

## Life in the Spirit

Romans 8:1–8<sup>1</sup>

### In Christ Jesus.

As we continue on through Romans, chapter 8, this Spring (how's that for optimism), we will come back often (possibly in every sermon), to the glorious and magnificent summary statement found in verse one. It serves as a summary for chapter 8, but in a sense, for the entire epistle.

<sup>1</sup> **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Romans 8:1 ESV

(I suggested a couple of weeks ago that you really ought to memorize that, and if you haven't yet, you really should.)

<sup>1</sup> **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Romans 8:1 ESV

To the one feeling the convicting power of the Holy Spirit driving him to his knees in repentance, here is the point; here is the reward. Turn to Christ in faith.

<sup>1</sup> **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Romans 8:1 ESV

To the Christian still struggling with shame and guilt—the ghosts of sins long past—this is the promise of the living God.

<sup>1</sup> **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Romans 8:1 ESV

To all who have or will come to God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, this is life and peace. This is hope. This is rest for the sin-weary soul. This is the very love of God.

<sup>1</sup> **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Romans 8:1 ESV

And how is this even possible? How can we live and die in the assurance of this truth? Well, if it was up to us—if we had to earn this great salvation through works of righteousness, or even works of penitence—then it wouldn't be. But the whole arc of Romans tells us that it is not by works of the law, or works of any sort. Verses 2 and 3 make this abundantly clear.

<sup>2</sup> **For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free...** Romans 8:2 ESV

(just savor that for a moment)

<sup>2</sup> **For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.** Romans 8:2–3 ESV

As we have it in the Heidelberg Catechism:

**He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted,

(Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1", ed., CRCNA (Christian Reformed Church in North America), (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 13.

But note once again that this freedom is found “in Christ Jesus”, and nowhere else.

<sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh... Romans 8:3 ESV

That is, the Law alone. But

<sup>3</sup> ...God has done what the law weakened by the flesh, could not do. Romans 8:3 ESV

And just in case we might be tempted once again to ask, “How?” Paul (as usual) answered the anticipated question.

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh... Romans 8:3 ESV

And in that simple act, He set us free. Expanding on this a bit, Matthew Henry wrote:

The covenant of grace made with us in Christ is a treasury of merit and grace, and thence we receive **pardon and a new nature**, are **freed from the law of sin and death**, that is, both from the guilt and power of sin—from the course of the law, and the dominion of the flesh. **We are under another covenant, another master, another husband, under the law of the Spirit, the law that gives the Spirit, spiritual life to qualify us for eternal.**<sup>3</sup>

Do we understand this? We throw the word grace around so much, but do we begin to comprehend when we do that **this** is what means. Grace is not just God looking the other way. God is not like a kindly grandfather, giving a stern reprimand but with a wink of an eye.

God’s grace isn’t remotely the same as we might mean when we speak of showing a little grace in certain situations. It is so much higher, that there is really no comparison. We, as sinners ourselves, are told to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, but God in His marvelous, infinite, matchless grace—God who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all—has sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh not only so that we could be forgiven, but

<sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law... Romans 8:4 ESV

(That same law that could not save us, remember? That law). God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. In so doing, He condemned sin in the flesh,

<sup>4</sup> 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. Romans 8:4 ESV

### **Flesh and Spirit.**

But notice the bookends on that paragraph. We begin in verse 1 with no condemnation

<sup>1</sup> ...for those who are in Christ Jesus... Romans 8:1 ESV

and we end in verse 4,

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, Hendrickson, 1994), 2211, emphasis mine.

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<sup>4</sup> ...in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us... Romans 8:4 ESV

and who is that? Well, those

...who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:4 ESV

So, those who are “in Christ Jesus”, are the same as those who walk “according to the Spirit”, and not “according to the flesh”.

Both of those statements then—those definitions—are referring to those who are truly children of God;<sup>4</sup> those who are born again, or born from above;<sup>5</sup> those who are saved.<sup>6</sup> We are talking about Christians. We are talking about people who are no longer under the condemnation of sin; people in whom the righteous requirement of the law is met when we live—when we walk—by the Spirit and not by the flesh.

And this Spirit versus flesh distinction is important—very important—because, as we read a few moments ago in Romans 8, verse 8:

<sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God. Romans 8:8 ESV

The truth is, those who are in the flesh don't even want to, but even if they did, they couldn't. It's impossible.

<sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh... Romans 8:8 ESV

(those who are in Christ Jesus)

...**cannot** please God. Romans 8:8 ESV

We need to understand this then. We need to understand it for our own comfort and assurance, and more importantly, we need to understand it that we may live for the glory of God. So, how can we know? How can we know if we are in the flesh or in the Spirit? Paul gives us the answer in verse 5.

<sup>5</sup> 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. Romans 8:5 ESV

Now, first of all, we need to understand that this verse speaks about a way of life, not a momentary lapse. We have already established back in chapter 7 that Christians can and do sin. The Canons of Dort put it this way:

Although that power of God strengthening and preserving true believers in grace is more than a match for the flesh, yet those converted are not always so activated and motivated by God that in certain specific actions they cannot by their own fault depart from the leading of grace, be led astray by the desires of the flesh, and give in to them. For this reason they must constantly watch and pray that they may not be led into temptations. When they fail to do this, not only can they be carried away by the flesh, the world, and

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4 Cf. 1 John 3:2.

5 Cf. John 3:3–8.

6 Cf. Romans 10:13.

Satan into sins, even serious and outrageous ones, but also by God's just permission they sometimes are so carried away—witness the sad cases, described in Scripture, of David, Peter, and other saints falling into sins.<sup>7</sup>

So, we're not talking about a moment or even a season of sin in the life of a believer. Peter was not "in the flesh" (not in this "way of life" sense) when he tried to prevent Jesus from going to the cross, nor David when he murdered one of his best friends and stole his wife. True believers—true Christians—are capable of such serious and outrageous sins, but that's not what we're considering in Romans 8, verse 4. What we're talking about is defined for us in the very next verse.

### Mind Sets.

<sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh... Romans 8:5 ESV

(those for whom the flesh is a way of life)

...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. Romans 8:5 ESV

Speaking of this, Hendriksen notes:

Those who live according to the flesh are controlled by their sinful human nature.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the flesh is in the driver's seat. The flesh doesn't occasionally break in and wreak havoc; it's in control all the time.

They set their minds on—are most deeply interested in, constantly talk about, engage and glory in—the things pertaining to the flesh, that is, to sinful human nature.<sup>9</sup>

"Like what?" we might ask, and helpfully, the apostle gave us an answer in Galatians, chapter 5, once again in the context of being granted freedom in Christ.

<sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit... Galatians 5:16–21 ESV

(live by and in the Holy Spirit of God)

...and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Galatians 5:16–18 ESV

And here's where we were headed with that. What does it mean to set your mind on the flesh? Galatians 5, verses 19 – 21.

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7 "The Canons of Dort, Chapter 5, Article 4", 1962, 139.

8 William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *The New Testament with Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 248, emphasis mine.

9 Hendriksen, *The New Testament with Commentary*, 248.

<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. Galatians 5:19–21 ESV

That's what it looks like to live, to walk, to set your mind on the things of the flesh. But Hendriksen continued:

Those who live according to the Spirit, and therefore submit to the Spirit's direction, concentrate their attention on, and specialize in, whatever is dear to the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

And Galatians is helpful here too.

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit... Galatians 5:22 ESV

(what the mind set on the Spirit leads to)

...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... Galatians 5:22–24 ESV

(just for good measure)

...those who belong to Christ Jesus... Galatians 5:22–24 ESV

(those who are “in Christ Jesus”)

...have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Galatians 5:22–24 ESV

And there's so much more that I could say, but time would fail, so, back to Romans 8, verses 6 and 7:

<sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death... Romans 8:6 ESV

Proving yet again that we cannot be talking about Christians here. A true believer in Jesus Christ cannot have a mind that is “set” on the flesh, because that would be death, and

<sup>2</sup> ...the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:2 ESV

In contrast,

...to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace... Romans 8:6 ESV

Once again, because it is the “law of **the Spirit of life**”, God's Holy Spirit, “the Lord, the giver of life,”<sup>11</sup> as He is described in the Nicene Creed, upon whom the Christian's mind is set

### Two Roads Diverged...

So, this is the great divide, the distinction between those who are in Christ—those who live in and by the Spirit of God—and those who have a mind set on the flesh. I'd be tempted to liken

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<sup>10</sup> Hendriksen,

<sup>11</sup> “The Nicene Creed”,

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, 8.

it to the Grand Canyon, but the Grand Canyon has a bottom that connects one side to the other, and there is no such connection here. With this, there is no way to be in the middle, much less to stand on both sides.

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Romans 8:7–8 ESV

An old poem says,

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...<sup>12</sup>

And as with the poem, the flesh and the Spirit are two separate roads. We cannot travel both.

<sup>6</sup> 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 ESV

The thing to remember is, this is not a matter of our perfect righteousness, holiness, and sanctification. If we are looking to our own righteousness, then we are truly and hopelessly lost. It's a matter of what the mind is fixed on—it's a matter of the heart. Do we look to ourselves for answers? Do we look to ourselves for direction? Do we look to ourselves for wisdom? That is life in the flesh, and it is enmity with God.

But if we look to the Spirit of God—if we understand that it is grace and grace alone that saves; if we resolve not to be better or do better, but to live and walk in the Spirit, then we discover that God will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed, or set, on Him.<sup>13</sup> Even so, as we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit, and, if we can anticipate next week just a little bit, verse 11:

<sup>11</sup> 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

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<sup>12</sup> Frost, Robert. 1915. "The Road Not Taken." Poetry Foundation. August 1915. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Isaiah 26:3.