

FREEDOM OF THE SPIRIT  
by Lester J. Start  
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FREEDOM OF THE SPIRIT Romans 7:14 - end

The text is a famous one: “For the good I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.” This is the problem of morality according to Paul. We often talk as if the moral problem is not knowing what is right or wrong, good or evil. The real problem, though, as Paul says, and as we realize, is that we know what is good, but we don’t do it and we know what is evil and wrong and all too often we do it. Now why?

Paul’s answer seems to be this: if I do what I don’t want to do, then something is in the way of my will, and this is sin in me. Thus, not I but human personality, a split between the spirit (pneuma) and the flesh (sarx) so that, as the next verses clearly indicate, there are two principles or laws at work within us: - delight in God by the inner spirit of man, but warring against this is a principle at work in myself which brings me into subjection to sin.

Paul is credited with making this split between the spirit and the flesh, the mind and the body which has influenced all our later thought on the nature of the self. The result has been a suspicion of the body and its desires and a tendency to separate the spirit from the tomb of the body, the mind from the machinery of the body.

In all fairness to Paul this is going too far. Usually when he speaks of the flesh as in the phrase “according to the flesh”, he is referring to the human reality, the human point of view. When he speaks of living “in the flesh”, as when he says that “those in the flesh cannot please God”, he is referring to human nature made vulnerable to sin. Man’s nature is sinful because sin invades it and directs it. But the very recognition of this moral struggle acknowledges a law of God by the mind or spirit which is separate from that of the flesh, so that one can say, “not I, but sin in me.”

This is all according to Jewish belief, incidentally. Jews believed man had both good impulses and evil impulses. But man need not submit to evil impulses. God created the law of Moses so that men could know what was good and follow it and not fall into the power of evil impulses. Knowledge of the law would save men, and Judaism was built on this belief.

But what Paul is telling us here is that it doesn’t work. Knowledge is not enough. The law is powerless to save; it simply points out my sin when the good I would do I do not and that which I would not, I do. It is an ancient problem. Other cultures recognized it. Said the Roman Stoic Epictetus of man: ” What he wants he does not do and what he does not want he does.” And Ovid, the Roman poet: “I see and approve the better but I follow the worse.”

Some find it a problem that Paul is saying this. The passage seems autobiographical. But how could Paul say this after his saving experience of Christ? Clearly it must refer to long ago. But the passage is too vivid to be put aside this way. And, besides, this attitude reflects a misunderstanding about those who live by faith. It is not the case that they are always serene. Faith is a dynamic affirmation over doubts, dread, and the voices of evil assailing us. Even Jesus struggled against temptation said “Get thee behind me, Satan,” and experienced a sense of desertion in the Garden. Augustine speaks of struggling against temptation. In a very human prayer, he said, “O Lord, make me pure and chaste, but not yet.” Pascal speaks of the heart of faith fighting the sense of meaninglessness that surrounds life. St. John of the Cross, the great mystic, speaks of the dark night of the soul. And Martin Luther is said to have thrown his inkpot at the devil — however we interpret it, this is not the act of a serene, unchallenged spirit. And Paul had his thorn in the flesh. No, the only ones who pretend everything is sweetness and light once Jesus is encountered are those commercial evangelists on TV with their slick pitch and unctuous plastic smiles. The Christian, Paul knew, struggles with sin.

Paul struggled, I am sure, as do we all. Sin need not take a crude form as in the gross sexual sins usually stressed. There are the sins of enmity, and division, and malice, as well, which can take respectable appearing forms, as we know.

But I suspect Paul did not have to struggle against these kinds of sin, although he clearly saw them in his churches. One senses another kind of problem when one reads between the lines of his letters. Here is Paul with this great vision for the Church of Christ, and here are the people misunderstanding, misbehaving, developing divisions and heresies and what all. How must he have felt? Even the Jerusalem church was alienated. Despair, disillusionment, depressions, a sense of lack of appreciation, inadequacy, black despondency must have assailed him.

Now we don’t usually look at these as sins. They aren’t directed at others. But they are directed against the person. They are destructive of the human spirit in oneself. They work to diminish the sense of human worth. They try to destroy the spirit Christ came to save. It is just as bad to judge oneself as no good as to judge another — perhaps worse, because we feel more sure of the nearer judgment.

What I am saying is that these black moods are destructive of the creative human spirit and they are sin, no less worse because they are directed at the human spirit in oneself rather than in others. And this sin of discouragement and defeat may well be the thorn in the flesh Paul complains of.

But how are we to be free of the law of sin? Specifically, how do we free ourselves from the black moods of depression and defeat, as well as the sins of anger, enmity, malice, etc. that positively assail us? How do we achieve a freedom of the spirit?

The answer is so obvious it is overlooked - - we must simply assert our freedom. We need to be reminded of the teaching of Genesis, that man is made in the image and likeness of God, and as such, shares in the creative power of God which is precisely the freedom of the spirit. Perhaps

we simply need to recognize the obvious fact that in a certain sense we are already free in that we are responsible for our moods and our actions.

Man is freedom and “We are condemned to be free,” says Sartre, the contemporary French thinker. This is not something to be argued but something to be faced. We like to say that we are the product of our environment, our heredity, our genes; we have all kinds of sciences pretending to explain how man’s actions are determined; biological determinism, sociological determinism, economic determinism, psychological determinism, political determinism. But all of these are excuses. We believe them because we want an excuse for what we are, but we are without excuse. So we blame society, our upbringing, our nature, anything — “Everyone has some weakness,” says a character in one of Thurber’s stories, “Wickedness is mine.” — because we want to flee our freedom, flee our responsibility. And this applies to our moods, our attitudes.

We often talk as if moods just come, like a cloud, or dusk at the end of the day — they just happen. “I got angry,” we say; or, “I became terribly depressed,” — or “This awful sense of inadequacy came over me,” or “This dreadful sense of hopelessness and loneliness hit me.”

But this isn’t what happens, says Sartre. Anger doesn’t just appear. We make ourselves angry — we see red, we talk loudly, shout, whip up a real rage — but we do it. And we make ourselves sad, too, in a similar way. We meditate on the mournful until we develop the mood. And we can focus on all the reasons why we should feel inadequate and find it so; we cultivate depressing thoughts and make ourselves depressed. We do it. Believing makes it so —. There is nothing out there, says Sartre, that can determine the human spirit except our freedom. Blaming events is a cop-out. No matter how terrible the situation, how great the pressure and a typical theme in Sartre is the situation of a man in the underground in France being tortured by the Gestapo to give up vital information —no matter how extreme the situation, one can always say no. If one says he cannot stand the torture another moment, he must realize he is the one that determines this, that he couldn’t hold out another minute, ten seconds. Negation is the fundamental form of freedom. The child who throws his cereal is expressing his first awareness of freedom of saying no. One can always say no.

Strong stuff, this, and hard doctrine in a secular philosophy. But it bears a curious relation to the theological principle of guilt. Both insist on our responsibility. And responsibility implies freedom. There is the claim we are free from external determinism, definition — we can always say no, whatever the temptation, coercion — we are responsible —guilty—. But there is here no sense of the freedom for which our lives might find a sense of direction or fulfillment. Dostoevski says somewhere, “If there were no God everything would be permitted.” Sartre says there is no God and everything is permitted. There is no guide and his liberty is no liberation.

A similar teaching is found in the ancient Stoics who flourished in Rome before and during the early days of Christianity. The Stoics taught that it is not the event, but our judgement on the event that spells the difference between serenity and misery, peace and anguish, happiness and despair. Failure happens to all of us — but not everyone needs to be defeated by it. It can be the occasion for a new beginning. That’s up to you. Sickness comes to all. Loss and bereavement come to all, but one need not be destroyed by it. One can convince oneself that all joy is gone

forever. Or cherished golden memories can be woven into the fabric of on-going life. That's up to you. Here is how our freedom is expressed.

Again, the Stoics taught wherever a man lives, he can live well. Paul expresses this, too, when he says, "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, to be content." Life is like a stage, as Shakespeare later said. We are called upon to play many different roles. If a long one, then long. If short, then short. Illustrious or humble, noble or ordinary, our job is to play the role to the hilt. The choice of the role is up to the Playwright, God. This is Stoic teaching.

The Stoics were an impressive group. They taught that the world was ordered by a power they called *logos*, which means "reason or word". This is the word found in the Gospel of John – "In the beginning was the Word."

They said all men are fellow-citizens in one world under Zeus. Some taught that human slavery was wrong when Paul was saying that Christians should be kind to their slaves. Christianity embraced much of Stoic wisdom and ethics - but there was something it lacked. It taught responsibility and freedom, but not hope and creative affirmation. Its freedom, again, is best seen as assessing guilt, responsibility. It is not yet an affirmation of liberation. It is not positive, creative. It is the wisdom of a world grown weary.

This is why Christianity triumphed over Stoicism. Triumph, not simple endurance, is the promise of Christianity. Not just responsibility and guilt, but a way to victory over the lower impulses is promised. And a new birth in the creative spirit of Christianity. Romans 8 continues: "There is, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." There is a higher level of freedom than that suggested by our responsibility and guilt. By an identification with Christ we can assert the power of the spirit over the flesh and live in the spirit rather than by the weakness of the flesh. This means we can call upon the creative power of God in which we share to free us from our destructive moods and create a new spirit within us. This means we can be assured of the creative love of God to work with us, in us, in all things to bring about that which is good. No matter what the situation, there is the love of God through Christ to point the way. Not only then do we find the freedom of the spirit to mean we are responsible for what we are — but further that the Spirit of God, through the love of Christ, lifts us to an ever more creative mode of life. As Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

Therefore, let us not sin against the human spirit in us by falling prey to dark moods. Let us see the wisdom of saying, when we feel down, "I'm not myself today," — and look up to assert the true self. As Paul said, "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

"Finally, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things, " - and live in the freedom of the spirit.

PRAYER: Almighty God, Who makest the stars to move in their courses and yet, dost watch over the tiniest creature so that not one sparrow can fall without Thee, we praise Thee and give Thee thanks for the power which flows into our lives from Thee and for Thy protecting care which covers us in a blanket of love. We thank Thee for Thy gifts of truth, beauty, and goodness which can never die, even when men would drag Thy priceless gifts in the dust. We thank Thee for the inner voice of faith which assures us of Thy presence and power when we feel alone and powerless. And for the light of conscience which gives us a pencil-gleam guide through the confused darkness of human actions, we do give Thee thanks.

As we praise Thee for Thy gifts to the children of men, O God, help us to be worthy to receive these gifts. Teach us to follow the guide of the highest that is in us, and live a quality of life a little lower than the angels, rather than a little higher than the beasts, and so live as true children of God. Help us to follow the spirit that springs from the serenity of feeling the tidal pull of Thy love, and as we receive love from Thee, teach us to express this love to others, seeing in every life our lives touch another expression of Thy creative love. And help us, O God, to deal with our moods. Sober and humble us if we are filled with pride or indifference. But lift us if we are low in spirit. Above all, save us from the dark sins of despair and despondency. Teach us to measure ourselves by the highest we know and express. May we trust in our higher selves.

Teach us, O God, to consider others; make us slow to judge, ready to understand. When we feel annoyed with another, may we consider the burdens he may be laboring under, and sympathize. Heal us from the near-sightedness which keeps us interested only in our own well-being. Teach us to help and pray for our fellowmen, suffering because of the sins of mankind, sins in which we share. May we remember those in sickness, sorrow, doubt or despair and support them with our prayers and deeds, and so share in the light of Thy love and truth.

As we thus light candles in witness of Thy Presence in our lives, may we not be weary in well-doing because the light seems small, for its beams will travel far in the darkness. And as more and more lights are lighted, small though they be, may they merge to form a halo of light over all the world to dispel its darkness and illumine the very face of God.

We pray in the spirit of Thy Son.

Amen.