



Bartholomeus Breenbergh, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. 1657.

IN HIS LETTER TO THE ROMANS, we find St. Paul contrasting two different ways of life. There is life according to the flesh and there is life according to the Spirit. We can take this important teaching of St. Paul as an invitation to examine our own lives and consider to what extent we are living according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. In order to make this examination we must try to see more clearly what exactly St. Paul means by *life in the flesh* and *life in the Spirit*.

The word *flesh* is used in Scripture and in the writings of St. Paul with various meanings. Sometimes people will mistakenly think that when St. Paul speaks of living according to the flesh he is referring exclusively to a disordered sensuality and sexuality, but, in fact, his meaning is much broader than that. In speaking of the flesh in this context, St. Paul is referring to a certain interior tendency, a strong inner inclination that we all experience. To live in the flesh would be to follow that inner inclination and make choices in accord with it. In my own attempt to dis-

cern more clearly what St. Paul means by this expression of living according to the flesh, I came up with the following characteristics:

- Life according to the flesh is a life in which one chooses to place one's happiness completely in the creatures of this world; It excludes the pursuit of happiness in God. St. Paul says that: "those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh" (Rom 8:5). The things of the flesh are all the passing goods of this life. We would see the extreme case of this in those who, seemingly at least, give no thought to God at all but place all their thoughts and energy and attention in the pursuit of the pleasures and goods this life holds out to us. But we could also discern this principle of the flesh at work in anyone whose mind tends to be overly preoccupied with the affairs of this world, with the pursuit of pleasures and possessions and honors. In short, to live a worldly life is to live according to the flesh. Life according to the

flesh is also characterized by a kind of inner rebellion against God's authority and God's law or against God's way of doing things. Life according to the flesh wants to be in control as far as that is possible. It bristles and rebels against any restrictions which are contrary to one's desires. It does not want to submit to anything that is contrary to its own lights and judgments. St. Paul says: "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law" (Rom 8:7). Again, we would find the extreme case in someone who consciously throws off the yoke of God's commandments and chooses to live by his own lights. But we would also find a trace of this element of life according to the flesh in anyone who would say: "If I were God, things would be different in the world," or "If I were God, things would be different in my life." There is in this attitude evidence of an inner spirit of rebellion against God's providence, against His wise ordering of the universe.

- Finally, one who lives according to the flesh is turned in on himself. Those who live according to the flesh make themselves the center of the universe. Have you ever met anyone who seems to be all wrapped up in himself and his own problems and who judges all things only in relation to how they affect him? That would be someone in whom the spirit of the flesh reigns supreme. St. Paul says: "those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom 8:8). But we could also look inside and ask ourselves how often we tend to judge the affairs of our lives according to how they will impact us with little thought of others?

To live according to the flesh is to live out of harmony with the truth of our real identity and the call of our higher nature. In so far as we are living according to the flesh we are living a lie; in so far as we are living according to the flesh our lives are grounded

in falsehood, we fail to live as authentic and genuine human beings.

So what is life in the Spirit? What does it look like?

- Life in the Spirit finds its principal happiness in God. One who lives in the Spirit has received the light to see that no creature can possibly satisfy the desires of one's heart. For those who live in the Spirit, God has become the focal point of their lives.
- Life in the Spirit does not see God's commandments as irrational restrictions on its freedom but actually *delights* in the law of God and sees God's commandments as expressions of the wise ordering of a loving Father. Life in the Spirit is characterized by a profound trust in God and accepts His mysterious ways which are often hidden from us and beyond our understanding.
- Finally, rather than being turned in on oneself, to live according to the Spirit, is to live a life of generosity and thoughtfulness of others. Life in the Spirit is characterized by the willingness to sacrifice for others out of love. True love is the clearest manifestation of life in the Spirit.

Whereas life according to the flesh is out of harmony with our true identity and what we are called to, life in the Spirit is in harmony with who we are and the purpose for which we were made. Life in the Spirit wants to put aside all that is fake; it wants to banish all that is false and deceitful. It is that part of us that wants to get rid of all the posturing before others and before God; it wants to take off all the masks we put on in order to deceive others and perhaps to deceive ourselves as well. Life in the Spirit is authentic and genuine; it turns us into real people.

So, are you living according to the flesh or according to the Spirit? If you haven't yet reached the heights of sanctity, you probably recognize that the flesh still exercises a powerful influence over your inner life. The modern world and modern culture has been deeply influenced by modern philosophy. There is one strand of modern philosophy which



teaches that, by nature, man is fundamentally good but he has been corrupted by society. One finds this attitude among modern liberals. This is completely out of harmony with the teaching of St. Paul that we are examining, and out of harmony with reality; it is a dangerous heresy. It is a dangerous thing when one is not aware that there are dark and powerful forces within the depths of one's own heart. We all have a tendency to want to live in a kind of denial of this dark side of our nature and banish it from our consciousness. It is not a pleasant truth about ourselves. The truth is not always pleasant and comfortable. As one spiritual author puts it: "The danger is great when we are not in conscious conflict with ourselves. We must bring the evil out into the light of consciousness in order that we may meet it on the battlefield of our own souls. We are safe only when we are consciously at war within ourselves" (Caryll Houselander, *Guilt*, p. 55).

One final point: Good modern psychology can help

us in many ways to come to know and understand ourselves better. We could take a Myer-Briggs test and learn much useful information about our temperament and personality. That is all very well and good and even often advisable in order to grow in self-knowledge, but what St. Paul is teaching us about life in the flesh and life in the Spirit goes much deeper and is ultimately much more important. He is giving us a much deeper insight into the human heart. Life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit is what divides a twisted and corrupt humanity from a whole and authentic humanity. It shows us how we stand before God.

So which way will your life go? Will it go the way of the flesh or the way of the Spirit? It all depends on which one you feed. If you feed the flesh, the flesh will grow and wax strong and dominate your life. If you starve the flesh and feed the spirit, the Spirit will begin to fill your heart and rule all your thoughts and actions.

