

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.

Outline:

Intro: A real black and white situation/ no gray

Those enslaved by the flesh

- Is life-consuming
- It consumes one's mind
- It results in death
- Is hostile to God
- Is unsubmitive to God's law
- Is incapable of submitting to God's law
- Is incapable of pleasing God

Those governed by the Spirit

- Have power and motivation absent from the fleshly person
 - This is the indwelling HS...
- Set their minds on things of the Spirit
- Receive life and peace

Two ways of living v.5

Two ways of thinking v.5-7

Two ways of relating to God v.7-8

Prayer:

Holy Father, sender of Jesus Christ our Lord and our Savior, and through Christ, the sender also of the Holy Spirit, grant us the assistance of your Spirit that we might understand aright this passage of holy Scripture, to the end that we honor and praise you, and grow as worthy Christian disciples. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Many things in life are neither black or white – they are gray. Some things are neither hot or cold, they are lukewarm. Some people we may not especially like, but we do not hate them, and we can tolerate them and get along okay with them.

But in humanity's relationship to God, things are not like that. There is no gray area nor lukewarm area and not some kind of relationship with God that is neither one of love, nor of

hate, but just tolerable co-existence. “God, you stay in your area and take care of the universe, and I’ll stay in my area and take care of the things in my life.”

In regard to our relationship to God there is no gray area, no lukewarm area, no merely tolerable co-existence. We are either for God or against him. We either serve him, or serve his arch-enemy, the devil.

This is what our passage today is pointing out to us today. We either belong in one category or another: we are either in the flesh or we are in the Spirit. We are either serving God, or serving some other being – like ourselves or the devil. There is no middle road. There is either the high road to heaven or the low road to hell. It might be good to pause a moment and ask ourselves, “Who am I serving in my life? Am I serving the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, or am I serving myself, or my boss at work, or my wife or my husband? Whom am I serving, whom am I trying to please? Whose glory am I seeking to build up in this life?”

Psalm 14:2 says,
Yahweh looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see
if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

He gives the answer in the next verse: (Psa. 14:3)

They have all turned aside... there is none who does good,
ds not even one.

Thankfully, this is not the end of the story. A Redeemer has come from heaven to change all that and we want to understand what a great deliverance he has brought to his people, to us if we believe in him.

Our text today is describing two kinds of people, not three kinds or four kinds, but two kinds: those who are “in the flesh” and those who are “in the Spirit.”

Romans 8:5 says, **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.**

So the first thing we need to get ahold of today is that...

I. There are only two ways of living

The Apostle Paul, the author of the Book of Romans, describes two groups of people: Those who live according to the flesh, and secondly, those who live according to the Spirit. This word “**live**” here is important because it is a broad term that encompasses the whole of one’s life, how they live their lives – what do they do with their time? But

more importantly than what their job or other activities may be, there is a focus here on the inner being of people: what motivates them, what are they striving for in the activities of their everyday lives? Is their flesh guiding them or the Spirit of God?

It's not so much talking about where you spend your time from 8:00 to 5:00 on Monday through Friday – are you at school or at work or at home – not so much the activities you're involved in, but what is your behavior, your attitude during the days of your life? What is in that is driving you internally? A car cannot run without an engine empowering it, what is the engine empowering your life?

According to Paul here there are only two inner empowerments of every individual – either the flesh or the Spirit. Either the flesh or the Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit of God, is empowering your life, is carrying you through life. Only two powers: the flesh or the Spirit.

What does the apostle mean by “the flesh” in verse 5? We often use the word flesh to refer to part of our body. You could say, for example, that I got into some bad poison ivy a few days ago and the flesh in my forearm looks like hamburger meat – it is eaten up with poison ivy.

But here in this context Paul is not talking about flesh, like skin and muscle tissue, but he's using the word “flesh” to describe human nature. And specifically human nature that has not come to God in faith and repentance, human nature that is selfish and sinful and self-glorifying and self-pampering, human nature that is separated from God, that is not interested in God, that would just as well prefer God to get about his own business of keeping the universe going and let me alone to run the business of my own life.

Paul uses the word “flesh” here to describe humans who live their lives apart from God. They only live in the human realm. They only place importance on the things they can see or eat or drink or touch. They're interested in what make them look good in the eyes of other people. They want what makes them feel good or important. They want to be their own little god and run the show of their lives as they want it to go.

They do want to satisfy their “flesh,” as it would describe their bodily appetites – their desire for pleasure, for food and drink and sex and relaxation. Now these types of things are not necessarily wrong in themselves – we have to have food and drink, for example – but they become wrong when they consume our lives – when we live for these things – we live to satisfy the craving of the body.

So the word “flesh” here as Paul uses it, is a term that encompasses bodily appetites but much more – all those sinful tendencies and behavior that are part of our human nature that we are born with and which war against God and his will.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones describe it like this: ““flesh” means fallen human nature, human nature as it is before the Spirit of God begins His work in a person. It is man left to himself, man born, developing and growing in life in this world outside the activity of God upon him- it is one who is habitually dominated by the nature with which he was born.” P. 4

In the book of Galatians, we see a list of some of these behaviors:

⁹ 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. Gal. 5:29-20

Paul calls them here “works of the flesh” – what I believe he means is that our sinful inner person expresses itself in outward physical activities or works, as we see listed. Let’s just take one for an example: “fits of anger.” Why do we get angry? It’s because things don’t go our way, things don’t happen like we want them to happen, people do things we don’t want them to do – all these things rub us the wrong way, they aggravate us, they stir up our own pride – we don’t consider God in this whole situation – it’s just what we want – things don’t go our way – people don’t act like we think they should – and so we get mad. The all-consuming passion in these situations is ourselves, our pride, our offended feelings – we don’t pause do consider what might be God’s will in this situation. We don’t trust God; we act according to our own sinful nature – we are acting “in the flesh.” The Spirit of God is 100 miles from us; we are in our own little selfish, fleshy world.

This is how I would describe “those **who live according to the flesh**” in verse 5. But also in verse 5 we read of another group of people “**who live according to the Spirit.**” The word “Spirit” here refers to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the one triune God. So those who live according to the Spirit are those who live their lives in a way that is under the superintendence and governance of the very Spirit of God himself.

Again, ML Jones says that this expression, “those who live according to the Spirit” means that they are habitually dominated by the Spirit, the Holy Spirit – that is, their lives are

“dominated by, controlled by, regulated by, determined by the Holy Spirit of God.” p. 218.

The difference in the lives of these two types of individuals is as different as light and darkness. It is so different because of the difference that the Spirit of God makes in a person’s life. If I am “in the flesh” I do not have the Spirit of God in my life. I am living life on my own. Like a man in a little kayak in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, being blown around and tossed around by the heaving sea. The man is on his own – its him against the mighty ocean. That is what it’s like to live life without the Spirit of God. It’s you or me against the ocean of sin in my life and in the world.

But when the Spirit of God enters our lives there is a total transformation of the heart. There is a presence there that was not there before. There is a person there that was not there before. God’s Holy Spirit has entered our lives and that changes everything. It’s like a person who is suffering terribly from Covid-19 and his doctor prescribes the concoction of pills that fight the virus and he takes them and begins to feel better within hours. He now has something within him that makes all the difference.

We read this prophecy of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in Ezek. 11:19-20

¹⁹ ☞ And I will give them one heart, and ☞ a new spirit I will put within them. ☞ I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh ☞ and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰ ☞ that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them.

Ezekiel here says Yahweh will put “a new spirit within them.” This happened when the Lord Jesus came and suffered for our sins on Calvary’s cross and then rose from the dead and then ascended to the right hand of the Father and then sent the Holy Spirit on his disciples on the Day of Pentecost and their lives were changed from the inside out. Can anything less happen when the Spirit of God enters a human life?

Just think: before there was no Spirit of God – only the flesh principle and power was governing the human life. But then God’s Spirit enters this person – the same Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation, the same Spirit who inspired the prophets to prophesy, the same Spirit who overshadowed the Virgin Mary and cause her to conceive the Messiah – this same Spirit enters a human heart and it’s like a stick of dynamite set off to pulverize rock in a road building operation through the mountains.

The Spirit of God explodes into a human life and pulverizes the stranglehold that sin had on that human life. It’s power is broken forever. The Spirit of God abides in that life and does a powerful transforming work that never ceases all the days of the believer’s life.

So life is never the same for the one who is blessed to have the regenerating powerful presence of the Holy Spirit enter his or her life. Where there was no spiritual life, only the sinful nature, the flesh, there is now the very presence of God himself, the Holy Spirit. Oh, miracle of miracles! *How can we praise you enough, O Lord, for entering our hearts with the transforming power of your presence.*

Paul says in verse 5, “those who live according to the Spirit.” Paul uses this same word “live” to describe the lifestyle, the motivation, the behavior, the whole tenor of life of this person who lives according to the Spirit. Just as the fleshly nature controls and directs the man or woman in the flesh, so the Spirit of God controls and directs the one in whom he dwells. We would expect radical things to happen when the mighty Spirit of God comes into a person’s heart and that is exactly what happens. Previously accepted behavior and attitudes are exposed to the searchlight of God’s Word and seen as unacceptable. And so begins a life-long journey of repentance from sin for the believer. The Spirit of God is always working from then on to open up the Word of God, to convict of sin, to transform the sinner’s life more into the image of the Lord Jesus. Look again at Galatians 5:22-23. We read that in contrast to the works of the flesh we see...

“...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

What begins to happen in the Spirit-inhabited heart? Love begins to replace lust, joy begins to replace jealousy, peace begins to replace strife, patience replaces fits of anger, kindness replaces dissensions, and so forth. If we had an X-ray machine or ultra-sound that could peer into the human heart and see virtues and vices residing there we would see the vices fading away and the virtues taking their place.

We see Two ways of living here: one governed by the flesh, the sinful nature, and one governed by the Spirit of God. But Paul teaches us not only about two ways of living but also...

II. Two Ways of Thinking

Look at v. 5 again, **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.**

Notice the emphasis here on “the mind” – both for the person of the flesh and the person of the Spirit. The text does not refer to their emotions or their will or their body

but on their minds. The mind is where the real battle ground, the spiritual battleground, takes place. I always enjoy reading ML Jones because he really believes this and he appeals to the minds of his hearers and readers. This is one of the keys to the effectiveness of his preaching. What goes into the mind affects the rest of the human person: his will, his emotions and so forth. The mind leads the rest of the person as a shepherd leads his flock, or a teen-age girl leads that great Braham bull she has been grooming all year to show him at the Dallas State Fair. She leads him out into the arena and he follows docily, that is, peacefully and obediently.

So, as a person thinks, so goes the rest of his person. In these 4 verses, verses 4-8, the expression 'set the mind' is used 4 times. It refers both to the person of the flesh and the person of the Spirit. The crucial thing is where do they "set their minds." In other words, what do they think about during the day? Are they consumed with the things of the flesh, or are they consumed with the things of the Spirit?

How a person thinks dramatically affects the person. Verse 6 says **the mind on the flesh is death**. Never let anyone tell you that what you think is unimportant. It is spiritual suicide to be consumed with thoughts of the flesh. It kills your inner spirit, your human spirit. To think thoughts of the flesh, that is, thoughts flowing out of our sinful nature, sinful thoughts, kills us spiritually. It makes us dead in regards to God and his holiness and righteousness and steadfast love and faithfulness. That's why when we find our minds wandering to sinful thoughts we need to stop them and put our minds on other things, things of the Spirit.

Likewise we see in v. 6 that **the mind on the Spirit is life and peace**. What would you rather have in your mind, in your thought life – death, or life and peace? The person of the flesh may delight in sinful thoughts and sinful scheming – but it all leads to death – to the spiritual death of himself – he is cutting himself off from God. He is placing himself under the dominion and manipulation of the devil. He is becoming a tool of the devil, a recruit in the army of Satan. There are many people in our world today who are tools of Satan – they have been duped into thinking that evil plans and evil actions are beneficial and profitable – but where does it lead them? It leads them to death. Never underestimate the importance of what you are thinking.

To think the thoughts of the Holy Spirit brings the opposite results in those who are indwelt and captivated by the blessed Spirit of God. He is called the "Holy" Spirit because he is holy, he is totally separated and opposed to all of humanity's sins. God is the God of life and peace and when we think thoughts inspired by and guided by the Holy Spirit we receive life and peace. We receive real life as it was meant by our Creator to be. Paul, in fact, tells us the kinds of thoughts we should be thinking in Phil. 4:8

whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. He says don't be anxious about the problems in life, don't be worried about so many things, but put your mind on these things of the Spirit and you'll have peace.

God is a good God; there is no unrighteousness in him. He is the God of steadfast love and faithfulness – we can depend on him to be the same every day, all the time, and as we align our thought-life with him and his will and his Word, we naturally receive life and peace. Isa. 26:3 says...

“You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.”

The man of the flesh does not trust in God; his mind is full of evil thoughts all the day long. He may not seem evil to other sinners around him, but hidden from view are thoughts of envy and slander and hatred and lust and worry and idolatry. He often is in turmoil, he is not at peace. He does not thank God for his blessings or worship God, who is plainly revealed in nature. So, although he may be an upstanding citizen in the community, before God he is wicked and vile because he is running his own life without reference to the presence and majesty of God.

It's like a person who is playing some video games on his smart phone, and the governor of the state or the president of the U.S. walks in the room to meet him and he ignores the governor or the president and keeps playing on his video game. That is the story of humanity – absorbed in the things of everyday life but uninterested in the One who created him and gives him every breath of life that he breathes.

In this passage we see two ways of living and two ways of thinking - either after the flesh or after the Spirit. We humans categorize ourselves in many ways. On the 10 year census form you indicate your race and your yearly income and your age and your citizenship – such ways we classify people. But God doesn't look on these categorizations – he looks at the heart and mind- where are that person's thoughts and how is he or she living – under the governance of the flesh, or the governance of the Holy Spirit.

Two ways of living and two ways of thinking - this is how the human race is divided in the eyes of God. And there is a third way that the human race is divided that we see in our text today:

III. Two ways of relating to God

Look at verse 7: **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.**

Let's look at the way the person who lives and thinks according to flesh relates to God. the picture is not very pretty:

A. First of all, the person of the flesh is said to be hostile to God.

This is the opposite of being a friend of God, or being a servant of God, or being a worshipper of God. To be hostile to God means a person is at war with God; he or she is an enemy of God.

I can't think of a worse situation to be in – to be an enemy of God, to be at war with him.

The bible is very clear and convicting about those people who are outside of Christ, who have not the Holy Spirit:

Rom. 5:10 - ¹⁰ For if [ⓐ]while we were enemies [ⓑ]we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son,

If you are a Christian today, you have a past history. At one time you were an enemy of God. You were opposed to God. To be an enemy of the living God is the worst possible situation a person could be in.

And then Ephesians 2:1-3 describes us further:

[ⓐ]And you were [ⓑ]dead in the trespasses and sins ² [ⓒ]in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following [ⓓ]the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in [ⓔ]the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in [ⓕ]the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body[ⓖ] and the mind, and [ⓗ]were by nature [ⓓ]children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

This is an accurate description of our past standing before God; before mercy was sent our way. We were living a life in the flesh and were related to God, not as friends, but as enemies.

B. Verse 7 goes on to say, the mind set on the flesh does not submit to God's law. God is the all wise creator of the universe and humanity and thus he has the authority to tell us how to live, how to relate to him and to other people. He has

set forth his law in the revelation to the Hebrew people and in the consciences of all people. But all people, Jews and Gentiles, know something of God's holy law and they have not submitted to it.

Rom. 3: 10 says: "None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

The bottom line is that the whole human race are rebels against the authority of God, like disobedient children who do what they want, not what their parents want.

Notice the final phrase in v. 7 regarding the mind set on the flesh, It does not submit to the law of God because as it says, **indeed, it cannot.**

The mind of the flesh cannot submit to the Law of God because it does not have the ability, the power to do this. Sin is too strong, sin is the ruler, sin is the overwhelming power that governs all the mind set on the flesh does.

The person in a wheel chair does not have the ability to participate in the pole vaulting even in a track meet. He does not even have the ability to participate in high jump. It is impossible for him. So the mind set on the flesh cannot submit to the law of God. The law comes from God and is a revelation of his righteous will. But the mind set on the flesh is governed by the desires of the flesh which are the ruling factor for him rather than the law of God.

And lastly v. 8 says that **Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**

When God looked on his Son at his baptism and at the transfiguration on the mountain he spoke from heaven **and said, this is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased.**

But that is not what he thinks about the human race. Even back in the book of Genesis we read(Gen. 6:5) we read,

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only **evil continually.**

Now the person who lives according to the Spirit does please God for the Spirit is active in his life. We will study this in more detail in the verses that follow.

This does not mean that the person who lives according to the Spirit, who is the Christian person, is perfect and never sins. But it means that supreme desire of their lives is to please God and to follow him and submit to the authority of his Word.

So, today we have seen that there are really only two classifications of people in this world – those who are of the flesh and those who are of the Spirit:

There are really in the eyes of God only two ways of living, two ways of thinking, and two ways of relating to God.

Oh, Christian person, let us rejoice today that God has delivered us from slavery to the flesh and set us free by the indwelling Spirit to live for his glory and live in obedience to him. He's given us power, the power of his Spirit, to do what the flesh would not allow us to do.

The stranglehold of sin has been broken by the almighty power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Praise be to God for his mercy and kindness, for the presence and power of his Spirit.

Prayer:

We thank you, Father, that you looked upon our hopeless, helpless, lost condition, and you just didn't ignore us and turn away and go some other place, but you took action. You sent your Son from heaven down here to live among us, to obey your Law, to be the substitute on Calvary's cross for the punishment of our sins. He took the rap, the punishment for our sakes, Then, Father, with the Son, you sent the Spirit into our lives to abide within us forever, that we might know you and love you, and serve you and grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ our Lord. Thank you for the power, the permanent transforming power, the radical, the blessed power of the Holy Spirit that you've given to all your people. In Jesus' name we give you thanks. Amen.

-by Jeff Gregory, pastor
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