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TWO GROUPS, TWO DESTINIES

Romans 8:5-6

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Romans Lesson 43

Two Groups, Two Destinies Romans 8:5-6

In *Faith Works* ([Word Publishing], p. 127) John MacArthur tells about reading a book which told about a pastor who had been sent to prison for robbing 14 banks to finance his encounters with prostitutes! The author of this book was fully convinced that this pastor was a true Christian and so he wrote the book to explore how such a thing could be possible. MacArthur writes, "Call me old-fashioned, but I think it is fair to raise the question of whether someone who regularly robs banks to pay for illicit sex is truly saved!" Yes!

In recent years several polls have shown disturbing beliefs and behaviors among those who profess to be evangelical Christians. For example, a Pew Forum poll indicated that 57 percent of evangelical church attenders believe many religions can lead to eternal life (in *Arizona Daily Sun* [06/24/2008]). Other surveys show that only 9 percent of teens and 32 percent of adults who claim to be born again believe in moral absolutes (Barna Update, 2/12/2002). That means that over 90 percent of "born again" teens and two-thirds of "born again" adults do *not* believe in moral absolutes!

These shocking numbers may be explained in part by a lack of solid biblical preaching in evangelical churches. But beneath this lack of solid preaching is a basic misunderstanding about the nature of the gospel. We have wrongly assumed that when someone makes a decision to accept Christ as Savior or prays a prayer to invite Jesus into his heart, he is saved. We wrongly think that someone can accept Jesus as his Savior, but not yield to Him as Lord. Or we mistakenly assume that all who profess Jesus as Lord, especially those who serve Him, will go to heaven. But Jesus made it clear that only those who obey Him can expect to be welcomed into heaven (Matt. 7:21-27).

The Bible is clear that salvation is a matter of God's imparting new life to a person who was dead in his sins. And such new life *always* manifests itself in changed belief and behavior. This is not to say that those who are truly born again cannot fall into gross sins.

But it is to say that they cannot live *complacently* in sin. While growth in godliness is a lifelong process, there *is* such growth in the lives of all who have been born of the Spirit.

In Romans 8:1-4, Paul gives assurance that if we are in Christ, we will not be condemned at the judgment. Jesus paid the penalty we deserved on the cross. If we have trusted in His shed blood, the Holy Spirit who gives life has set us free from the law of sin and of death. Paul concludes that section (8:4b) by describing those who have been justified by faith: they “do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

Now he explains (“for”) why some walk according to the flesh and others walk according to the Spirit: It is due to their nature. Their spiritual nature of being either “according to the flesh” or “according to the Spirit” determines their spiritual behavior of walking according to the flesh or the Spirit. In 8:5-8, he mainly describes those who are “according to the flesh.” In 8:9-11 he focuses on those who are “in the Spirit.” Griffith Thomas (*St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 208) summarizes the flow of thought: “Hence, as in verses 1-4, the Apostle has shown that until and unless a man is justified he cannot possibly be holy, so now, in verses 5-11, he will show that if a man is not holy he cannot possibly have been justified.” In other words, justification is always the necessary foundation for sanctification. And sanctification is always the evidence of justification.

So Paul paints a picture of these two distinct groups: those according to the flesh; and, those according to the Spirit. We can apply his point by saying,

Since there are only two groups of people with two very different destinies, make sure that you are “according to the Spirit,” not the flesh.

1. There are two and only two groups of people in the world: Those who are according to the flesh and those who are according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:5: “For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.”

It's important to understand that Paul is not writing here about two types of Christians, but rather about how non-Christians differ from true Christians. While it's true that immature believers may yet live in accordance with the flesh (as I believe 7:14-25 describes), and even mature believers at times yield to the flesh (Rom. 8:12; Gal. 5:17), that is *not* what Paul is describing here. Here, "those who are according to the flesh" describes the spiritual condition of unbelievers. They are characterized by death (8:6). "Those who are according to the Spirit" describes believers, who are characterized by life and peace (8:6). The nature of each group determines their present behavior and their final destiny.

There is a popular but mistaken view that there are two optional tracks for the Christian life. If you're prone toward masochism, you can sign up for the discipleship track. Under this plan, you give up everything to follow Christ. You have to deny yourself and take up your cross daily. You will suffer hardship, sacrifice, and perhaps even martyrdom. You have to give the control of all of your material assets to Christ. You may be required to take the gospel to a foreign culture, where you'll live in difficult and perhaps dangerous circumstances. But, your rewards in heaven will be great. This discipleship track is for the super-committed.

The other track, the "cultural Christian track," is for the rest of us more "ordinary" believers. Under this plan, you can accept Jesus as your Savior (to make sure that you'll go to heaven), but also pursue your dreams for success and personal fulfillment in this life. You get the best of both worlds without needing to be gung ho, like those on the discipleship track. You can enjoy the fellowship of a good evangelical church and pursue the American dream at the same time. Just drop something in the offering plate once in a while to pay your dues. Once in a while you can volunteer to help out at the church, when it fits in with your busy schedule. Don't be too hard on yourself about obedience to the Bible. After all, we're all human. God is gracious and He understands your weaknesses. So accept yourself and don't think that you have to be all-out for Jesus. That's just for the fanatics on the discipleship track.

But Jesus made it clear that there is only one track for the Christian life (Mark 8:34-38):

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

It's pretty clear that Jesus is talking about eternal life or eternal condemnation. If you want eternal life, you must die to self and follow Jesus. In Paul's language, that describes a person who is "according to the Spirit." The other track describes those who are "according to the flesh." These are the *only* two groups in the world when it comes to eternal life or eternal death.

2. These two groups are sharply distinguished by different mindsets.

Paul describes the mindset of those who are according to the flesh as "the things of the flesh" (8:5). This mindset is death (8:6); it is hostile toward God, not subject to God's law (8:7), and not pleasing to God (8:8). On the other hand, the mindset of those who are according to the Spirit is "the things of the Spirit" (8:5). This mindset is life and peace (8:6). By implication, since it is the opposite of the mindset of the flesh, the mindset of those who are according to the Spirit is friendly toward God, subject to His law, and pleasing to Him.

To be "according to" the flesh means to live under the flesh, to make it your rule, or to obey it. To live "according to" the Spirit means to be "ruled and determined by His awakening, regenerating, illuminating presence; characterized by the fact that He dwells in [us]" (H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* [Cambridge, 1903], p. 141). Let's look at the two mindsets:

A. Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh (8:5a).

"Flesh" in the Bible can be used in different ways, depending on the context. It may refer to our human bodies with no moral

connotations at all (2 Cor. 10:3; Gal. 2:20; 4:13). It may refer to the weakness of human life as temporal (1 Pet. 2:24). Or it may refer to the sinfulness of human nature after the fall, as expressed in the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:16-21). These deeds include sins that we might categorize as sensual (immorality, impurity, drunkenness); but they also include worshiping false gods, strife, jealousy, and anger. So to live according to the flesh is to live independently of God, in dependence on oneself, with self at the center. The fleshly person may be outwardly moral, but his motives and goals are for his own glory or gain or comfort, without regard for the glory of God or the good of others.

Paul makes it clear that being “according to the flesh” has to do with our *mindset*, or how we think. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: The Sons of God* [Zondervan], p. 5) explains, “The term includes not only thought and understanding, it includes the affections, the emotions, the desires and the objects of pursuit.” That non-Christians set their minds on the things of the flesh not only means that they think about them occasionally, he says, “but that these are the things which they think of most of all; these are the things of which they think habitually, the trend or the bent of their thinking is toward them.”

To set one’s mind on the things of the flesh is much the same as when John says (1 John 2:15-16), “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” Loving the world or setting one’s mind on the things of the flesh means to live for the temporal things that the world values, in disregard of God and eternity.

B. Those who are according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit (8:5b).

The things of the Spirit are the truths revealed to us in God’s Word concerning who He is, who we are, the great salvation that He has provided in Christ, and how we should live in light of that salvation (1 Cor. 2:6-13). To set your mind on the things of the Spirit does not mean that you go around with your head in the clouds, detached from everyday matters. It does not mean that you must join a monastery and spend hours every day in meditation

and prayer. It does not mean that you do not get your hands dirty with mundane things like work, paying bills, cleaning the house, fixing meals, mowing your lawn, or reading the newspaper.

Rather, to set your mind on the things of the Spirit means to relate all of life to God and His Word. God has seen fit in His Word to tell us how to have our sins forgiven and to have eternal life through faith in Christ. That is the most important thing, because you could die at any moment and stand before God. That is why Paul says (Col. 3:1-4),

Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

So to set your mind on the things of the Spirit means especially to think often about matters of salvation. It means to worship God and commune with Him.

But the Bible also tells us a lot about many practical, down-to-earth matters. In the context of Colossians 3, Paul goes on to talk about sex, greed, anger, abusive speech, and truthfulness. He gives practical commands regarding relationships, marriage, child-rearing, and work. In other places, the Bible says a lot about how to manage money, how to deal with trials, how to relate to civil authorities, and many other practical matters. So to repeat, to set your mind on the things of the Spirit means to relate all of life to God and His Word. It means to develop a biblical worldview, where you think about and process all of life through the lens of the Bible.

At the heart of this process is *how you think*. In an article on the Greek noun, *phronema*, which occurs only in Romans 8 (translated "the mind set"), J. Goetzmann points out that there can be no such thing as neutral thinking. We're always aiming at something. He adds (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Words* [Zondervan], ed. by Colin Brown, 2:617):

This passage makes it abundantly clear that the way one thinks is intimately related to the way one lives, whether in Christ, in the Spirit and by faith, or alternatively in the flesh, in sin and

in spiritual death. A man's thinking and striving cannot be seen in isolation from the overall direction of his life; the latter will be reflected in the aims which he sets himself.

In Colossians 3, Paul *commands* us to set our minds on the things above, but in Romans 8 he *describes* believers as those who set their minds on the things of the Spirit. While it's a lifelong process that involves growth, we need to ask ourselves honestly, "Does this describe me? Do I set my mind on the things of the Spirit or on the things of the flesh? Which direction am I heading?"

I'll give you a clue: If you spend more of your spare time watching television or playing video games or on your computer than you spend reading the Bible, reading Christian books, fellowshiping with other believers, or serving the Lord in some capacity, you're probably not heading in the right direction. I'm not saying that every spare minute should be spent on spiritual activities. We all need some down time. We all have chores to do. But if you're not making a concerted, consistent effort to develop a biblical mindset, something is seriously wrong.

Thus there are two and only two groups of people in the world: Unbelievers who live under the domination of the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh. Believers who live under the domination of the Holy Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. From there, things get even more serious:

3. These two distinct groups are marked by mindsets that lead to two completely different destinies: death or life and peace.

Romans 8:6: "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace."

Paul is describing the *current* spiritual state of each group, which explains ("for") why the first group sets their minds on the things of the flesh and the second group sets their minds on the things of the Spirit. The first group is dominated by the flesh because they are spiritually dead. The second group is dominated by the Holy Spirit because He has given them life and peace with God.

But the scary part is this: If those who are dead in their sins continue in that state until they die physically, they will continue

throughout eternity in the awful condition of separation from God, under the penalty of His just wrath. The Bible calls this the second death and it is spent in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). The next verse (Rev. 20:15) adds, "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

This state of eternal spiritual death does not mean that those in hell are annihilated or cease to exist. That would be a blessing for them! But the Bible is clear that eternal spiritual death means enduring conscious torment forever (Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:16-31; Rev. 14:10-11). These frightening truths come to us from the Lord Jesus Himself and from John, the apostle of love. If we reject this truth, we are not following Jesus.

The good news is, if you have been given new life through the Holy Spirit, although your physical body will die (Rom. 8:10), God will resurrect your body (8:11) and you will enjoy life and peace with Him and with all the saints throughout eternity. The moment your physical body dies, your spirit goes immediately into the presence of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Acts 7:59; Luke 23:43).

Death is never a pretty picture. The mortician can make up a corpse to look its best, but we all know, that person is *dead*. And death is the spiritual picture of all who are outside of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 2:1, Paul writes, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins." He repeats (Eph. 2:5), "Even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ" The unbeliever may be a good person. He may give generously to charity and devote himself to good deeds. But if he has not been born again by the life-giving Spirit, he is spiritually dead.

But the one who has been born again has *life and peace*. The *life* is called *eternal* life because it is indestructible. It cannot be taken away by any evil force (Rom. 8:33-39). It joins us in living union with Jesus Christ, who once and for all conquered death and who lives and reigns forever. *Peace* means that we now have peace with God because our sins have been completely forgiven: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Even in the midst of life's trials, we enjoy peace in Christ (John 16:33).

Conclusion

The application of our text is obvious: Make sure that you have new life through God's Spirit and that you are not living according to the flesh! Don't deceive yourself by thinking, "I'm one of those worldly or carnal Christians, but I'm going to heaven because I prayed a prayer to ask Jesus into my heart." The issue is, do you have *life* and *peace* with God through the Spirit? Do you set your mind on the things of the Spirit? If not, repent and cry out to God to give you new life! If you're sure that you've been born again, but you're drifting into the things of the flesh or world, the solution is the same: Repent and don't rest until your mind and focus are on the things of the Spirit.

Sit down and evaluate your schedule. Do you remember the "big rocks" illustration? A professor came in with a large jar filled to the brim with big rocks. He asked the class, "Is the jar full?" "Yes," they responded. He poured in some pea gravel and shook it down through the cracks. "Is it full now?" They weren't so sure. He poured in some sand. Then he added water. The point of the illustration is, if you don't put the big rocks in first you won't be able to fit them in at all. Schedule your priorities or they will get crowded out by the urgent but trivial. Your biggest rock is your relationship with God. Set your mind on the things of the Spirit!

Application Questions

1. Do you agree that there are not two options for followers of Jesus? What bad consequences follow the "carnal" Christian teaching?
2. How can a person know for sure that he has eternal life? What are the marks of the new birth? Give biblical support.
3. Is setting our minds on the things above automatic or does it require discipline? How (practically) can we do this?
4. A professing Christian tells you, "I've tried to get into the Bible, but it bores me." How would you counsel him?

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