

Beethoven is arguably one of the world's greatest composers. His 9th Symphony is arguably his greatest work. And within the 9th Symphony, the 4th movement with its vocal soloists and choir singing a triumphant hymn to joy. It is arguably one of the greatest 24-minute periods in the history of western music.

We have a similar situation with the Epistle to the Romans. We're in the middle of 14 weeks of Romans from mid-June through mid-September. And for the next 3 weeks, our readings come from the glorious 8th chapter of Romans.

Like the 9th Symphony, Romans is arguably Paul's greatest theological masterpiece. And in the midst of Romans, the 8th chapter is arguably the greatest chapter in any of Paul's writing, if not the greatest chapter in the entire New Testament.

So I want to deal with Romans 8 these next 3 weeks. During this pandemic we're trying to shorten the services. Thus I'm preaching only half-length sermons. So 3 half-sermons will not even begin to scratch the surface of the depths of Romans 8. But I will get to talk about a few of the high points.

The glorious 8th chapter of Romans begins with a "therefore." Paul' has been leading up to this statement for a while. And now he gets to it:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."¹

This is huge—don't miss it. So many of the discussions throughout Christian history have been about salvation. And in this part of the world that topic of salvation is often heavily emphasized: "Where will you spend eternity?" Are you going to heaven, or not???

Paul is really taking that discussion off of the table here.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Those Christians who trust/believe/have faith/pledge allegiance to Jesus and have been baptized into his death and resurrection, they don't have to worry about such questions anymore. Now there is no condemnation.

I meet Christians who are worried about doing something bad and having God send them to hell. But Paul takes that off the table. "There is... no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

So the questions, or the worries about where you'll spend eternity are off the table for Christians. As Paul says at the end of our reading today,

"If the Spirit of (the God) 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."²

¹ Rom 8:1

² Rom 8:11

God will raise up those who believe in his son. Full stop. End of discussion. So we don't need to focus on the question, "Where will you spend eternity." We will spend eternity with God.

But in the rest of our section of Romans 8 that we read this morning Paul wants us to focus on something else. And it's something we often misunderstand in our culture.

Paul spends a fair amount of time contrasting the flesh versus the spirit. We've often misinterpreted "the flesh" to mean the things we do with our bodies versus our spiritual sides. In fact, we often interpret "the flesh" narrowly as a euphemism for sex. But this is off target.

When Paul says, "the flesh" the word encompasses not only our bodies, but also our minds, also our desires and emotions, also our wills. It really encompasses the whole human self—everything except our spiritual side is "the flesh."

In fact, there's a newer and very solid Bible translation that I'm becoming more and more fond of, the Common English Bible, or CEB.

Our passage this morning contains the word "flesh" used 10 times.

But the CEB translates that word more accurately for our culture. Instead of, the flesh, the flesh, the flesh, the flesh... it translates the word as, "selfishness," and "selfish things," and being "self-centered." That's what Paul is really arguing for. We need to focus on moving away from selfishness and being self-centered. We need to move towards the things of God, God's spiritual mindset. We need to move beyond ourselves and expand our horizons to include loving God, and loving others.

The classic term given this process is sanctification. As we mature spiritually, God helps us to grow less selfish and more and more concerned about loving God and loving other people.

Selfishness is the result of millions of years of evolution. In evolution, you protect yourself and those who share your genetic material. Thus the processes of evolution are inherently selfish. And selfishness will get you to a certain point. But you have to move beyond that. You have to move from the flesh, from selfishness, to being spiritual, to being concerned about more than yourself, to being focused outwardly on God and on others.

We also have to do this in our lives. We start as infants. Infants are the most selfish human beings possible—they only are aware of their own needs and they try desperately to get those needs met. And as we grow we become aware of others. And we have to be taught to share our toys and to play nicely with others and to follow those social norms that allow society to function.

And in the same way, Paul is saying we all need to grow beyond selfishness. We need to embrace the life of the Spirit. That's a tough struggle. Just because we become believers doesn't mean we arrive instantly. But we have to try to grow spiritually, to mature spiritually, to

transcend our innate selfishness, in order to be more and more like the perfect human, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus not only brings us the gift of eternal life. He helps us to experience true life and peace in this life, by loving God and by loving our neighbors. Paul says this explicitly:

"To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

There is no condemnation. That's off the table for Christians. So worry about something more important. Seek to mature spiritually, to live according to the Spirit and not your selfish nature.

That is truly the path to life and peace.