

## **Flesh and Spirit**

So we are in the second week of a series on words made strange, looking at pairs of words that we obviously know the meaning of, in order to see whether in fact, our over familiarity with those words has led us to domesticate the God who utters them. So this week we are looking at Flesh and Spirit.

It tends to be more in Hollywood and other secular sources of entertainment that today, we hear phrases like 'sins of the flesh'. The assumption is always and invariably, something of a sexual nature, being fleshy. And, in Christian circles, we often buy into this definition, and then presume that if we are to withstand the temptations of the flesh, then we must rely on the Spirit.

In scripture however, being in the flesh is something much less specific than being obsessed with sex. Fleshiness, is human life without reference to God. It is living as though our fleshly existence is all there is, that there is no world beyond the immediate world of our five senses. It is very close to what today, we call 'materialism'. That is, the belief that the physical, material world is the only world there is, so we may as well make the most of it, and live as well as we can, materially.

But it is not always used in a strictly negative sense. Being in the flesh is our natural state, it is the world into which we are thrown. So Paul begins his letter to the Romans by describing Jesus as in the flesh and in the Spirit. He speaks of the Gospel concerning Gods son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, but designated son of God in power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by his resurrection of the dead, Christ Jesus our Lord.

So for Paul, living in the flesh is one thing, even Jesus himself lived 'in the flesh' – but allowing your life to be determined by the sinful flesh is quite another. But really, what does it mean to set our minds on the things of the flesh, to live without reference to God? Well, it seems to me that there might be two ways to consider this, that bring the sheer gravity of 'flesh' into view:

### **Good fleshiness**

Firstly, living in the flesh means a vulnerability that is common to all human beings. So, if you think of times when you have suffered the most, when injustice has exerted its monstrous force over your life; when inexplicable, and senselessly evil or tragic events overtake you. Real suffering I mean – where does it leave you? So many Christians, when they are in the midst of suffering, will simply say, look – I can't pray. (Obviously, the answer is probably not to give them a jolly good Christian pat on the back and encourage them to have more faith. Perhaps a better answer is to say – if you can't pray, don't worry – we'll do that for you.)

But what is the reason that those who we might say, walk in the valley of the shadow of death, cannot pray? It is because immediate circumstances are so weighty, that you cannot see beyond them. The pain of the present moment clouds our awareness of anything, or anyone or any time, that is not present. Hope in others, or in the future, is eclipsed, by our immediate situation. Of course, it would be great to

click your fingers and conjure up some sincere faith that God will make things right – but not even Jesus did that. At his lowest moment of human agony, Jesus turns round and demonstrates that he is fully human when he cries out, ‘my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ He was quoting from the psalms, which themselves are fully of people who are having a horrible time and wondering where God is when this suffering comes. This, it seems to me, is inevitable for those living in the flesh – it is perfectly human.

### **Bad fleshiness**

On the other hand, is a more culpable way of being ‘fleshly’. It happens to us even as we might think we are being utterly spiritual. Perhaps I should give an example. Seven months ago, I bought a car – the one that it seemed to me was big enough without being too big, cheap to buy, and easy to run. So I bought this car – a Rover 75, a kind of fake Jaguar. Because it was the first time in years that I had a car that looked nice – I began to notice other cars that look nice. Wouldn’t it be nice to be driving a real Jaguar! I began to notice the cars that other people were driving, and thinking to myself about how – when things are different, I could have an even more impressive car. All of these thoughts quietly, not consciously, asserting themselves. And of course, I could do a pretty good job of justifying my materialism ethically.

It’s a silly example (not just because it begs the question of who on earth would be proud about owning a Rover), but it does demonstrate how easily our circumstances dictate our ethical practices. The same was true the moment I owned a house, which is in a very public place, and wanted to improve it, and began noticing other houses, and felt the attraction of the so-called property ladder. And being human, and living in our society, it seems that all by themselves – these material objects begin to shape our motives and goals, and our lifestyle choices – and then we can go in search of theologies that justify our materialism, worship a God who is not allowed to challenge our materialism, live with an ethics that endorses materialism. None of this through conscious choice, and I would never dream of describing myself as a materialist – I’m a Christian of course. But how easily my Christianity is shaped by all the stuff that I have got for myself, all the things that I believe are necessary...

I once read that our wealth is determined not by how much we have, but by how much we need. The materialist will never be happy, because materials never bring any lasting happiness. Jesus himself had said as much when he says that instead of storing up treasures on earth, where moth and rust take their toll, we instead should be amassing treasures in heaven. In other words, the Christian life moves beyond crude materialism and its sophisticated disguises, into a life where our hopes and motives and worship genuinely engage with that which is beyond our immediate world.

### **In the Spirit**

And that is what Paul requires when he talks about life in the Spirit. Of course, it is easy to carry on as a blatant materialist, whilst using all the language of being spiritual and selfless and sacrificial. I never forget leading a bible study on consumerism in the church, and I couldn’t begin my little talk until the group leader had finished thanking God for how fulfilled her family now felt, because they had – at

last – acquired the four by four utility wagon they had been dreaming of. But all this blatant celebration of materialist religion, was couched in good old fashioned biblical, spiritual terms. Try and follow that with a talk on consumerism. How easy it is to convince ourselves that the course of life we have already chosen is human.

But to be in the Spirit is something radically different. The Holy Spirit is not a property of our human existence – it is not material, or graspable. And for many, we might therefore think that the Holy Spirit is not very practical. And that has been part of the myth of modernity – to think that flesh is exclusively human, and the spiritual exclusively otherworldly. But the presence of Jesus in the flesh transforms our understanding of human existence – the dwelling place of God is with people. Look at the artwork in the chapel. Human flesh is the tabernacle, the temple, in which the holy presence of God is pleased to dwell.

But equally, for human beings to be ‘in the spirit’, does not mean that we wander round with some distant persona of Christian otherworldliness. The indwelling of the Spirit is the recognition that God himself is here, in the midst of his people, working in them and through them. The presence of the Spirit is just that, the presence of God, here and now impinging upon all we do, taking our mortal existence and infusing it with a life whose origins lie beyond anything that our nature could muster up. It is the Shekinah glory of God, the presence of God, pitching his tent with his people, living in the camp, sharing our journey. To be in the Spirit is to be the recipient of God’s life changing grace. And that, I think is the challenge to us, whether we tend towards fleshiness because of difficult circumstances, or sinister motives hidden from ourselves. Whether our life in the flesh is accentuated by sorrow, or by greed – our flesh is not the last word, it’s not the last word because we believe in the resurrection – infusing our mortal bodies with real life. In the Spirit, is being in receipt of God’s loving kindness as a life-giving gift that comes to us from beyond our immediate – it is to be in receipt of God’s grace.

### **My grace is sufficient for you**

Paul had his own struggles in the flesh – which he described as a thorn in the flesh. And God’s word to Paul was simply this: ‘my grace is sufficient for you’. And that is perhaps either the promise or the challenge for us, depending on what form our life in the flesh may take.

To those of us weighed down by the weight of difficult circumstances, I wonder if God asks, ‘is my grace not sufficient for you?’

To those of us who have quietly become unwittingly materialistic, comes the same question, ‘is my grace not sufficient for you?’

To those who feel that they cannot cope with the pressures that face them, that same question rings – ‘is my grace not sufficient for you?’

To those with plenty, but who need plenty in order to be happy, God says again, “is my grace not sufficient for you?”

I once heard somebody speaking about his struggle with cancer – someone facing the darkest of battles, and trying not to believe in God any more, he said that he heard God ask him precisely this question, ‘is my grace not sufficient for you?’

I wonder how many of us who are chasing the tails of our own equivalent quest for that all important four by four, could even hear God ask us, 'is my grace not sufficient for you?'

For all of us, our lives are material, and defined by material needs and hopes and circumstances. But all who are Christians, are filled with the Spirit of the living God which falls upon us as a gracious gift. To all of us, living in the flesh as we do in our many and varied ways, God's voice comes to us as summons, as challenge, as invitation, as welcome – 'My grace is sufficient for you'.