Romans 8:1-11

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 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 Spirit that dwells in you.
Not Guilty

When Sandy and I first started dating (we actually met for the first time on July 19, 1997—twenty years ago this week), one of the simplest and cheapest dates was to rent a movie from the video store. Most of you are old enough to remember video stores. But if you’re under twenty-five and don’t know what I’m talking about, a video store was an actual store that rented movies. This was before streaming and downloading brought movies to your computer. If you wanted to select a movie to watch at home, you first had to leave home and go to the video store.

Usually Sandy and I would look for a movie that neither of us had seen, but once in a while I would introduce her to a favorite movie of mine that she had not seen. Of course, I hoped that she would like it too. Part of the fun of those first few weeks of dating is discovering each other’s tastes in things like music and movies.

One night I introduced her to one of my favorite movies [SLIDE]…12 Angry Men. 12 Angry Men is a classic courtroom drama from 1957. Although it’s a courtroom drama, only one scene takes place in the courtroom, and that’s at the beginning of the movie. Almost the entire movie takes place in the jury room, where the twelve men in the title debate the guilt or innocence of a teenage boy who has been accused of murdering his father. Whatever verdict they reach—guilty or not guilty—must be unanimous. That’s the law for criminal cases tried by a jury. If found guilty, the boy will face the death penalty.

Before the members of the jury begin their discussion, they take a preliminary vote by show of hands to see where they stand. The vote is 11-1 in favor of conviction. The one vote for not guilty belongs to Juror 8 (all of the characters remain nameless), a man in a white suit with a soft spoken voice but firm principles. He tells his fellow jurors that he cannot vote to convict because he has a reasonable doubt about the boy’s guilt. He wants to discuss the case further.
Because Juror 8 is the lone holdout against conviction, he must persuade the others to his point of view. He attempts to do just that. He is able to prove that the knife used in the murder is not as unique as they think it is, but this doesn’t persuade anyone to change his vote. After more arguing back and forth they find that they are at an impasse—no one’s mind is changed either way. Acknowledging the frustration of the eleven, Juror 8 proposes that they have a second vote, this time by secret ballot. He will abstain from the vote. If the vote is 11-0 to convict, he promises to go along with the majority and vote guilty. I’m going to show you the scene in which the results of the second vote are calculated [VIDEO].

The movie continues in that fashion. One by one, using reason and logic, Juror 8 wins converts to the side of acquittal. He exposes the flaws in the prosecution’s case such that any honest man would have to admit a reasonable doubt about the boy’s guilt. The last holdout is Juror 3, the angry man in the video clip. The climax of the movie comes when it’s revealed that his reason for continuing to vote guilty has less to do with the facts of the case and more to do with the anger that he has against his own son with whom he has a broken relationship and who is just a few years older than the boy on trial. When he at last admits this to himself he breaks down and changes his vote to not guilty.

12 Angry Men is a remarkable film. When I watched it with Sandy the first time, she immediately rewound the tape (that’s what you needed to do in those days) and watched the movie again. No matter how many times I’ve seen it, I can watch it again and again. I never cease to be inspired by Juror 8, who is a model of decency and integrity. I’m not alone in that assessment. The American Film Institute rated the character 28 on the list of all-time movie heroes.

Maybe it’s my Christian lens through which I view the film, but I can’t help but see some parallels between Juror 8 and Jesus Christ. While he acknowledges that the boy may be guilty, rather than rush to judgment, Juror 8 espouses mercy. He takes up the
cause of the one who is already condemned. To do so he is willing to stand alone and face the ridicule and scorn of others.

It’s not of the exact same category or degree, but this is in some way what Jesus Christ does for us. He comes to our defense. He takes our side. He makes the case for mercy. He is willing to endure scorn and ridicule on our behalf.

One important difference between Jesus and Juror 8, however, is that our guilt is not in doubt. We are guilty. That makes it all the more amazing that Jesus is for us. Another difference is that rather than simply advocate for the condemned, Jesus is willing himself to be condemned in our place.

In Jesus Christ, we have been declared “not guilty.” “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). It’s over. It’s done. The jury has come back with the verdict. Not guilty. We are free to go.

Today we begin a three-week series through chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Romans. It’s a pivotal chapter in a pivotal book of the Bible. Romans is a book of profound theology. In it Paul makes a series of connected arguments that he begins in chapter 1 and continues throughout the entire book. It’s therefore difficult to jump into the letter midstream like this, but I think it would be even more difficult to wade through 16 chapters. I wouldn’t want to subject you to that, nor would I want to subject myself [SLIDE].

But before we dive into chapter 8, we can at least get our feet set so that we know where we are as we begin this journey. Romans was probably written in the year 57. Paul is writing from Corinth to the church in Rome, a church that he did not found but where there are many people that he knows. The letter was likely delivered and possibly read in public by Phoebe, a deacon of the church and a financial supporter.
of many in the church, including Paul. Let’s note that female leadership within the
church is as old as the Bible itself.

Paul’s reason for writing the letter has to do with tensions that have developed in
Rome and elsewhere between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, between
those who do not keep the law and those who do. In the minds of some Gentile
Christians, the fact that many Jews have rejected the gospel suggests to them that
God has rejected the Jews. Paul writes to argue that there is but one gospel for all
people, and it was first made known to Israel through the law and then later,
through Jesus Christ, to the entire world [SLIDE].

Paul spends the first seven chapters of Romans diagnosing the problem of the
human condition—the condition of both Jews and Gentiles. What is the problem?
Sin. Paul has a rather robust understanding of sin. We tend to think of sin as “sins,”
i.e., things that God doesn’t want us to do. Do not lie. Do not lust. Do not envy. That
is a very narrow definition of sin and not at all what Paul has in mind.

We could expand the definition to include not just the evil we do but the good that
we do not do. The stranger whom we choose not to welcome. The poor whom we
choose to ignore while rushing out to buy the latest electronic gadget that we don’t
need. That would get us closer, but it still wouldn’t capture what Paul means when
he speaks of sin.

We could expand the definition even further to include systemic sins that are built
into the structure of our societies, like racism, economic exploitation of the poor so
that we can have cheaper products, and our disposable society that treats the Earth
like one enormous trash can. Again, that would bring us closer to what Paul means
by sin but it still would not cover the full scope of the term.
When Paul writes of human beings and sin he uses words like “slavery,” “captive,” and “bondage.” Sin, as Paul understands it, is not a thing that we do or don’t do, it’s a power, a force that enslaves human beings and works against God. It’s a power that is actively opposed to God and seeks to twist God’s good creation to evil ends.

Sin is so powerful that it can even overwhelm God’s law, which is good and was given to Israel as an act of love and grace. How does sin do this? If you have children or have ever been around children you’ll know. When you tell a child not to do something, you virtually guarantee that they will do it. My mother tells this story about my older brother Steve. When he was a child she once told him not to touch something or other. I don’t remember what it was. Maybe she had just polished the furniture and didn’t want his fingerprints on the end table. What’s the first thing he does? With my mother still looking at him, he ever so lightly taps his finger on the table and says, “I touched it!”

Paul says that it’s the same with sin and the law. In saying “Do not covet,” the law creates the desire to covet. The law is good, but sin—again, sin as a force, a power—corrupts the good intention of the law. As Paul writes in Romans 7, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin” (Rom. 7:14).

“I am of the flesh” [SLIDE]. Now we get to the heart of today’s passage. We have to be careful in how we understand Paul’s use of some words. By “flesh,” Paul doesn’t mean the body. Paul is not saying that our bodies are evil. There is an unchristian dualism that sometimes infects Christianity. A dualism that separates spirit from body and declares spirit good and the body evil. By this way of thinking, we should want to escape our evil bodies and fly to heaven, a realm of so-called pure spirit.

The early Church declared this view heresy, but it survives within the Church to this day. We see it wherever Christians reduce the gospel to believing in Jesus so that you can go to heaven—the rest of the world be damned, literally. They seem to
forget that Jesus doesn’t tell his disciples to flee from the world. He sends them into the world to make disciples because the kingdom of heaven has come near.

We see it wherever Christians don’t take seriously the damage that human beings are doing to God’s creation. Last week there was a news report of a massive block of ice—one of the largest ever recorded—that broke away from Antarctica. It’s an ominous sign for the future as global temperatures and sea levels continue to rise because of human activity. We forget that while God has given human beings dominion over the Earth, it’s a dominion that reflects God’s dominion over us. God’s dominion expresses caring and concern for God’s creation. It’s not about exploitation. It’s not about power for power’s sake. Creation, like the body, is good.

So when Paul talks about the flesh, he doesn’t mean the body; he means our rebellion against God. He means the way that we choose ourselves rather than God. Think of flesh as a relentless selfishness. Flesh is not a physical state. Flesh is not “flesh and blood.” Flesh is not the same as the body. The body is not evil. God gave us our bodies. Our bodies reflect God’s goodness.

The flesh, on the other hand, is a way of being in the world that resists and rebels against the will of God. “To set the mind on the flesh is death,” Paul writes (Rom. 8:6). God’s creative power is expressed in life. In creation God brings forth life from nothingness. In the resurrection of Jesus, God brings forth life from death. If God’s creative power is expressed in life, then sin, that force that is opposed to God, leads to death.

“To set the mind on the flesh is death” [SLIDE]. That doesn’t mean just biological death. The power of death doesn’t wait for the moment of our dying. When we, as individuals of the flesh, rebel against God and choose selfishness—the selfishness of greed, the selfishness of lust, the selfishness of stubbornness, our relationships die. When we, as a community of the flesh, rebel against God and choose the selfishness
of America first or Korea first or the Church first, our community dies. Our selfishness is literally killing us.

It’s almost enough to make you despair. Paul seems on the verge of it at the end of chapter 7 when he writes, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). But here in chapter 8 we reach the turning point. In chapters 1-7 Paul laid out the problem, but now here in chapter 8 he presents to us the solution [SLIDE]:

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

There is no condemnation. Sin and death, however powerful, were no match for the Spirit of God. The law of sin and death enslaved us and held us captive, but the law of the Spirit of life has set us free. The Spirit has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. We who were dead in sin are now alive in Christ.

In Christ. That’s the key phrase, isn’t it? You might be asking yourself, “How do I know if I’m in Christ? Is it something I say? Is it something I do?” We’re all here in this worship service, presumably, because we’re Christians. But even as Christians we don’t always feel close to Jesus Christ. We often keep him at a distance. We even at times run from him. Or we may feel that he has hidden his face from us. Does that mean that we’re not in Christ? Do we need to say the sinner’s prayer? Do we need to get baptized again to recapture that feeling of closeness we once had?

No and no! To be in Christ is not a feeling. It’s not a mood. To be in Christ is not our doing at all [SLIDE]. “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do” (Rom. 8:3). God has done it. So, first of all, to be in Christ is not something that we do for ourselves. It’s something that God does for us.
To be in Christ is to be set free from sin and death. The Spirit of Jesus Christ has freed us from the law of the flesh—this downward spiral of sin, guilt, and despair that leads only to death. That is the way things were. That is not who we are. Listen to Paul’s words: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Rom. 8:9). He is writing in the present tense. “You are in the Spirit.” Life in the Spirit is not a future hope that waits for heaven and eternal life. Life in the Spirit is for us a present reality. Life in the Spirit is life here and now.

God is our judge, and the judge has rendered a verdict of “not guilty” [SLIDE]. To live in the Spirit is to live as people who have been declared “not guilty.” We are free from condemnation. But that’s only half the story. We’re not only free from, we’re also free for. Life in the Spirit means a life that’s free to live for God. We are now free to go and live as God wants us to live. We are free to make peace, free to forgive, free to reconcile, free to work for justice, free to show mercy, free to offer hope, and free to love as Jesus Christ has loved us. You heard the verdict: not guilty! Therefore, you are now free to go.