

## Spirit vs. Flesh

St Brandon's

Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-end

26 June 2022

*Note: due to Covid, this sermon was pre-recorded and 'played' during the service.*

I'm sorry not to be with you in the flesh this morning, but be assured that I'm with you both online and in spirit.

And that, rather ironically, couldn't be a better lead in to what I want to look at this morning. Spirit vs. Flesh. We don't use the word 'flesh' much in common usage today. Other than the example I've given – being with you in spirit if not in flesh – I think the only other reasonably common usage is when we speak of flesh-pots. The flesh-pots of Bangkok, Sunderland or wherever.

But those two usages do indicate what 'flesh' might mean. It might be just a way of describing us as human beings – we are made of flesh. And that usage is obviously morally neutral. But then there's the morally-loaded meaning, as in flesh-pots, whereby our flesh pulls us towards actions that are not good for us, will not lead to our human flourishing. And there's a sense here that flesh exerts power over us – that we find it difficult to resist even if we know that it's not good for us. As St Paul said elsewhere (in Romans 7:15), "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." There's some kind of power over us, or power within us, that makes it difficult for us always to do the things we know are good for us.

And it's in that sense that St Paul here in our reading in Galatians is using 'flesh'. And, of course, he's contrasting 'flesh' in that sense with Spirit (capital S – the Holy Spirit). In v.16 of our passage, he says, "Live by the Spirit [capital S], I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other". But then he adds, rather curiously, "to prevent you from doing what you want", as though the power associated with the flesh somehow wins out.

We'll come back to that in a moment, but what is clear is that St Paul is setting up what's sometimes called a 'dualism' – Spirit vs. Flesh – two things in opposition to one another. And it begs the question: so which will win out – Spirit or Flesh? And interestingly, if we went on a purely arithmetic basis, the examples he gives of the "works" of the flesh – fornication, impurity, and so on – total 15, whereas the examples he gives of the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace and so on – total only 9.

And to be slightly frivolous for a moment, 15-9 sounded to me like a rugby score. If you were beaten 15-9 at rugby, it would suggest quite a close game, but one in which the opposition's superiority eventually won through, particularly if their 15 points came from 3 (albeit unconverted) tries (5 points each), vs. 3 penalties (3 points each) for your side.

Is that what St Paul is suggesting – that it's a constant struggle between the Spirit (capital S) and the flesh, and that the flesh might well win out in the end? Well, yes and no. He's certainly suggesting that it's a struggle, and we might well be able to relate to that in our own lives even if our besetting sins include others besides those in his list. Yes, it is in the nature of being human that it's a constant struggle against the flesh.

But also no. No, it's not inevitable that flesh will win out in the end. For, and this is perhaps the key verse, verse 24, "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have **crucified** the flesh with its passions and desires". That's deliberately powerful language, which is meant to bring us up short and make us realise that, although a struggle, the winner is not in doubt. The Spirit **will** win out over the flesh. The Spirit **is** given to us, the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – **will** bear fruit in us.

Let me give just one example of this, taken from our Gospel reading, and then finish with a couple of other points. When Jesus and the disciples are rejected by a Samaritan village, James and John, with an astonishing degree of bravado, ask Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven to consume the people. But Jesus rebukes them and, if we take the footnote that says other ancient authorities add this, Jesus also says, "You do not know what spirit (small s) you are of, for the Son of Man [i.e. Jesus Himself] has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them".

James and John had fundamentally misunderstood what Jesus and the Holy Spirit were all about. They had assumed that punishment and violence were the order of the day, but Jesus makes clear, if we use St Paul's language, that punishment and violence are works of the flesh, and that James and John are still caught up in those and need to change. And by contrast to the works of the flesh, the work of the Spirit is not to destroy but to save – in other words to enable human beings to flourish in relation to themselves, to each other and to God.

Two final points. Does this mean that all bodily desires are wrong, that we need to live chaste lives without any degree of passion at all? Well, quite clearly no. Sexual desire, to take the most obvious example, is a gift from God to be used, in the right context of a long-term loving relationship, to give and receive pleasure. It's the distortion of that desire, as with all good desires, which makes it a work of the flesh.

Secondly, what if the flesh seems to be winning? What if it's 15-9 every time, and there doesn't seem to be much if anything we can do about it? Well partly this is about personal responsibility and a need to acknowledge our own distorted desires, but it may also be that help from others, professionals or otherwise, is needed. And there should be no hesitation or stigma associated with seeking out such help if we need it. But in addition to this, we need to remember that we have received the Holy Spirit, and that He brings about a work of God in us. It's not up to us. This is a work of grace. And God's greatest desire is not to destroy but to save, to enable, by His Spirit who is in us, an end to our distorted desires and the fulfilment of our deepest flourishing.

Amen