

Sermons through

# Romans

Things of the Flesh, Things of the Spirit

*Romans 8:5-6*

*With Study Questions*

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# Things of the Flesh, Things of the Spirit

*Romans 8:5-6*

**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, the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace (Romans 8:5-6).**

The first paragraph of the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith contains one of the most unsettling statements a professing Christian might ever hear. The chapter is entitled *Of Assurance Of Grace And Salvation* and begins with these words:

**Hypocrites and other unregenerate men may deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions about their being in God's favor and about their being saved. Their presumptions will die with them.**

Not exactly the type of rhetoric on the shelves of contemporary Christian bookstores. It might be helpful to recognize that this was written during a period of intense ecclesiastical corruption and cruelty. The authors, little doubt, had the Roman Catholic clergy in mind when they wrote this—motivated by events recorded in Foxe's Book of Martyrs—providing an account of the sufferings of Protestants under the Roman Catholic Church.

It wasn't a cushy Christian atmosphere. Deception in religion had reached a fever pitch and the divines who wrote this realized souls were at stake. The truth can have an edge to it and it is not healthy to shrink back. Those who found deliverance from their false assurance would surely say of these teachers:

**Faithful are the wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27:6).**

This, of course, doesn't mean there is no application today. Living in a culture which cradles a very casual approach to religious convictions, false hopes and carnal presumptions about being in God's favor may be running quite prevalent. And the Scriptures are not silent on the matter.

**So *are* the paths of all who forget God; And the hope of the hypocrite shall perish,<sup>14</sup> Whose confidence shall be cut off, And whose trust *is* a spider's web (Job 8:13, 14).**

**Her heads judge for a bribe, Her priests teach for pay,  
And her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the  
Lord, and say, “Is not the Lord among us? No harm can  
come upon us.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore because of you Zion shall be  
plowed *like* a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of  
ruins, And the mountain of the temple Like the bare hills  
of the forest (Micah 3:11, 12).**

**Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not  
prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name,  
and done many wonders in Your name?’<sup>23</sup> And then I will  
declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you  
who practice lawlessness’ (Matthew 7:22, 23)!**

It is the healthy fear (at least it should be) of every Christian pastor and every Christian parent that those they love might fall into the above category; that their church or home would be inhabited by those who bless themselves, saying **“I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart”—as though the drunkard could be included with the sober” (Deuteronomy 29:19).**

The Apostle Paul had been accused of presenting a brand of Christianity which had eliminated the pursuit of holiness—the call to obedience—the call to love. His response to this accusation was very firm —**“Their condemnation is just” (Romans 3:8).**

Having just written one of the most comforting verses in all of Scripture (**“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus”**), Paul wants to make sure his readers understand that this great promise is not dished out indiscriminately; that is to say, not everyone can hold this promise as theirs.

A recent candidate for ministry was asked how he would respond to a member of his church, who had doubts about his salvation—who struggled with assurance. He began to answer the question by suggesting that the very concern on the part of the member was a good thing—the natural man tends not to be concerned about such things.

The presbyter who asked the question didn’t seem to care for the answer though. In a mild correction, he asked “Would you not direct your member to the promises found in God’s word?” But I must say I thought the presbyter was missing the point of his own question. The hypothetical member is not asking if there is a God in heaven who makes and keeps His promises; he’s asking if he, the sinful man, is the recipient of those promises.

In verse four Paul had taught that the promise is for those who **“do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”** Paul will now define what he is talking about. And in doing so, he is not offering an exhortation (although after observing it, an exhortation might be appropriate) but describing what is.

**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, the things of the Spirit <sup>6</sup> For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace (Romans 8:5, 6).**

## **Being in the Flesh/Spirit**

A literal translation of the beginning of verse five might read: **“Those being in the flesh, of the flesh think.”** **“Being”** is the Greek word *ontes* from where we derive the word ontology (the philosophical study of the nature of being). Paul is describing two types of people here; one whose being (or nature) is according to the flesh and the other whose being (or nature) is according to the Spirit.

The one whose being is according to the Spirit is the one who has been delivered from condemnation through the blood of Christ. So this might be an important thing for us to consider, keeping in mind that Paul is not saying we need to be more spiritual to be the recipient of God’s promises, nor is he saying that the spiritual man has obtained the promises by being spiritual.

The heirs of my household are my own children. Other children may come into my house and behave more appropriately than my own, but that will never make them heirs. If they want to be heirs, they must become my children—I must adopt them. And adoption is the act, not of the child, but of the parent.

This brings us back to the question of the hypothetical church member. How do I know if I am adopted? How do I know if I am recipient of the promises of God? How do I know if I am an heir? How do I know if my being is of the flesh or of the Spirit? The answer seems to require more than a mere awareness of God and His promises.

## **Setting Their Minds**

Paul answers by informing his readers that those whose being (or nature) is in the flesh **“set their minds on the things of the flesh”** and conversely the man whose being (or nature) is of the Spirit sets his mind on **“the things of the Spirit.”** So if I were to reason backward, if my mind is set on the things of the flesh, I can conclude that my nature is still of the flesh. But if my mind is set on the things of the Spirit, I can have that assurance of knowing that my nature is of the Spirit, or to put it another way that, I can know that I am new creature in Christ.

I think it is a very a good question for a person to ask him or herself. Is my mind set on the things of the flesh or the Spirit? What does that even mean? Charles Hodge gives a nice working definition of the **“mind”** *phroneo*.

**It...is used for the seat of all mental affections and faculties...any form or mental activity, any exercise of the intellect, will, or affections. They mind, therefore, means, they make the object of attention, desire and pursuit.<sup>1</sup>**

Does it mean my mind never strays? That all my mental activity—that every single exercise of my will—my moment by moment affections—every desire, large or small is in the pursuit of the things of the Spirit (which we will define momentarily)? Remember, this passage is not an exhortation but a description.

Before we become **“swallowed up with too much sorrow”** let us hear Calvin’s take

**...for as he had exempted none from the curse, but those who lead a spiritual life, he might seem to cut off from all mortals the hope of salvation; for who in this world can be found adorned with so much angelic purity so as to be wholly freed from the flesh?<sup>2</sup>**

When heaven and hell hang in the balance, it is of great import to hammer out our definitions. After all, Paul gave the conclusion of the two natures, not merely as one slightly preferable to the other, but one, **“the carnally mind”** being death and the other **“the spiritually minded”** being **“life and peace.”** From this we conclude death and all its torments is attached to the one against true life from heaven with all its peace—**“the very element of the soul’s deepest repose and true bliss”<sup>3</sup>** attached to the other.

Let me offer here that Paul is neither saying that one can merit the promises of Christ by way of spiritual living, nor is he proposing that the spiritual man never errs. One need but turn to Peter, where Jesus uses the same verb *phroneo* used to so strongly rebuke such a prominent apostle.

**But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:23).**

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1 Charles Hodge, Commentary on Romans. P. 255.

2 Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:5). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

3 Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:6). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Or, as one translation renders is: **“thou savourest not the things of God.”** It may not be a good move here to question the salvation of Peter, though there may have been times when his own assurance waned. No, Peter was a Christian man who, in his many faults and failures, never ceased to trust in His Christ as both Savior and Lord.

The Christian man or woman is a person whose being or nature is redeemed by the grace of God through the gospel. They will consequently set their mind, will, affections, desires and pursuits upon the things of the Spirit. So how can examine myself and draw the conclusion that I am that spiritual man—the man whose being is changed and has set his mind on the things of the Spirit?

The spiritual man is not synonymous with the mystical man. The spiritual man is not one who detects impulses within himself and interprets them as the Spirit of God. The spiritual man—the man led by the Spirit is a man who resists behaving one way and seeks to behave another.

**But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another (Galatians 5:18-26).**

This should not be reduced to mere moralism. There are other components to the spiritual man, not the least of which is Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16). The promise of deliverance from condemnation is directed toward the person who walks, not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. And that walk includes a fight, a fight that can at times be exhausting. Why else would Paul write:

**For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. <sup>9</sup> And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup> So then, as we have opportunity, let us**

**do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:8-10).**

## Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose the quote from Chapter 18 of the Westminster Confession sounds so harsh? Is there a time to risk saying something that might appear hurtful? Explain (page 2)?
2. What is assurance? What does the Bible teach about false assurance? Why is this so important (pages 2, 3)?
3. How do you know the promises of God are for you (page 3)?
4. The Apostle Paul is describing two types of people in this passage, who are they? What does the Greek word *ontes* mean (page 4)?
5. What does it mean to set your mind on the things of the flesh or the Spirit? Why is this an important question for a person to ask himself (pages 4, 5)?
6. Can a person merit (earn) the promises of God by spiritual living? Explain why or why not (page 5).
7. What marks a person out as a truly spiritual person—a person led by the Spirit? Where would you place yourself (pages 5, 6)?

