarter of the time but those seeds that “took” produced up to one hundredfold in crops. Tenfold would have been considered a bounty. Sevenfold was a good harvest. So this seemingly indiscriminate sower sows seeds wherever and various factors hamper their growth; some seed is thrown on rocky ground, some on hard ground, some on thorny ground, and some on good soil. We like to think of ourselves as the good soil - after all, we’re here this morning - we’re ready to receive whatever God is throwing our way.

Sometimes, though, if we are honest, we can admit we are more like the rocky ground, excited about God but when the going gets rough, we forget God or are sure God cannot be there. Sometimes we are

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 233.

like the thorny ground, energized by the good feeling we get with God but then we get distracted by other things that feel good like money or acclaim at work. And sometimes, we hate to admit it, we are like the hard ground, unwilling to receive God.

I began gardening a couple of years ago and it is amazing the number of things I learned that I *didn't* know about soil. For example, the soil, if you can call it that, that was left in the wake of the glaciers is clayey - marginally great for pottery, not so much for growing vegetables and fruits. Gardening soil from Walmart isn't too bad. Mulch is *really* important for keeping out weeds. And then, then, there is Mel's Mix. My brother's girlfriend gave me a book on gardening, written by a man whose first name is Mel and who has a recipe for soil that is to gardening what the Packers are to football. It's nutrient-rich - that makes sense - and fluffy - you heard me - fluffy, which allows the roots to spread out well and deep. In short, it's a winner, as long as you have the time and energy and money to invest in it. Once you make it, you shouldn't need to do anything to it for years.

The thing about clay and Walmart garden soil and mulch and Mel's Mix, it is what it is - on its own, it cannot change. It takes outside intervention, amending the soil, adding needed elements to it to make it a better medium. Same for the rocky / thorny / hard soil - it is what it is; it cannot remove its own rocks or thorns or break itself apart. And so it is with us. We are who we are. If we are to be changed to better receive God, and whatever God is sowing with abandon, whether it be faith or love or hope, God is the one who changes us. The Spirit's living within us changes us. All we can do is be ready for God to do it; and sometimes, God acts within us even before we are ready or know we need to be. Sometimes the Spirit works through others and through us to prepare the way for new growth.

So if we who look to God and listen for God and try to be ready for God to act within us are sometimes poor soil, what about our family and friends and even strangers who aren't looking for or to God or who actively eschew God? This week, as in my studies of any Scripture, I look for the good news in the Word and I ask if that good news is for everyone. At first I was worried that the good news, that condemnation is no more for those who are in Christ, meant that those I care about who question about God or doubt God or even speak against God, could not share in that good news. But the reading in Romans isn't the only place with good news.

While we may worry about ourselves and others being bad soil, the promise of hope and salvation lies not in the soil but in the sower. We might, from our human perspective, see the sower throwing seeds without planning, without discrimination. God, as the sower, though, gives all ground a chance to receive God's love and hope and faith. And, like with any farmer, God does not only sow seed on the ground once. God comes back sowing seeds of love and faith and hope season after season and the Spirit does not abandon those who turn away from the Spirit. As we read in 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is

not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” Our God is persistent and ever-hopeful that all might flourish so the good news is indeed good news for all. “There is therefore now no condemnation.” Now is ever-present, today and tomorrow and twenty years and twenty millennia from today. We acknowledge the weakness of the flesh, but we rejoice in the strength that the Spirit gives. The gift of Christ, and new life without condemnation through him, is ever-offered and ever-present to be received. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: Lord, we are ready. Amen.