

## How to Have a Closer Relationship with God

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Lent, April 1, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 116:1-9; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:(1-16), 17-45.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

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The events of this past week have all worked together to encourage me to have a closer relationship with God. About a month ago I became vaguely aware of something being not quite right but didn't really think too much about it. Last Friday morning, however, I began to pay closer attention and became mildly alarmed. I scheduled an appointment at the medical center that morning where I could get in right away. After an examination the doctor referred me to see a specialist that same afternoon in Lancaster. After the examination, which included a sonogram, the doctor told me, frankly, that he was very concerned about what he saw, that something was definitely not right, and that he was fairly sure that I had a malignant tumor. He scheduled me for surgery as soon as possible, which was last Monday.

After the surgery I spent several anxious days awaiting the results which came on Thursday. Doctor Pohl's first words were, "I have relatively good news for you. It's a semanoma. It's cancer but it's a type of cancer very easily cured or destroyed. If I had to have cancer", he said, "and I could choose what kind it would be it would be what you have. The recovery rate is 98% or better with radiation treatment. Unlike some cancer cells, semanoma is very sensitive to radiation and is destroyed by even low levels." So I'll be having 17 treatments of radiation in Lancaster beginning Tuesday. Other than feeling like someone just kicked me in the groin I feel wonderful.

The events of the past week have made me very aware of my mortality. I believe and am confident that this cancer will be destroyed but I also realize, as St Paul says, that my body is mortal. That's why I'm so glad that Christ is alive and that the risen Christ gives us his Spirit as a guarantee of eternal life. That Spirit working in us draws us into a closer and closer relationship to one another and to the Lord. That same Spirit will lift us up one day from the dead into the very presence of Christ.

Now I want you to listen once more to a portion of our Epistle lesson. <sup>Romans</sup> In chapter 8 Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit lives or dwells in everyone who has placed their faith in Christ. And when we die physically, that same Spirit which raised Jesus will raise us to new life. The Holy Spirit lives, not just in the charismatic who's been given extraordinary gifts of the spirit like tongues, but in every ordinary Christian who sincerely trusts in Christ for salvation and eternal life. The Spirit of Christ is in the teenager who sincerely trusts in Christ. The Spirit of Christ is in the doubter who struggles with belief and cries out to God, "I believe, help thou my unbelief." The Spirit of Christ is in the business woman and business man, in the teacher and factory worker who trusts in Christ.

The Spirit is not necessarily manifested by spectacular signs. Rather the Spirit manifests itself by what it is we've set our minds upon, what our goals are, what our priorities in this life are. If we set our minds on the flesh, St Paul says, we've set our minds on death. But when we set our minds on the Spirit we're drawn closer and closer to the heart of God.

St. Paul says, "To set the mind on the flesh is death". I'm concerned by what the teenager understands when he or she hears those words. I'm concerned that the teenager might hear that as bad news. When I was a teenager I was very much concerned about my flesh, and in particular,

pimples on my flesh. I'd examine my face every morning in the mirror and apply clearasil. And I was also very much interested in the flesh of others, especially girls. I was concerned about my looks and my popularity. I was very much concerned about my body. So I wonder if you, as a teenager, hear St Paul telling you that, as a Christian, you can no longer set your minds on these things. If that's what you understand Paul to say I don't believe you'll be hearing what God wants you to hear. I believe that God has good news for you, not bad.

I'm also concerned by what adults understand when they hear Paul say, "Do not set your minds on the flesh." I think of the factory worker. I think of the school teacher, the business woman or the business man who hears this. I wonder if, perhaps, what you understand Paul saying is this: Don't set your minds on practical, down to earth, things about how to make a living, or how to attract more customers or clients. Rather think about spiritual things that don't have anything to do with this world. If that's what you understand, you won't be hearing the word of God correctly.

By flesh, Paul doesn't mean this flesh on our bodies. The Bible never teaches that the body is sinful. Everything God created is good. Our bodies are good. Our flesh and bones are good and necessary to ordinary life. God came in the flesh in Jesus. God was once a teenager. God was once a carpenter. God knows what its like. Paul doesn't mean that thinking about and showing concern for physical things is sinful.

Rather, when Paul speaks of flesh, he speaks of sinful human nature which doesn't take God into account, that isn't concerned about God's will for our lives or for this earth, that's not concerned about the relationship we have to God. People who set their minds on the flesh, in this sense, don't hear God speaking; don't see signs of God's kingdom in this world.

They don't care what God says about the poor and the suffering. They don't care about those who don't yet know of God's love for them in Christ. Their eyes are focused on the flesh, on the immediate, on what concerns them alone, on what can be seen or heard or touched with the hands.

The man who sets his mind on the flesh looks at a woman and sees only a beautiful body, a sexual object, but not a person who loves and hurts and has hopes and dreams. The doctor who sets her mind on the flesh looks at a patient only as a living machine. The businessman who sets his mind on the flesh sees a person only as a client or a prospect, rather than a person created in the image of God. The student who sets her mind on the flesh goes to college for the sole purpose of being trained to make more money. The person who sets his mind on the flesh may invest his money wisely, buy the best insurance, get regular health check-ups, provide well for family, make out a will but not take eternity into account and not take into account what life in this world is meant to be.

The mind that's set on the flesh, Paul says, is hostile to God; doesn't submit to God's law: indeed, cannot. The mind that's set on the flesh can't please God. When our minds are set on the flesh, in this sense, we move further and further away from the source of all life. We move further and further from God until we've removed ourselves from the source of our life.

To set one's mind on the Spirit, on the other hand, is to hear a word that comes from eternity. To set our minds on the Spirit is to discover what it means to be truly human, and what God requires of us. To set one's mind on the Spirit is to see the Kingdom of God, to see beyond our own narrow concerns, without altogether ignoring our own concerns. To set our minds on the Spirit is to see the purpose for which God created us. When we set

our minds on the Spirit we're drawn closer and closer to God.

This past week has helped me to keep my mind set on the Spirit. I've been confronted with my mortality. I've been confronted with the truth of old Gospel chorus I used to sing in college chapel,

Only one life,  
I will soon be past.  
Only what's done  
For Christ will last.

As we set our minds on the Spirit of Christ, the purpose of Christ, the love of Christ, we're drawn closer and closer to God. This doesn't happen in isolation from others. As we're drawn closer to God, we're simultaneously drawn closer to one another. We come into a closer relationship to God in community, in the church.

This week I got a get well card. On the outside a brown robed monk says, "While you're getting better, remember: Somebody up there cares about you." Inside it reads, "P.S. Somebody down here does too!" When we have our minds set on the Spirit we know those two things are true. It doesn't mean that we never sin or that we never make mistakes. It does mean that it's God who gives our life meaning. It's God who alone can show us the purpose of our life. God above cares about me. Brothers and sisters in Christ here below care about us. We're drawn closer to God in community with others who know and trust Christ. We remind one another that there's a world beyond ourselves; there's a Word that comes to us from eternity. Thanks be to God. Amen.