



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

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Sarx Search

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Romans 8:12-17

It all started innocently enough. The church that I was serving in Kalamazoo Michigan had given each of the 3rd grade children- which included our son, David- a Bible that morning in worship. Now, even with a father and mother who were ordained clergy our son David wasn't old enough to be all that familiar with the Bible. So as his big day was coming to a close, David was in bed flipping through his brand-new Bible. I entered his bedroom to say goodnight to him. David asked a question or two about the new Bible and he was very clearly pleased with it as a prize new possession.

Then he asked” what are some of the good parts?” And without being too thoughtful of the capacity of a 3rd grader to comprehend it, I blurted out , ““My very favorite place in the Bible is in the book of Romans, chapter 8.“

I had no sooner or gotten the words out of my mouth before I was already regretting them. Here is my young son getting ready for sleep and I have picked the most theologically sophisticated part of Scripture one could imagine.

Sure enough, he said “find it in my new Bible, Dad.” And I opened to chapter 8 and he asked me to begin reading. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For the law has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do... “

With these words I knew I had raised more questions than could be dealt with in a quick bedtime reading, but I was sure that I did NOT want my young son to identify the flesh of his body as something inherently sinful. A difficult part of my own growth and faith had been the equating of the body and especially sexuality with this term “flesh.” It had taken me years to understand the differences and I surely didn't want my boy to have to go through that same struggle I had.

So I paused in the reading and said, “now, David, the flesh that is he is talking about here is not the flesh like on my arm anything else having to do with the body directly. The apostle Paul is talking about the tendency that we all have to do things that feel good for our own bodies even those that aren't healthy for us to do, or are pleasurable to us even though they hurt others. Paul is not saying that your physical body is bad. No, God made your body and your body is very good.” My interlude completed, David prodded a little more.

“We'll then, what does this ‘flesh’ mean?”

“Well, “flesh” here in English is a translation of the Greek word *sarx*. It means that self-serving tendency that we often have. And what the apostle Paul is going to say later here is that even though we are all tempted to let that *sarx* spirit guide our decisions, there is another option for us as Christian people. We can choose to be guided by the Holy Spirit instead of the flesh.”

And then there was this pause. It wasn't very long but David came back with “Is *sarx* like the way that I enjoy teasing Marie [his little sister]? I like to show that I'm smarter and stronger than she is.”

I was stunned at how right on his suggestion was.

“Yes, David, that's it, or at least that's part of it. When we act so as to make ourselves feel smarter, or stronger, or better regardless of what it does to other person, that's allowing our self to be ruled by the power of what the Bible calls the

sarx.” And with David being a student of all things Star Wars, with its emphasis on trusting the power of the Force, and avoiding the power of the Dark Side, that made sense to him.

David was then far too young to know what is natural for us as we grow spiritually. Once we come to understand the power of this *sarx* in our own lives, by feeling the tug of war within ourselves, with one spirit pulling you towards the immediate satisfaction of your own personal desires and the other calling you to live a life that was pure and holy.

It begins early and simply, like the little boy who wanted a new bicycle. His plan was to save nickels & dimes & quarters until he finally had enough to buy the new bike that was his dream. Each night he prayed to God to help him in this effort to save us money. And each prayer included the line, “please, Lord, don’t let the ice cream man come down my street again tomorrow.”ⁱ

Then as middle-schoolers the stakes get higher:

- watching as some friends begin mortgaging their futures by experimenting with sex, drugs, and alcohol;
- growing up enough to understand the relentless power of all kinds of addictions over their victims;

It is usually as a middle-schooler that we come to believe that the chief purpose of our religious life is to identify and tone down this power of the flesh. Paul would probably have been pleased to know that his writing to the church in Rome could open you and me up to understanding the power of those *sarx* realities and teaching us to focus on avoiding bad things; to attune to them in ways that will protect us and enable us to grow safely and spiritually.

But something happens to so many people. Or perhaps it would be better said, something doesn't happen. What doesn't happen is a continuing movement in

faith, a continuing growth in faith beyond this fixation on identifying what is bad, this overriding *sarx* search.

Many, many people, it seems, choose to trade in their spiritual pilgrim's tent for a solid, immovable, fortress of religious faith right there, that they defend as their purpose, their only goal until the day they graduate off this mortal coil.

Don't get me wrong, there is nothing improper about coming to this realization of the power of the flesh in one's life, It is a good and necessary part of the path. But it should be near the beginning. It should not be the place at which we stop and build ramparts.

For example take a look at what Paul does right here in the Book of Romans. In chapter 7 Paul has spent quite a lot of time making us aware of the threats and challenges to being faithful. He has spent a lot of time pointing out the power of the flesh. He has helped us focus so that we don't simply slip comfortably into life the way everybody else lives it and think that that would be adequate for us, for those of us called to live the high and holy vocation of the Christian life.

But then in chapter 8 there is a whole new tone. It begins with a rousing affirmation “ there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.” That is a joyous celebration for those of us spiritually mature enough to receive it. Freedom!

And with the gift of Freedom from compulsion to sin, or as Paul calls it, slavery to sin, with Freedom comes a new challenge for the spiritual pilgrim. Now the major challenge becomes, not untangling oneself from the gravitational pull of lower temptations:

- No, now the challenge becomes sensing your particular call to action, your particular way of living in the Holy Spirit;

- And now the challenge becomes balancing in a spiritually healthy way your life's limited time between that outward call to serve.... with the inward call to commune with God in worship and in prayer. And then, Assured of your own adoption as a child of God, the challenge is to boldly spend yourself in service to others- which is also service to God- spending yourself in ways that will sometimes be personally costly. Paul doesn't hide that element as he puts it this way, "we suffer with him [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with him." With this warning of suffering at the end of our morning reading, should we reconsider the cost of discipleship, as possibly too high?

Not according to Paul, in the very next words saying, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." [Rom. 8:18]

And as if to personally call us out from safe & predictable ruts of daily living, and to challenge each of us to go boldly about our individual ministries in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, Paul's ringing conclusion to Chapter 8 must be familiar to your ears and encouraging to your heart, " Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Let us walk forward in the strength of that conviction!

¹ Taking the Risk Out of Dying, Lee Griess, CSS Publishing Company, Inc, 1997