

Reflection on the Scripture: Romans 8:1-11

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

The way the reading from Paul goes, it sounds like you have to pick. Either you're in the body or you're in the spirit. It's like AM or FM,¹ you're either getting traffic on the 4s or you're getting the greatest hits of the 70s, 80s and 90s. And perhaps because the Church spent so many centuries telling so many people that their bodies were bad, evil, leading them astray, we kind of read into this passage from Romans that bodies are bad and spirits are good and you definitely want to ditch the body as quickly as possible.

But I don't think that's what Paul's saying. He's far too practical a Christian for that. Bodies are the whole point. Jesus was a regular person. The crucifixion and resurrection are pretty pointless if Jesus' real body wasn't involved. Jesus spent years of his ministry healing broken bodies. Bodies matter. So this message *those who are in the flesh cannot please God* (Romans 8:8) cannot mean that the point of our worldly existence is to get through it as quickly as possible, hit the eject button and return to pure spirit.

I think that Paul is arguing that we have to choose between two orientations, two alignments with the world. One is toward the ever more limited, ever diminishing range of outcomes that humanity, focusing only on the desires and needs of the body can attain. The other is toward the ever more abundant, ever increasing range of outcomes that God, through the fully human Jesus Christ, can attain.

Early in my corporate career, I had to travel. Not all the time, but not infrequently either. I would usually get to my hotel pretty late, having worked a full day in Boston and then flown to Texas or California. I'd get into my hotel and collapse. Then in the morning, I'd take a shower. Sometimes the shower was ordinary. But most times it was wonderful. Way better than my shower at home. So I decided I would shower as often as possible when I was on the road. Because it was such a pleasure and it was free and why miss out on something that lovely when all I had to do was take 10 minutes to enjoy it?

Then, one morning after a series of meetings, we got talking about how people commuted to the office. Someone mentioned that he rode his motorcycle and I said I had never been on one. And he asked if I wanted to take a ride at lunch. It was a crazy suggestion, so I said, "No." Only what came out of my mouth was "Sure." I have no idea what the next meeting was about, because all I could think about was what had possessed me to say "yes." And I decided it was that it was like the shower. Maybe it would be ordinary. But if it was wonderful, why would I want to miss out? So we went, and I didn't love the ride. It was too noisy

¹ Barbara Ann Hedin, "Romans 8:6-11." *Interpretation* 50, no. 1 (1996): 55.

and I felt the speed way too much. But I was really glad I had gone. Once I started asking myself, “but what if it’s wonderful?”, I kept finding opportunities that I should try because maybe they would be wonderful too. My new orientation, my new alignment, had me changing the way I approached the world.

That’s what I think Paul means by *living according to the Spirit* and *setting our minds on the things of the Spirit* (Romans 8:5). When *Christ Jesus set you free from the law of sin and of death* (Romans 8:2), what changed in you? How do you keep referencing that experience of freedom? How do you find different ways of expanding that freedom in your own life?

For each of us, it will be different. For some of you, it’s having a neat and tidy home because portions of your life were so chaotic that neat and tidy wasn’t possible. For some of you, it’s not having the next beer, because all the previous beers eventually led to destruction. For some of you, it’s having your own time with no people in it, because your life has had a lot of people in it, all with expectations of you that you couldn’t meet.

But whatever that first experience of true spiritual freedom was, it happened while your spirit was in your body. You needed your body to hold the experience in a particular place and time.² And you needed your body and your spirit to work together to recognize that the freedom you had first experienced over there and back then was now showing up over here and right now. And maybe it was time to give this new experience a try.

Any one experience of the spiritual freedom is probably pretty small. So it’s not the experience that Paul is so activated about. It’s that God will keep offering them. It’s that they will build on each other, interconnect with each other, building a network. It’s that one person acting on the spiritual freedom that God offers causes other folks to do so as well. We can’t create them. Only God does that.³ But we can respond to them. We must respond to them. Because once you really see one experience, you get much better at spotting the next.

That’s what makes Paul’s unbelievable statements at the beginning and end of this passage true. He began the reading by saying *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1). And he ended it with *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*

² David M. Greenhaw, “Proper 10, Pastoral Perspective, Romans 8:1-11” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 234.

³ Beverly Gaventa, “Proper 10: Romans 8:1-11” in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 403.

Spirit that dwells in you (Romans 8:11). For those experiences to build on each other, you need your body to anchor them and your spirit to recognize them. And you need a place for God to dwell in you. So don't worry about choosing between AM and FM. Just choose to keep going, listening for all the places God plays that holy music in your earthly bodily life.