

# Romans 8.5–9

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## *Peace*

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### **Lost in translation**

If you've ever been on holiday to a foreign country, you'll know that – most of the time – people are pretty good with English, to our great shame. But sometimes translations don't come out quite right. I've got a few here on-screen that I found online. **J**

We have a little of this going on in our reading this morning. If you were following the reading from Romans in one of the church Bibles, you will have spotted that there were some pretty major differences between what it says, and what Jo read. This bit of Romans 8 is in fact one of the notorious parts of the original NIV, which in most respects is actually a pretty good translation.

But not here.

# Controlled? Sinful Nature?

To show what I mean, take a look at **§** v6 in the church Bibles:

**§** The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.

*Romans 8.6 (NIV 1983)*

The translators have added in extra words to ‘help’ us, but they are making it worse. Neither the word ‘sinful’ nor the word ‘man’ appear in the sentence Paul actually wrote. And neither does the word ‘controlled’, which pops up again in v8:

**§** Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

*Romans 8.8 (NIV 1983)*

This suggests that there is something called a ‘sinful nature’ which ‘controls’ people so they are unable to please God. But the issue is, Paul’s sentence does not include the words for ‘controlled’, ‘sinful’ or ‘nature’.

Friends, there is nothing inside you that controls you, other than you – you alone are responsible for your thoughts and actions, and one day God will hold you to account for them.

And also, God does not want to control you like some heavenly puppet-master. Sometimes people invite God to come and ‘take control’ – there are even some songs that do that – and I suspect they come from people who have been reading bad translations of the Bible.

Did Jesus live among us to ‘take control’? No – in fact he did the complete opposite. He allowed himself to be subjected to human cruelty, even causing many to reject him as God’s Son, because surely someone with all that power *would* ‘take control’?

But no: that is a human way of thinking, and it is not the way God thinks. Jesus came to open his arms wide and *invite* us home. Jesus does not grab us by the scruff of the neck and drop-kick us into the kingdom of God, whether we like it or not.

## **Mindset**

Imagine this scenario. Three years ago, I had fallen in love with Jess. We had been going out for about four months, and things were looking very promising, so much so that I started to think about how and when I might propose.

I can’t tell you how many brain cycles, how much brain power I expended on planning that proposal.

But one thing I did not consider, was tricking her into marrying me, or worse kidnapping her and forcing her to marry me.

No: when I proposed, *I asked a question*. I said, ‘Jess, will you marry me?’ (Or words to that effect.) And she said, ‘Yes!’ and threw herself into my arms so hard that I nearly fell over backwards, to the amusement of a group of builders who were watching us!

Marriage is not about control, but mutual and shared love.

Love is not about control; love is about invitation and response.

So where does that leave us with this bit of Romans? Sometimes people dismiss Paul as complex, confusing – and even plain wrong. I agree Paul’s letters are often complex and sometimes confusing.

But, tempting though it can be to disagree with Paul, we need to trust God’s word, and allow *it* to correct *our* way of thinking, rather than the other way round.

There’s a little word that I think helps us with these verses: **mindset**. It’s not about control, it’s about our *mindset*, it’s about *what we set our minds on*, what we focus on, what *drives* us, because what we set our minds on determines our direction of travel.

# Flesh

Close your church Bibles, and look at verses 5-6 with me, from the NRSV translation, which is much closer to the original Greek **J**.

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.

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

*Romans 8.5-6 (NRSV)*

Paul gives us a simple choice here: flesh or Spirit, death or **life and peace**? Paul says that what we do here and now *matters*, because our mindset, what we set our minds on, sets our direction of travel.

So what do *you* set your mind on? Is it set on **the flesh**?

Now, by **the flesh** Paul doesn't mean our bodies. God gave us physical bodies and a physical world to make the most of and enjoy. Our souls are not 'trapped' inside a 'cage'. 'You' are not a soul, waiting to be freed from an evil body. 'You' are a person, made up of mind, body and soul. So when Paul says **to set the mind on the flesh is death**, he doesn't mean our bodies are evil.

No, **flesh** is Paul's way of summarising all these lovely things:

- Broken, corrupted human nature
- Fallen, unredeemed humanity
- The tendency to sin, which all are born with
- Self-centred desire, greed, pride

**Flesh** is Paul's way of summarising all that is bad within us. We need to deal with all that stuff, before we can find peace. It's no good indulging it, it's no good setting out minds on fleeting pleasures; if we do that we will always be restless, never satisfied – because God made us to be satisfied in *him*, and quite frankly nothing else will do!

Imagine working through a long day, missing lunch because you're so busy, and being given a single grape for your dinner – it might be tasty, but it's simply not enough!

The solution is not in indulging whatever desires make us feel good for a few moments, as if the more we indulge, the happier and more peaceful we will be – in fact usually the opposite is true: the more we indulge, the *less* content we become. Instead of being satisfied, we become *insatiable*.

# Peace

**I** *like* peace, especially when it goes with ‘quiet’! But I’m not very good at it. I struggle to be peaceful.

I often need to put the radio on to go to sleep: something to focus on to stop all the thoughts swirling round my head. Even in my dreams I can’t escape work, and it exhausts me. I find it ever so difficult to switch off, and so I struggle with the temptation to drink more than I should, or to waste my day off by binge-watching Netflix – anything to distract me, to turn my brain off for a few hours.

But none of that helps me find peace – you know why? Because I’m not turning to the *only* source of peace: God.

When I let my mind run away with the list of tasks I haven’t finished yet, when I let my mind think through every permutation of a situation I’m facing, I am setting my mind on the flesh. I am effectively saying to God, ‘What’s most important is that I finish my todo list every night, because when I don’t it stresses me out.’

But what’s *actually* most important is that I spend time with God, setting my mind on *him*, dragging it away from my jobs – no matter how worthy they might be.

I am ashamed to admit that far too often I don't pray during the day because, **J** 'I have too much to do.' At least, that's what I tell myself. And when I tell myself that, what is my mind set on? The things of the Spirit, or the things of the flesh?

Is it any wonder I struggle to find peace? I give in to the lie that if I finish my list of tasks, *then* I will be able to relax, *then* I will find peace. But the truth is, the list of tasks never ends. We are so good at telling ourselves, 'When this happens, or that finishes, *then* I'll give God the time I know I should.' 'When I'm here or there, *then* I'll pray.'

Friends, the time is *now*. I'm preaching to myself here, as much as to all of you. Paul tells us, straight and simple, where and how to find peace: **J** set your mind on the Spirit.

Focus yourself on God. Regularly through the day, pause and refocus yourself on him, so your day doesn't fill up with other things – no matter how important or worthy they may be.

Focus yourself on God. Regularly through the day, pause and be still, replay the previous few hours and thank God for the things you've done, the people you've encountered – and the things you can't thank God for, commit them into his hands.



Focus yourself on God: **set your mind on the Spirit**. And as you do that, the fruit of peace will slowly begin to grow in your heart.

This is tough. It is deeply counter-cultural. Our world prides busy-ness and achievements over all else. And so deep within us is the desire to be busy, to get things done. And *that* means we often allow God to be pushed to the end of the queue – the queue which never ends, so we never get there.

But God doesn't call us to be disciples tomorrow, or when we are less busy, he calls us to be disciples *now, here, today*. This is not something to be put off for another time, a better time. That is the lie of the world: don't listen to it, don't wait for a better tomorrow, but find God, find peace, *today*.

If you want true peace – Paul tells us where to find it. Are you brave enough to look there? Are you bold enough to let go of the things we pile up around us in our lives, and reach out to the only one we truly need? Do you dare give God some time this week, even if it means not *quite* getting as many things done?

Jesus doesn't want to control us – he invites us. And that means we have to respond.

What will you do?