

Flesh & Spirit

Dr. Steve Schell | Romans 8 | Week 9 Essential Doctrines

Excerpt from *Preaching Through Romans*, “Setting the Mind” (Romans 8:1-5)

One of the greatest crises of Christianity is that we’ve lost our understanding of how to actually do what Paul is teaching in this passage of Romans. I’m not exaggerating! By and large over most of the past 2,000 years church leaders have tried to make God’s people holy by warning them not to do bad things and scolding them when they did—which as we all know, doesn’t work. Like the man Paul describes in Romans 7:15-25, after a good scolding we grow sorrowful and try to exert our willpower to change our behavior or attitudes only to find our flesh is too strong to resist. We end up feeling like prisoners trapped in our own bodies. After enough attempts and failures people generally resort to one of two options: either they live double lives, pretending to be good Christians while secretly carrying on some kind of hypocrisy, or they grow exasperated with themselves and God and quit trying altogether announcing they simply aren’t able to live the Christian life, so they might as well enjoy a life of sin. The tragedy here is that there really is a way to experience genuine transformation. That cycle of frustration and condemnation so associated with Christianity is absolutely unnecessary. But in order to find freedom and live a victorious Christian life, a person must learn to “walk according to the Spirit.” Isn’t it time to stop scolding and start teaching people how? Somewhere over the centuries the Church forgot how to access the power of the Holy Spirit, but that’s what Paul is teaching us again today.

Changed thinking

In order to live a victorious Christian life, first of all we have to get our thinking straight. Freedom begins in the mind. As long as we’re deceived, nothing can change. We have to see the truth and believe it before we can let go of old things.

In Romans 8:1-3 Paul gave us three foundational truths. He said these truths make it possible for us to fulfill the “righteous requirements” of the Law which ultimately means to love God with all our heart, soul and mind (Mt 22:37-40) and our neighbor as ourselves (Ro 13:8-10).

- v1 Forgiven: As a believer in Christ I am not under condemnation. I continue to have my sins forgiven while I learn to escape the cycle of failure Paul describes in 7:15-25.
- v2 Free: By being joined to Christ my human spirit has been set free from the old rebellion, selfishness, independence and pride that I inherited from Adam. My spirit is now the rightful governing authority (law) in my life. At last I can choose to follow the Holy Spirit.
- v3 Filled: I am no longer powerless to resist temptation. My body has been cleansed of sin and has become a holy temple in which the Spirit of God can dwell. This means the Spirit is always present to help me.

In other words, as a believer:

- I am not under God’s judgment even while I struggle with sin.
- I am not a slave to my flesh even though I may have failed in my attempts to change. I simply haven’t discovered how to “walk according to the Spirit” yet.
- I am not alone in this struggle. I don’t have to conquer my flesh with my willpower. The Holy Spirit is always with me, and He provides more than enough power.

Restored authority

When Adam sinned, he and all his descendants lost their freedom. Sin (rebellion, independence, selfishness, pride) enslaves every generation of humans, and sooner or later each of us discovers the power of its chains. And with that discovery comes despair. A person without Christ can't change their attitudes, and the more they try and fail the more despairing they become. But Jesus really set us free... from sin's power over our spirit and from its authority to rule our bodies. And in doing so He made it possible for our human spirit to take control of our lives.

When we're born-again, Jesus doesn't just set us free from one form of slavery (to sin) only to impose upon us another (to God). He restores the freedom humans lost when Adam sinned and then, as our Savior and Lord, calls us to follow Him. He leads us; He doesn't drive us, and understanding this truth is very important. He has made it possible for my human spirit to rule over my body and mind... to exercise the authority I was intended to have (Ps 8:1-9; Jn 15:14-15; Ro 8:14-16). He puts me back in charge of me and gives me the resources I need to rule. But if we're truly free, then we're also free to disobey. We can say "no" to sin, or we can say "yes." Depending on what our spirit chooses we can return to being controlled by our flesh (Ro 6:15-16), or we can learn to constantly draw on the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit and become more and more like Jesus.

The real me

Paul uses different terms to describe the human spirit. I believe that though the terms are different, they all point to the same part of us:

- "I" (Ro 7:17-21)
- "The inner man" (Ro 7:22)
- "My mind" (Ro 7:23, 25) (This word is used to translate the Hebrew word "heart" at times in the Septuagint)
- "Spirit" (1Co 2:11; Pr 20:27)
- "Heart" (Ro 1:21; 2:5, 15)

Jesus uses the word "eye" to describe the human spirit in Matthew 6:22-23. He says the eye is the "lamp of the body." He says our minds will focus our eye on either the "treasures of heaven" or the "treasures on earth" (Mt 6:19-21) with the result that we will either be filled with spiritual deception (darkness) or revelation (light).

Setting the mind (Ro 8:5)

Paul says that people who "walk according to the Spirit" are able to live righteous, pure, God-pleasing lives. So how do we do this? He uses a Greek word that means to "think or set my conscious attention on something." The picture he presents is that my human spirit is able to control what my mind focuses on. I'm able to stop thinking one thing and start thinking another. I can't overpower the pressures from my flesh, but I can stop listening to it (looking at it) and deliberately redirect my thoughts to think about God, reflect on His Word and become consciously aware that His Spirit is with me. And when I do, I will find His Spirit will come to help me and free me from the compulsive grip the flesh has on me.

- What is the "mind set on the flesh?"
 - Old, subconscious-driven thoughts (my old, faithless, loveless way of thinking)
 - Body-driven thoughts (appetites, emotions, impulses)

- What is the “mind set on the Spirit?”

My spirit, aided by the Holy Spirit, is able to change what my mind is consciously thinking about. I can:

- Picture Jesus in my mind.
- Sing, worship and pray in tongues.
- Quote Bible promises.
- Obey (turn it off, leave the room, pour it out, flush it down).

Practical steps

Jesus has restored my spirit to its proper role of authority, so my spirit can command my mind to stop following the flesh and to follow the Holy Spirit. When I direct my mind to do this, sooner or later the flesh will lose its grip. I don't overpower it; I mentally flee to God, and He quiets my flesh. Sometimes the process is easy, and sometimes it's like flying through a storm, gripping the wheel and keeping the plane going straight. I hang on until the storm ceases.

- Recognize what's happening.
 - My mind is being controlled by my flesh (Gal 5:19-21).
 - Face the truth; don't make excuses.
- Refuse to keep going.
 - Don't continue looking or listening to pictures or words in the mind.
 - There's an “inertia” that resists change.
- Redirect my thoughts onto the truth.
 - What is God's will here and God's promise concerning this situation?
- Repeat these steps as often as necessary.
 - The mind can drift back to the negative before I realize it.
- Repent: Tell the Lord exactly what just happened. Don't make excuses or blame others. Ask God for help so I can joyfully obey Him.
 - Surrender again if there is an area of His will I am rebelling against.
- Remember: He said that to follow Him we must come and die (take up our cross). This dying is more than just religious persecution. It's a lifetime of decisions to crucify the flesh (Gal 5:24).

Advent meditation

Following Jesus involves much suffering as we resist temptation and refuse the flesh. There are many pleasures of the world we forego, yet as we “walk according to the Spirit,” we soon discover a pleasure that's greater than all the world has to offer. It's the pleasure of His presence.

This is the third weekend of Advent, and our focus is on the joy the Lord brings us. We don't go without joy when we follow Him; we trade the world's joy for God's. And being filled with His joy allows us to enjoy the world properly. We don't expect too much. We are able to relate to people and things properly. We aren't “needy.” We are secure in the give and take of human exchanges. We handle the good things of this world without craving them. Nothing else can give us this kind of joy...only Him.

Questions

- 1) Have you felt the joy of God's presence? Tell us about it.
- 2) How do you find God's help when you are tempted?

Excerpt from *Preaching Through Romans*, “Two Minds” (Romans 8:3-15)

My flesh has a mind of its own, and becoming a Christian does not stop the flow of thoughts coming out of that mind. Sadly, it keeps generating bad attitudes, passions and images as long as I live. The good news is it won't be there after I'm resurrected into my new body. The bad news is I'll have to learn to cope with it and silence its voice day by day and moment by moment for the rest of my life or until Jesus comes again. Facing the prospect of this lifelong struggle is not pleasant, but if I refuse to acknowledge this truth, I'll never live in the freedom God has promised.

Over and over again in this passage Paul contrasts two minds: the “mind of the flesh” and the “mind of the spirit” and then appeals to us to follow one and warns us of the danger of following the other. In order to do this I first have to learn to distinguish between the two and recognize which is talking to me at the moment. One always lures me back to slavery and tries to damage whatever or whomever I'm dealing with. The other calls me to draw closer to Him and to listen and trust. When you describe it this way, the choice seems easy. Of course I want to follow the mind of the Spirit, but in actual practice it's not easy at all, especially at first. It requires faith. It requires humility. It requires diligence... day by day and moment by moment. And that's hard work until it becomes a habit. But if I accept the responsibility to govern my flesh and consistently redirect the attention of my mind back to the Spirit, then I actually discover God's will for my life and with it the greatest blessing of all: that every day I can walk beside Jesus.

Think right

It's very important to Paul that we see life from God's perspective. That's why he's going through such a careful explanation. Truth sets people free. Deception holds them in bondage. As we read this passage, two truths confront us:

- God has done His part already!

As a Christian there's no point in begging God to help me. He has already given me everything I need. Change will come only when I believe this and learn to access these resources.

- I'm forgiven (8:1); I'm free (8:2); I'm full (8:3-4).

I have now all I need to:

-Escape depression, break the yoke of addiction, heal my mind from toxic memories, reprogram bad habits, make good decisions and start living a blessed life.

- I must do my part.

-I must not passively wait for God to change me, saying things like:

a. “He knows I want to change, and I'm waiting for Him to do something!”

b. “I've prayed: God change me; make me kind; make me pure; make me happy. It's out of my hands. Now all I can do is wait.”

- I must not be content to remain as I am.

a. “I'm okay with it if I have to stay like this until I get to heaven.”

- I must not put the responsibility for my change on others.

a. “Here I am; you fix me.”

b. “I want you to hold me accountable and make me behave properly.”

- I must refuse to go back to my old ways when the going gets hard.

a. Lot's wife toward Sodom

b. Israel toward Egypt

- I must be courageous, willing to suffer until I learn to find comfort in God.

Restored authority

Paul says, “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again...” (8:15). When we’re born-again, Jesus does not free us from one form of slavery (to sin) only to impose on us another form of slavery (to God). He restores the original freedom the human spirit had before Adam sinned, then He calls us to voluntarily pick up His yoke (Mt 11:29-30) and follow Him as our Lord. The new birth makes it possible for my spirit to rule over my body and mind and to exercise the authority I was intended to have when God created me (Ps 8:1-9; Jn 15:14-15). He puts me back in charge of me. But if I’m truly free, then I’m also free to disobey. I can still say “yes” to sin. I can return to being dominated by my flesh (Ro 6:15-18), or I can choose to draw on the guidance and power of the Spirit to become more and more like Jesus. To stay free I must remember that it’s not my willpower that frees me; it’s God’s power. But my will must continually choose to draw on that power.

What holds us back?

The truth is neither the flesh nor the devil have the power to prevent us from walking in the Spirit. The greatest obstacles we face are our own attitudes:

- I stubbornly refuse to admit that I can’t handle this on my own (pride).
- I’ve grown comfortable with a certain level of failure because I assume I’ll never be completely free in this life.
- I’m not fully convinced that what Paul says here is true.
- I’m embarrassed to admit how awkward I feel when I try to function in the spiritual realm: worship, prayer, hearing God, letting His Spirit come over me, discerning His voice from the flesh and the devil...
- I’m ashamed to come to God and ask Him to help me because I’ve failed so often for so long.
- I’ve grown hopeless because I’ve tried to change so many times but have always relapsed.

So which voice is right? God’s Word which says I’m forgiven, free and full, or my past which says I should be ashamed, hopeless and learn to live in defeat? God can’t make the choice for me. He can show me the truth, but I have to make the decision to follow.

Two minds

Before we talk about practical steps, let’s briefly describe these two minds, so when thoughts come, we’ll recognize their source.

- The “mind of the flesh”: In each of us, even after we become born-again, there remains a flow of thoughts that arise not from our spirit but from our physical brain:
 - Programmed thinking: Thoughts actually produce physical pathways in our brains, and the longer we think those thoughts, the deeper those pathways become. It takes a concerted effort to re-pattern our thinking (Ro 12:2).
 - The subconscious: There’s a part of our mind that records reality from our perspective (whether true or false). It doesn’t filter what’s real from what’s being pretended. So it’s usually full of toxic memories and distorted reality, but it constantly influences our thinking usually without our being aware of it. Wounds located here cause many of our struggles, but God can heal them.
- The “mind of the Spirit”: After we’re born-again, we become aware of new thoughts and feelings that present themselves to our mind. This happens much more intensely and more frequently when we’re consciously close to the Lord in worship and prayer. A new thought or attitude can suddenly envelop us, and everything looks different. Hope arises; we’re sure God will answer; the right decision becomes obvious; we recognize a new option we never saw before...my spirit is now thinking God’s thoughts... it’s following after the Spirit.

The process of “walking in the Spirit” requires deliberately staying conscious of His presence and waiting until His thoughts come before I act. This can be done subtly so that others are not even aware of what’s taking place inside me, and it can become a habit so that I become accustomed to find Him quickly.

Practical steps

I must by trial and error discover practical steps that work for me to discern which is His voice and which is my flesh, and for that matter, which is the devil’s (we’ll take up that subject another time). I must tend my mind by:

- “Acknowledging Him” in all my ways (Pr 3:5- 6).
 - Directing my mind to the Spirit at the beginning of the day and of each activity.
 - Regularly reminding myself to listen to Him, depend on Him, obey Him.
- Recognizing the ever-present danger of the “flesh mind” taking over without my even knowing it at first.
 - Admitting with humility and honesty when I see I’ve slipped into the flesh.
 - Quickly refocusing back to the Spirit.

I must tend my thoughts. I deliberately turn my attention to the Lord and then monitor my thoughts as I go, listening to my words and making course corrections when I catch myself drifting back to the flesh. Have I become unloving, judgmental, cynical, angry, fearful, lustful, envious? Have I started boasting, dominating the conversation, talking too much about me? Am I only talking to friends and ignoring someone who’s lonely or overlooked? Lord, what do you want me to do right now? What do you want me to say? Holy Spirit, please speak to my spirit; I’m listening.

Questions

- 1) Describe what it’s like for you when the Holy Spirit comes over you and that change of mind takes place. What steps did you have to take for this to happen?
- 2) Describe how God usually communicates with you. Do you “see” things, “hear” things, “feel” things? Give us an example.