

Romans: The Promise of Righteousness (part 2 of 6)

The Spirit's Role in Spiritual Life

Romans 8:5-11

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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. ⁶ For 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. Romans 8:5–11 (ESV)

When we lived in West Michigan, a friend of mine, and a leader in our church, was the Executive Director of a wonderful rescue mission in the city of Holland. One time we were talking about the challenges of trying to help people change, and he said something that I've never forgotten:

"A man convinced against his will is of the same persuasion still"

Do you know what that means? We all face this issue this reality in the various relationships that we have in life. If you are a friend, counselor, parent, boss, coach, personal trainer, or leader, you have run into this issue multiple times. The challenge behind this quotation is the fact that people can modify their behavior or change their actions at some level or for some time. But if the will has not changed, the effect will not last very long. In other words, without a change of desire or a change of mind, the person will return to his or her former ways.

When we say something like "He just doesn't get it," what are we saying? We are expressing the frustration that something is lacking inside a person's head and heart. And without that internal change of mind and will, there is very little hope of lasting change.

The Condition of "No Condemnation" and the Holy Spirit

How does that relate to Romans 8 and our text this morning? Here's how: The reason that Romans 8 is so beautiful, compelling, and encouraging is because of the way that God invades our lives and changes us from the inside out. What I hope to show you today and in the weeks to come is the way that God changes our condition so that He can change our conduct. The beauty of conversion is that God changes our will, our thinking, and our desires, which then leads to a change in how we live. The gospel does more than give us a new set of behaviors; the gospel gives us a new set of desires, empowered and driven by the Holy Spirit.

If you are a Christian, you have seen this in your life. Now I know that you haven't seen it in all the ways that you would like. But at some fundamental level, the traumatic beauty of Christianity is the heart change that God brings.

Isn't that what you pray for people you love who are destroying their lives? This week Tuesday our staff gathered for a morning prayer summit, and one of the frequent groanings in prayer was for family members who are chasing the wrong things because they have the wrong desires. The beauty and the burden of Christianity is to see God change the hearts of people. We are praying for a change of condition, a change of mind, or a change of life.

Last week we arrived at the "summit" of the book of Romans as we examined verses 1-4, and we learned about the logic and the beauty of "no condemnation." And I hope that you are starting to see that "no condemnation" is more than just a theological statement. It is statement about your condition, who you are, and your position "in Christ."

When Paul says "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," he means that God has created a new reality in our lives. It means that there is new relationship that we have with the God of universe, such that everything about who we are and what we do has been changed. And that is why Paul not only talks about "no condemnation" but also about walking in the Spirit.

"No condemnation" and "walking in the Spirit" are absolutely linked. Since last week some of you have asked "What does it mean to walk in the Spirit?" That is a great question, but I fear many of us are asking that question in a way that is too small or too limited. It seems that we want to know what "things" we are to do that reflect walking in the Spirit. While that is a good question, we need to be careful that we do not limit walking in the Spirit to a list or a series of actions. Because walking in the Spirit is a new condition, a new mindset, a new empowerment before it is a series of actions.

Maybe an illustration will help. Imagine a man who asks me what it means to love my wife. So I tell him that it means that I care for Sarah in every way possible. I listen to her, express my love to her, serve her, support her, cherish her, and provide for her. But that answer is not specific enough for this man so he asks, "But how do you serve her?" Imagine that I say, "Well, I help with the kids, wash the dishes, rub her feet . . ." And then he interrupts saying, "How often do you wash the dishes or rub her feet? Every day? Every other day? Do you plan for it or does it just happen? Do you tell her you are going to do it? Does she expect it?" Now, by this man's questions, I would be concerned because his over-concern for specificity takes away from the main point: I love my wife.

There is mystery to my love for my wife. When I married Sarah, our lives were knit together in a way that changed everything about us and impacts every aspect of my life. Marriage created a new reality for us that has practical implications, but if you understand the beauty of marriage, the practical stuff just simply follows along rather naturally.

I think that Christianity is, at its core, a life lived "in the Spirit." And as we talk about this today, keep that marriage illustration in mind because Paul is going to describe this change of condition more fully to us in verses 5-11 and show us the centrality of the Spirit in all of it.

The Contrast of the Flesh and the Spirit

Verses 5-8 identify a contrast between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. Paul takes up this explanation because of this statement in verse 4: “. . . who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Verses 5-8 further expand on this contrast.

Now keep in mind what I said previously about the matter of condition. When you read words or phrases like “those who live” or “set their minds” or “to set the mind on,” you might initially think that Paul is giving us some commands regarding actions that we should embrace. While actions are certainly in view here, these terms are a description of a contrasting reality or realm of living. He is describing what is necessarily the case for those who are “in the flesh” or “in the Spirit.”¹

This is really important to keep in mind, or you will miss the point of the text. Paul is not telling us how to obey in this section; rather, he is showing us that obedience is rooted in the transforming work of the Spirit, which creates new desires, new affections and new actions. In other words, to have “no condemnation” over you or to “walk according to the Spirit” means that you see, experience, and pursue everything differently. And the contrast could not be starker.

Mindset

The first contrast between the flesh and the Spirit is in regards to how a person thinks. The person whose condition is marked by living in the flesh has a mindset that is set on the flesh. It is not just that he or she thinks about fleshly things or pursues fleshly things in mind (however true that is!). That is only the observable issue. The real problem is an ontological or a “being” issue. There is a fleshly mindset that is present in the person who lives according to the flesh. His or her thinking is bad because there is a distorted mindset.

Earlier in the book of Romans, Paul said the same thing this way:

²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools... (Romans 1:21–22)

¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. (Romans 3:10–11)

So the tragedy of a person outside of Christ is that his or her mind does not just think the wrong thoughts, but there is an anti-God mindset that is central to who and what they are. Wrong thinking is the product of wrong “being.”

The believer’s mindset is radically different. The condition of “no condemnation” has created a new mindset which is characterized not by the flesh but by the Spirit. There is a different way of thinking, a different processing of information, and a different value system that now dominates a believer’s

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998) 410.

² J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit – Finding Fullness In Our Walk with God*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books,

mind and his or her life. The believer has been invaded by the Spirit's agenda, affections, and desires. There is a very different mindset.

Now do not hear me say that what you think about is unimportant. There are many passages that exhort us to fill our minds with what is good, right, and true (see Phil. 4:8). However, the point here is what lies underneath that pursuit of right thinking. Paul is saying here that the Holy Spirit has created a new way of thinking in us. He has created a new direction of the will or a new orientation of life.

So the key to thinking right things is not only putting the right things in our minds but also realizing that to have an anti-God mindset is to work against the very reality of who we are. We are in Christ! We are "of the Spirit." We walk according to the Spirit.

For some of you, this may be a place to think about what it means to really be a Christian. If you look at your life and you see a consistent powerlessness to change or an inability to stop your self-destruction, it may be due to the fact that you are not genuinely converted. You may be trying to apply spiritual resources to a heart that is completely unreceptive. You may have tried not walking according to flesh by walking according to you. And that is just another expression of the flesh. Coming to faith in Christ means that you acknowledge your bankruptcy apart from Him and your powerlessness apart from the Spirit. Coming to Jesus means that you know you need a mindset change that only He can bring.

There is a contrast between the mindset of the flesh and the mindset of the Spirit. But there's more.

Destiny

Verse six identifies that the second difference between the Spirit and the flesh is in regards to the future. The destiny of the two classes of people are dramatically different.

⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6).

It seems that Paul moves from talking about the mindset to the ultimate consequence of being in the wrong realm. It might be compared to the parent who says two things to a very disobedient child: "What were you thinking?" and "Do you know where this is going to lead?"

Elsewhere in Romans, Paul points out the contrasting paths:

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (ESV)

⁶ He will render to each one according to his works:⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. Romans 2:6-8 (ESV)

It seems to me that Paul wants to elevate our sense of urgency when we are considering this contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. It is not just that the two realms and the two ways of living are different. They are dangerously different.

This text attempts to awaken us to what is at stake here. So don't make the mistake of being dismissive or minimizing the difference when it comes to the destinies at stake here.

Relationship to God

Verse seven concludes the section of contrasts by giving us the ultimate reason why the destiny of those who live in the flesh or who have their minds set on the flesh is death. The word "for" helps us to see this connection very clearly.

The problem, as we will see, is related to their relationship with God. Being in the flesh and having the mindset of the flesh is an issue because of a fundamental opposition to God.

Notice the four things that Paul says about this problematic relationship. And as we look at these things, keep in mind that these are still in contrast to those who are "in the Spirit." So by looking at this list, your heart should rejoice if this is no longer your position. This is what God saved you from!

1. **There is hostility to God.** There is a very basic problem at the core of people who are in the flesh, and it is the fact that they are set against God. They are resistant to God.
2. **A refusal to submit to God's law.** This hostility expresses itself most evidently in a refusal to do what God's law demands. They do not want to believe what He says or obey what He commands. But it is not the actions that make them hostile. It is their hostility that makes them disregard and disobey Him.
3. **They are powerless to obey.** Here is something that would be easy to overlook, but it is very important, especially as we move into Romans 9-11. The condition of those who are "in the flesh" is so tragic because they are not only disobedient, but they are also powerless to do anything about it. We will talk about this more in a few months, but I just want you to note here that God still holds people morally responsible for their sins even if they lack the power to do anything else. The person "in the flesh" is hostile, rebellious, and powerless.

Now the reason that Paul is talking about this is because of the power of the Spirit. You see, even after you come to faith in Christ, you are still powerless. You do not become powerful in yourself after you are "in Christ." You become powerful because of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

4. **They cannot please God.** This is a tragic summary statement. These people are outside of God's favor. They are His enemies. They are not pleasing to God. Their relationship with God is dangerously broken. Their mindset, their actions, their desires and their motivations are all in opposition to God. And left to themselves, there is no way for this to ever change.

This is a dark picture, is it not? Paul wants it that way. He wants us to see the stark contrast between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. He wants us to deeply understand the difference between these two realms so that we will see the beauty of what is going to come in verses 9-11.

Paul wants us to understand the vital connection between “no condemnation” and the Spirit as it relates to what it means to be a Christian.

The Centrality of the Spirit

In verses 9-11 Paul turns his focus away from the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit to the centrality of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Paul wants those who are “in Christ” to see the beauty of what it means to have the Spirit and to be “in the Spirit.” Let’s ponder the beauty of what we see here. What does the Spirit do?

Gives Assurance

Verse nine is fascinating and important. Notice the word “however,” which is meant to be a hopeful statement in light of the fact that the previous four verses were dark and scary. What was previously said about the realm of the flesh – hostility, rebellion, powerlessness, and lack of peace – do not apply to those who are united to Christ.

Next, notice that he uses the word “you,” making this more personal than anything that we have heard before. Previously Paul has said “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” and “those who live according to the Spirit.” But now there is a personal focus and application.

What is the assurance? It is that believers are not in the flesh if the Spirit of God dwells in them. The assurance here is not just that the followers of Jesus are not in the flesh or that they are in the realm of the Spirit, but that the Spirit is personally dwelling in those who are in Christ.

Previously in Romans, the only thing that was referred to as “dwelling” was sin or sinful actions (see Romans 7:17, 18, 20).²³ *but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members (Romans 7:23)*. So for Paul to now say that the Spirit dwells in us is a startling and important statement. While the believer may struggle with indwelling sin, there is powerful presence. The believer is not left to struggle alone against sin.

Finally, verse nine also offers the assurance that to belong to Christ means to possess the Spirit. The Spirit and Christ are so linked together that you cannot possess one without the other. Those who belong to Christ are given the Spirit as assurance that our redemption will be completed and that Christ will return (see Ephesians 1:13-14). To have the Spirit is to have Christ. To have Christ is to have the Spirit.

Just think of what this means for a moment. If you are a follower of Jesus, you belong to Christ. You are His. Something about who you has irrevocably and eternally changed. Jesus sought you, bought you, saved you, and He is in the process of sanctifying you. And the basis of his sanctifying work in you is rooted and based in His possession of you. So becoming more righteous is not merely a matter of you working harder. Rather, it springs from the joy of knowing who you are and from allowing the Spirit to work through you. Because you belong to Christ and because you are indwelt with the Holy Spirit, there is freedom to say “Yes” to what is right, not because we have to, but because we want to.

So if you are struggling with assurance today, my encouragement would be to 1) rehearse the truth about who you really are, 2) fill your mind with the beauty of God, and 3) start killing sin in new ways. Hearing about and seeing the Spirit's work reassures us as to who we really are.

Gives Life

The second thing that we see here is the fact that the Spirit gives life even while the body is still dead. In verse 10 Paul is acknowledging the reality of the tension that every believer lives in. We still live in bodies that are part of brokenness of the world. To be "in Christ" does not remove us from a real battle. Belonging to Christ does not remove the battle with sin; it changes the battle.

Those who are in Christ possess the Spirit of life. Some take this verse to refer to the final resurrection, and I think that is the ultimate expression of what Paul means by "the Spirit of life." However, the wording in verse 10 is much different than verse 11.

The tone of verse 10 is much more active and present. Verse 11 says "will give life to your mortal bodies," but verse 10 says "the Spirit is life because of righteousness." There seems to be something here connected to resurrection, but it is lived out and experienced even now.

In other words, if the Holy Spirit's control and mindset takes over a person's mind or mouth or marriage or dating or relationships or career, there will be life in it like never before. In a small and incomplete way, aspects of God's kingdom are brought to bear even in the midst of a broken world and broken people.

On Monday I had lunch with Pastor Cory Johnson who planted Nehemiah Bible Church with our help. The church is growing, and this summer they were given a wonderful building from another congregation. I watched as volunteers, some from our church, distributed food, cared for people, and shared the gospel with them. And then I visited Purposeful Design, a small furniture shop started by one of our elders, that provides jobs for men in the Brookside area. Do you know what I saw in both facilities? Life! I saw Spirit-filled people bringing life to others.

That is what the Spirit does. He gives life for life.

Gives Hope

The final aspect of the Spirit's role that Paul features in our text is related to hope for the future. Verse 11 links the resurrection of Jesus Christ to those who are "in Christ" by virtue of the presence of the Spirit.

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. Romans 8:11 (ESV)

Do you see what Paul is saying here? The focus, like in Romans 8:3, turns back to the Father and His powerful activity. The Father raised the Son from the dead by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4), and it is this powerful person of the triune God who dwells in believers, assures them that they belong to God, and reminds them who will defeat death. And He, the Holy Spirit, is already present in their lives!

Therefore, as believers look to their future they can be filled with hope because the defeat of death has begun with Christ's resurrection, and it has been inaugurated by the coming of the Holy Spirit. So no matter how difficult or bad or broken things become in the world around us or in our lives, we can know that there is a coming day when the "breath" of God will give life to our dead and buried bodies.

If the Spirit gives life now, just imagine what it will be like when He gives life to all those who have died "in Christ." Imagine the moment when a broken earth gives up her dead and those resurrected saints give clear evidence that "death is swallowed up in victory."

Walking in Spirit?

So what do we make of the Spirit's role in the spiritual life? I hope you can see from Romans 8:9-11, that the Spirit is vitally important. I hope you can see the difference between the flesh and the Spirit, and the centrality of the Spirit. But there is something more I want and pray will happen.

J.I. Packer, in his excellent book on the Holy Spirit, says that to be led by the Spirit "is not a revealing to the mind divine directives hitherto unknown; it is rather, **an impelling of our wills to pursue and practice and hold fast that sanctity {reality} who terms we already know.**"² In other words, it is aligning our hearts with the will and desires of the Spirit. It is embracing a change of mind, a change of heart, and a change of outlook about ourselves, the world, temptation, and sin.

Walking in the Spirit is not so much a list of things to do as it is a vision of who we really are. Being a Christian is a life by the Spirit, in the Spirit, and through the Spirit. It is to be so controlled – in small and major ways – that our lives reflect a Christlikeness that is stunning and other-worldly.

So let us live this week with a new commitment and a fresh vision for what it means to "live according to the Spirit." Let us pray:

*Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.*

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² J. I. Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit – Finding Fullness In Our Walk with God, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2005), 97.