

If you want to hold in your heart the nucleus of Romans, you need to know from memory Romans 5:10: **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.** The word **enemies** is strong language. It is distasteful. It is real. It means that if we just let nature take its course, we would be happy to forget about God.

There is a downside. When we forget God and let human nature take its course, we have the sub-prime mortgage mess and the threat of an economic depression. When we forget God and let human nature take its course, we have Bashar Assad slaughtering his own people. We have the North Korean dictator starving his people, while he builds nuclear weapons. We have John Edwards betraying his wife and trying to cover it up, while he tries to become President. We have a quarter of our children in this country being sexually abused.

Christianity tells the story of how God intervenes. He refused to let human nature just take its course. He addressed our natural alienation from God by offering us terms of peace. Instead of alienation from God He offers Man friendship with God. **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.** The Church is the community that has accepted His offer of friendship by faith.

Our friendship with God is not a friendship between equals. Friendship with God never becomes chummy. It "simply puts you in the position where God can begin to change you" and where you want to be changed. You want the friendship to work.

And what kind of Friend is our God? The biblical revelation before us today says that He is a Friend who empowers us. He empowers us to live on a different level than just doing what comes naturally. We can actually please God, even though the streak of lawlessness in us is still a threat to our friendship with God, as it is a threat to our closest friends on earth. The biblical revelation today tells us how God empowers us.

Letting Nature Take Its Course

Romans 8:5 is central to our understanding: **Those who live according to their sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires.** They let human nature take its course. That means you think you have life all figured out, but you don't. Letting nature take its course means that your impulses can be easily manipulated by the propaganda of this world. Letting nature take its course means that negative forces that shaped you in childhood, over which you had no control, play out in your adult life. You may never know why you behave the way you do.

I just read a fascinating, first person story by Mark Bauerlein, professor of English at Emory University in Atlanta. He tells how on a summer morning in 1976 he became an atheist at age 17. This is how he describes that event: "The morning's revelation occurred as a simple and basic perception, like hearing someone calling out next door. God is not there, I realized, and that knowledge seemed to have come entirely from outside me." (*First Things*, "My Failed Atheism," 48)

His story tells how he ignored the Christian faith of great writers and looked for "passages I could interpret as expressions of my own vision." (*Ibid*) He became a Christian last year through the influence of other scholars like himself, who had become Christians, and from his four-year-old son "who posed big questions to me such as 'Daddy, where is God?' and something inside stopped me from answering, 'nowhere.'" (*Ibid*, 50) And then he made this powerful confession: "I

know that my epiphany at seventeen was not an insight into the nature of things. It was a psychological adjustment to a mentally ill, domineering father and an erratic, promiscuous mother.” (Ibid, 51)

Letting nature take its course allows an irrational, unpredictable monster to govern your life. Hundreds of millions of people allow it. That, says our Christian Faith, is why the world is such a mess. What’s the alternative?

The rest of verse five: **those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.** God empowers us to live on a different level and to please Him when we set our minds on what the Spirit desires. Do you know what the Spirit desires? I can show you. Look at Galatians 5:22-23. **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** That’s the result of setting our minds on things of the Spirit. How do we do that?

The Renewal of Our Mind

This is a communion meditation. I can say far less than I would say, if I were your spiritual mentor. But I offer two courses of action for setting your mind on what the Spirit desires. First, allow your faith in Christ to be nurtured in a disciplined way. What is hardest for us to admit is that the Church is the matrix where this happens. Here the Spirit power renews our minds and keeps us from letting nature just take its course. Allow your faith in Christ to be nurtured in a disciplined way.

In practical terms, be here every Sunday. What takes place here – the singing, prayer, teaching of scripture, baptism, communion, acts of compassion, the fellowship with like-minded people – offers an alternative to the thinking of the world that comes at us relentlessly all week long. What takes place here lays down pathways on which the Spirit’s desires can operate in your life. Don’t deprive yourself of the power of God.

Second, seize any opportunity that comes your way to deepen your faith. That could be a Bible class. It could be a small group. It could be a small group dedicated to essentials of discipleship. It could be an Alpha Course that helps you to have a personal relationship with Christ and to find your way around the Christian faith. Seize any opportunity that comes your way to deepen your faith.

Romans 8:6 calls us to this more discipline life. **The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.** Not a bad prospect in our tumultuous world.

Doers of the Word

As we share communion, read Romans 8:1-6 again, with an eye on verse five. As you commune with Jesus, tell Him you want our friendship with God to thrive. Make a promise to Him that you will move heaven and earth to be here every Sunday, and that you will go deeper into the ways of the Spirit.