

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part eighteen

Sunday, March 3rd, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2111

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THE GREAT DIVIDE - MINDING THE FLESH AND MINDING THE SPIRIT

Romans 8:5-11 - "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. [6] To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. [9] You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. [10] But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."

The conjunction "**For**" at the beginning of **verse 5** (which the NIV omits) shows these verses as being linked with Paul's words in **verse 4** - "...in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

The question that jumps out of that last phrase is what does that mean - "...who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit?"

As Paul rather quickly refers to the change that had occurred in those who, at one time, walked "**according to the flesh,**" he now wants to go on to prove that this condition - **walking "according to the flesh"** - is not something we can solve on our own. So it is in order to show both the greatness of the power of the work of Christ and the hopelessness of "**living according to the flesh**"(5) that Paul goes on now to describe these two contrasting conditions - "**walking according to the flesh**" and "**walking according to the Spirit.**"

Remember, **verse 4** tells us what's at stake in walking according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. It is only by walking according to the Spirit that the "**righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us**"(4). Reading **verses 3 and 4** together expands the point by showing that walking according to the Spirit accomplishes what the **law of God** alone cannot - "**For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**"(8:3-4).

All of this is the subject of today's study:

1) **THE CHRISTIAN IS NOT MERELY A PERSON WHO NO LONGER DOES THE THINGS HE USED TO DO**

Romans 8:5 - "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."

This is a highly significant verse. Paul describes both the **pagan** life and the **Christian** life in a very careful way. He begins, not with the deeds, but with the **mind**, or, as we might describe it, the **mind-set**. The main point here is he begins his description with the **internal** condition, not the **external** one. Conversion is not a **mechanical** change. It is not something accomplished through **moral resolve** alone.

It's as though Paul can't quite find words big enough to say what he wants to say. The only solution he can find is to show the miracle of the Christian life by **contrasting** it with the pagan life - the life lived "**according to the flesh**"(8:5). And the life lived according to the flesh is described as a life that is **dead to God**. It is always "**minding the things of the flesh**" - "**For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh...**"(8:5a).

These are **one-dimensional** people. It's not that they're **always** doing only bad things. They may be quite moral. But there is nothing **driving** the life but the **present desires** of the **self**. Paul says they live their whole lives setting their "**minds on the things of the flesh**"(5). Their thoughts don't go to any other destination. Paul says they "**set**" their minds this way from sunrise to sunset.

That verb "**set**" is significant. They "**set**" their minds toward the self the way a hostess sets a table - **prepared** for everything

that is to follow. Everything is geared to the flesh. Those in the flesh are **one-dimensional** in the sense that they are motivated by **this world only**. They can't gear their lives to the **world to come**. They can't set their ambitions on **eternity**.

Please understand, when Paul uses that term "**flesh**" - walking "**according to the flesh**"(5), he doesn't mean the soft tissue that covers our skeletons. He means life lived apart from the influence of the Holy Spirit. He means life **turned inward**, life **directed by the ego** and by **greed**, and by **selfish ambition**.

Also, when Paul talks of living "**according to the flesh**" he doesn't just mean flagrant "**sins of the flesh**" like adultery or homosexuality or gluttony. Paul makes this clear in his description of the sins of the flesh in **Galatians 5:19-21** - "**Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**"

All of these traits - both inward and outward - are Paul's description of the **continuous** direction of the flesh. Some break through the surface into **visible actions** (sexual immorality, rivalries, drunkenness) while others **lurk under the surface of immediate manifestation** (envy, idolatry, impurity). But, taken together, these are what the flesh is set on.

2) THIS PICTURE OF THE WALK OF THE FLESH PROVIDES PAUL WITH HIS BEST PICTURE OF THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

Romans 8:5 - "**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.**"

The life of the Spirit is best seen as the opposite of the life of the flesh. That is, just as the walk of the flesh is **dominated** by a **mind-set** that is constantly **set** on the flesh, so the life of the Spirit sets the whole character of the life on the "**things of the Spirit.**" The difference Christ makes in the heart by the presence of the Holy Spirit is a **total** difference - a **comprehensive** difference.

I said in the first point that the Christian is not merely a person who no longer does certain things. Of course, that is very true, as far as it goes. But it really doesn't get at the **essence** of the Christian life. That is the **very least** you can say of a Christian. It is really only **preamble** to stating what is true of the Christian.

Paul says the Christian "**lives according to the Spirit,**" and "**sets his mind on the things of the Spirit**"(5). He is possessed by an **ever increasing interest** in the things of the Holy Spirit. They dominate his **mind** - his **thoughts** - in ever increasing measure. He cannot get away from the concerns of the Spirit.

This is the key to understanding everything else Paul will say about the Christian and his new relationship to the law of God in the next three or four verses. This idea of having our "**mind set on the things of the Spirit**"(5) is the only way to understand what Paul said about the Christian and the law in **Romans 8:2** - "**For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.**"

Through the inward work of the Holy Spirit the Christian has a different approach to life. He doesn't live the Christian life as a list of **duties** or a series of **traditions**. No, he **minds** the things of the Spirit. He is **pulled into these things**. They represent his **chief interest** in this life.

What I'm saying is he doesn't read his Bible and go to church to find out how to be a better father or husband or business man. All of that will no doubt happen over time. But his delight is in the "**things of the Spirit**" for **themselves**. He is drawn to **God**. His **mind** is constantly turned to another realm altogether. His mind is always concerned with his **relationship to God** - not just **improving himself**.

3) THIS INWARD CHANGE OF HEART PRODUCES RIGHTEOUSNESS WHERE THERE WAS ONCE REBELLION AND LIFE WHERE THERE WAS ONCE DEATH

Romans 8:6-9 - "**To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**"

These verses explain more fully the concept Paul laid out in **Romans 8:2-4** - "**For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free**

in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

In plain words Paul is saying the Holy Spirit accomplishes something the bare commandment never could. When the commandment - the law - comes to people who are in the flesh, it comes to people who are *“hostile to God”*(8:7). And *hostile* people aren’t interested in *servicing* God. The law only serves to *deepen our resentment toward God* because it *exposes our love affair with the world and with self*. So, for those who have their *“minds set on the things of the flesh”*(8:6), the law becomes a *“law of sin and death”*(8:2). This is why, as Paul says so clearly, *“Those who are in the flesh cannot please God”* (8:8).

But the Holy Spirit changes all of this because the Holy Spirit doesn’t come *externally*, like the law, but comes and works *internally*, causing me to *“mind the things of the Spirit”*(5). And to set the mind on the Spirit is *“life and peace”*(8:6).

In other words, the Holy Spirit releases the power of *love* - love for the things of God - in a way the external law never could. This is exactly what the Old Testament prophets, with longing hearts, predicted God would do under the New Covenant - Ezekiel 36:26-27 - *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”*

4) IN VIEW OF ALL THIS, THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS ISN’T JUST A MATTER OF IDEAS

Romans 8: 9 - *“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”*

This verse forms the natural conclusion from all Paul has been teaching in this chapter. It isn’t *religion* that separates Christians from non-Christians. It isn’t works of charity. It isn’t church membership. It isn’t family background or moral upbringing. It is only the *inward presence of the Holy Spirit* that causes one to *“mind the things of the Spirit”*(8:5). The mind-set we all possess *naturally* - the one we are all *born* with - is *“hostile to God”*(8:7) - at least as God is revealed and defined by the revelation in Scripture. No amount of training or will-power can overcome or change this one bit. Only the inner working of the Holy Spirit can cause us to *“mind the things of the Spirit”*(8:5).

Notice the Holy Spirit is called the *“Spirit of Christ”* in this ninth verse - *“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”* Then, in the very next verse Paul makes his intention even more plain - *“But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness”*(8:10). This is what the Holy Spirit does. He puts the reins of the life into the hand of *Christ*. He unites people to *Christ*.

5) THIS TRANSFORMING WORK, WHILE NOT YET COMPLETE, IS INEVITABLY CERTAIN

Romans 8:10-11 - *“But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”*

While Christians are *dissimilar* to non-Christians in almost every way, Paul finishes this section dealing with one way in which they are both *similar*. We both live in physical bodies. We both live in bodies that have limited capacities. While the Spirit lives within the Christian, we remain *mortal*. We don’t yet garner the *full* harvest of redemption.

But we *do* live in certain hope. And Paul gives the *reason* for that hope in these two verses. The Spirit who has come to work *internally* in these physical bodies of ours is the *same* Spirit who raised the physical body of Jesus from the dead. Your resurrection is *certain* because Christ’s resurrection has already *happened*.

In other words, the Holy Spirit doesn’t throw bodies away. He didn’t leave *Christ’s* body in the grave, and He didn’t come into *your* body to leave it in the grave either - *“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”* The verse starts with that conditional word, *“if.”* Then it unfolds the logic. *“If”* the Holy Spirit did this - *“raised Jesus from the dead”* - then He will also do *that* - *“give life to your mortal bodies.”*

The Holy Spirit finishes what He starts. He never throws anything away. Amen.