

The Spirit is Life

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 21, 2021.

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. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 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. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 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. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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).¹

In the preceding four verses, Paul tells us the amazing truth of God's mercy and the extent of his grace: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). We who are sinners by nature, evidenced by our thoughts, words, and deeds, are justified as righteous before God not through our good works but through faith in Jesus Christ the righteous. In Christ, we are not sentenced as sinners and punished as guilty, but we are uncondemned now and for eternity. As a result of what God has done for us in Christ, we live out our faith in Christ by his Spirit. And there is a direct correlation between being in Christ and what we do (or do not do) by his Spirit: We do not "walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4).

To explain this distinction between walking "according to the flesh" or walking "according to the Spirit," as well as the active participation in each, Paul uses an expression of setting the mind on something: "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" (8:5). Clearly, the metaphor of "walk" means "live," and living is not merely existing but engaging: we actively not passively set our minds. Of course, the mind thinks, but Paul probably means something more comprehensive than mere thought. Setting the mind involves, as John Calvin puts it, "all the faculties of the soul—reason, understanding, and affection."² No one is a passive spectator on the stage of life. We are part of it, and what we think and desire matters.

There are then two kinds of people: those who think and desire things of the Spirit and those who think and desire things of the flesh. We could say that it is a distinction between the converted and the unconverted, between the uncondemned and the condemned, between those who are in Christ Jesus and those who are not. The distinction is a spiritual reality but so is the struggle. Paul readily admits what every believer must too: Sometimes "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7:15); Sometimes "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² John Calvin quoted in Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 487.

the law of sin that dwells in my members” (7:23). How can we who are converted, uncondemned, and in Christ Jesus admit to such a struggle with the flesh? Because, we who are already justified as righteous are not yet fully and completely conformed to the righteous standard of Christ. We are under construction—the project of sanctification not yet complete. And part of our sanctification is setting our minds on the things of the Spirit, which he encourages, enables, and empowers us to do.

The same cannot be said for those who are not in Christ Jesus. They do not have the Spirit of Christ and therefore set their minds on the things of the flesh. It is a life apart from Christ, separated from God, and characterized not by the Spirit but the flesh. It is also all they know—life according to the flesh.

It is not the Christian life. We who are in Christ “are not in the flesh but in the Spirit;” By God’s grace through faith, we do indeed “have the Spirit of Christ” and “belong to him” (8:9).

Why then does Paul describe the contrast? Why should we who are in the Spirit even be concerned with the characteristics of the flesh? Does Paul describe the distinction between the Spirit and the flesh merely for identification purposes? Yes, but in two ways: We should notice a distinction between those in the flesh and those in the Spirit, but perhaps more importantly we should guard against characteristics of the flesh in our lives. Your life and my life should never look like a life according to the flesh.

Life according to the Flesh

As the life we live is not passive existence but active participation, those who live according to the flesh, those apart from saving faith in Christ, think about and desire that which appeals to fallen human nature. What is important to the unbeliever is not “Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) but the way of the world, or as John puts it, “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). Hardly neutral, such a way of life is not only deserving of death but “is death” (8:6). Though they do not see themselves as such, all who are not in Christ are spiritually the walking dead. The wrath of God remains upon them (John 3:36); they are both guilty and condemned. Apart from the miracle of God’s grace, the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, they are spiritually dead, awaiting physical death, awaiting eternal death.

Yet, as their current existence is not passive but active, they display the wickedness of the flesh in their hostility to God. Sometimes this hostility is more or less overt, but it is always a matter of the heart. Sometimes it may be hidden behind a veneer of good works, but in the end they “cannot please God” (8:8). John Murray says that hostility to God “is nothing other than total depravity and ‘cannot please God’ is nothing less than total inability.”³ The unbeliever is truly destitute: unable and unwilling to please God.

Life according to the flesh is also a life of lawlessness. Whether the Ten Commandments are known or not, the flesh pits the unbelieving heart against itself betraying the God-given conscience. As a result, life becomes increasingly characterized by works of the flesh. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality,

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 285.

The Spirit is Life

impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19-21). It is indeed a litany of lawlessness, but the key words are at the beginning and end: “evident...things like these.” It’s not an exhaustive list but one that may be summarized as sins against God, sins against our neighbor, and sins against ourselves.

What is most evident, however, is that sins like these characterize those who do not belong to Christ, who do not have the Spirit of Christ, those in whom the Spirit does not dwell. Therefore, such lawless living should never describe those who do belong to Christ, who do have the Spirit of Christ, in whom the Spirit does dwell. We do not live as the walking dead, because we have been brought to life by the same Spirit who resurrected Christ from the dead. And so, the life we live is a life according to the Spirit.

Life according to the Spirit

How do we live according to the Spirit, setting our minds upon it? First, it starts with grace, specifically God’s saving grace. By his grace, God sends his Spirit to regenerate us, that is to bring us to spiritual life. By virtue of this act of grace, we willingly and joyfully repent of our sin and believe on the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, we are justified, or reckoned, as righteous and adopted into the family of God. As Paul puts it, we “belong” to Christ.

Second, we are given the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, who does not merely pay us a spontaneous visit but who dwells within us by virtue of the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is in fact a defining characteristic of all who are in Christ: “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (8:9). It is the Holy Spirit who gives us spiritual life even while we remain confined to the flesh of our mortal bodies. And it is the Holy Spirit who will one day resurrect our bodies from the dust of mortality to an eternal life of glory.

Third, because the Holy Spirit dwells within us, he enables, encourages, and empowers us to set our minds on the things of the Spirit. He renews our mind (Rom. 12:2), giving us the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), and thereby transforms us, shaping our thoughts and desires to the glory of God. This of course does not negate the reality of the battle of the heart and mind, but this should not discourage us. Think about it: there would be no battle were the Spirit of Christ not present and active. But he is in all who believe, so rejoice!

In conclusion, let me encourage all of us who are tempted to set our minds on the things of the flesh yet have the Spirit of Christ to *remember, reflect, realize, and rejoice*. *Remember* that you belong to Christ. You are not your own but were bought with his blood (1 Cor. 6:19-20). *Reflect* on the reality that the very Spirit of God dwells in you, a guarantee that you are his child and an ever-present reminder that he is with you, even to the end of the age (verse insert). *Realize* that “although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life.” Regardless of how you sometimes feel, you are in fact alive in Christ. And *rejoice* that “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4), and the power of his presence transcends all the trials this world has to offer. So, let him who is greater do greater things in and through you, as you set your mind on the things of the Spirit. For, the Spirit is life.