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UNDERSTANDING THE UNBELIEVING MIND

Romans 8:6-8

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Romans Lesson 44

Understanding the Unbelieving Mind Romans 8:6-8

Once in a while people ask why I do not give altar calls, where I invite people to come forward to indicate that they want to receive Christ as Savior and Lord. Due to the influence of Billy Graham and other popular evangelists, many think that if you don't give an altar call, you have not properly preached the gospel.

The short answer to why I do not give altar calls is that there is no biblical example or command to do so. I assume that Jesus and the apostles, as recorded in the Gospels and Acts, preached the gospel. While they often called on people to repent and believe in Christ (as I also do), there is no indication that they ever invited them to raise their hands or get out of their seats and come forward. That method of evangelism came into vogue in the early 19th century and was later popularized by Charles Finney, who held to some seriously heretical views of human nature. Iain Murray, who chronicles this in *Revival and Revivalism* [Banner of Truth], says regarding altar calls (p. 186), "Nobody, at first, claimed to regard it as a means of conversion. But very soon, and inevitably, answering the call to the altar came to be confused with being converted."

Murray shows the damaging effects of "revivalism," the evangelistic method that emphasizes some external action that the sinner can do to be saved. Gospel preaching that brings sinners to despair over their inability to do anything, driving them to trust in Christ alone, may bring true revival. At the root of the problem (and the longer answer for why I don't do altar calls) is the biblical understanding of the spiritual condition of unbelievers and the nature of true conversion, which is Paul's subject in our text.

Charles Spurgeon, who was used of God to bring thousands to genuine conversion through his preaching, understood this even early in his ministry. In a sermon in 1860, when he was only 24, Spurgeon said that the doctrine which leaves salvation up to something that man does exalts the flesh and dishonors God. He labels that view as Arminian. He explained (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*

[Pilgrim Publications], 6:259, also cited by Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Banner of Truth], pp. 87-88, italics Spurgeon's):

What the Arminian wants to do is to arouse man's activity; what we want to do is to kill it once for all, to show him that he is lost and ruined, and that his activities are not now at all equal to the work of conversion; that he must look upward. *They* seek to make the man stand up; *we* seek to bring him down, and make him feel that there he lies in the hand of God, and that his business is to submit himself to God, and cry aloud, "Lord, save or we perish." We hold that man is never so near grace as when he begins to feel that he can do nothing at all. When he says, "I can pray, I can believe, I can do this, and I can do the other," marks of self-sufficiency and arrogance are on his brow.

He goes on to emphasize that you cannot be saved unless *God* saves you. And so he urges sinners, not to come forward, not to look to their own prayers or faith, but to cry out to God to draw them to Christ by His grace. Only God can take away a sinner's heart of stone and give a heart of flesh that loves Him. And if anyone complains that he cannot repent or believe, Spurgeon says, these, too, are gifts from God. Cry out to Him to have mercy and save you. Salvation is *totally* from the Lord, not from us, or we would boast, even about our own repentance and faith!

The frequent result of an emphasis on doing something, such as coming forward, to receive Christ is that it promotes false conversions and gives false assurance to those who did it that they are saved because they went forward or prayed a prayer (Murray, *Revival*, p. 243). But such a decision alone is no evidence of the new birth. As Paul makes clear in Romans 8, the genuine result of being saved is that we walk according to the Spirit, not the flesh (8:4).

In 8:5, Paul sets forth the contrast between these two groups: "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." To be "according to the flesh" means to live under the domination of the flesh and to obey its dictates. It is to live with a self-centered, not a God-centered focus. Another way of saying it is that such people are "in the flesh" (8:8); they live in the sphere of the flesh. Such people may believe in God and be very

religious, but they live to please themselves. Godet (*Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 303) calls the flesh, “the life of the *I* for itself.” Those in the flesh do not set their minds on the things of the Spirit, which are the truths revealed to us in God’s Word. (See last week’s message for more on 8:5-6.)

In 8:6, Paul explains that the reason those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh is that they are spiritually dead: “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.” Then, in 8:7-8, he explains further why the mind set on the flesh is spiritually dead and headed toward eternal death: because it is hostile toward God, not subject to His law, and displeasing to Him. These verses reveal Paul’s insight into the unbelieving mind:

The mind set on the flesh is spiritually dead and thus
an enemy of God because it does not and cannot
submit to Him or please Him.

Note three things:

1. The mind set on the flesh is spiritually dead and headed toward eternal death because it is an enemy of God (8:6a, 7a).
 - A. The mind set on the flesh is spiritually dead and headed toward eternal spiritual death (8:6a).

Romans 8:6a: “For the mind set on the flesh is death . . .” In our last study we saw that outside of Christ, everyone is spiritually dead, and so I only mention this in passing since it’s the foundation for verse 7. To be spiritually dead means to be separated from God and the eternal life that only He can give. In Ephesians (2:1, 5) Paul says that we all were dead in our sins before God graciously imparted new life to us. And if we die in that state of spiritual death, we enter into what the Bible calls “the second death,” eternal separation from God (Rev. 20:14, 15).

Some try to avoid the implications of what it means to be spiritually dead by saying, “It’s only a metaphor and you can’t press it too far.” But the metaphor was not chosen without reason and it *does* convey something important (which I’ll say more on in a moment), namely, that sinners are spiritually unable to seek God or please Him. Spiritually dead people are cut off from understanding

the things of the Spirit, including the gospel (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4-6). This is the natural condition of every person (except Jesus) descended from Adam since the fall.

B. The mind set on the flesh is not spiritually neutral, but is an enemy of God (8:7a).

Romans 8:7a: "Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God." Paul uses the same word ("hostile") to describe a deed of the flesh (Gal. 5:20) and the perpetual hostility between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14, 16). It is the opposite of love. Unbelievers do not love God; they hate Him. He is their enemy.

Perhaps you're thinking, "But I know many unbelievers who don't *hate* God. They don't have anything against Him." But the Bible draws a line: Either you are a God-lover because He has saved you from your sins; or, you're a God-hater because you do not want Him to rule over you. Unbelievers may be religious, but invariably, it's religion *as they like it*. They pick and choose the kind of "God" that suits their preferences. They come to God on their own terms, by their own good works, and they "use" Him for their own selfish purposes.

So unbelievers are not spiritually neutral. They may be indifferent toward God, but that's often the worst form of hatred. Spurgeon (*MTP*, 32:20-21; I'm paraphrasing somewhat) illustrates this by supposing that someone wrote you a letter, but you paid no attention to it. "When did it come?" "Last Monday." "Have you read it?" "Oh no, I don't bother to read his letters." "You've had a good many of them, then?" "Oh yes, hundreds of them." "What have you done with them?" "I haven't done anything with them. I leave them alone and don't bother to read them."

"When you did read one of his letters, what was it about?" "Well, it was about wishing to be at peace with me, and desiring to do me good. He spoke of my being in great danger, and said that he would help me; and of my being poor, and he offered to make me rich." "He talked like that and yet you've never read any more of his letters? You must hate that person very much!" Indifference toward this kind and merciful God is to hate Him.

Also, unbelievers often think that a holy God is too strict and foreboding. They prefer a God who is more cuddly and user-

friendly. They think that God's justice in judging sinners is too severe. They protest, "Sure, I've got my faults. But God shouldn't judge me for being imperfect. That's not fair!" They think that God's truth is too inflexible. They wish He would be more tolerant, as they are. They say, "I believe that as long as a person is sincere and does his best, he will go to heaven." And they even think that God's mercy through the cross is offensive, because it implies that they cannot save themselves by their own good works (Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines of the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], XV:203, suggests the thoughts I developed in this paragraph.) But all of this puts the person who sets his mind on the flesh at odds with God.

You should always be careful before you make an enemy, especially if that enemy is much stronger and smarter than you are! But the problem is, we all are born at enmity with God. You would think that everyone would be scrambling to figure out how to become God's friend and end the hostility. But instead, unbelievers brazenly defy God and disobey His law. They boastfully oppose God's truth as revealed in His Word, asserting that they know more about spiritual matters than He does! They remake God in their own image. I've even heard of professing Christians who say, "My God isn't a God of judgment; He's a God of love!" Okay, but then your "God" isn't the God of the Bible!

By way of contrast, those who set their minds on the Spirit (believers in Christ) are not God-haters, but God-lovers. We seek to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We love the Savior, who left the glory of heaven to suffer and die on the cross in our place. We don't want to do anything to hinder the fellowship that we now enjoy with Him because of His grace.

So Paul shows that the mind set on the flesh is not spiritually neutral. Rather, it is separated from God (dead) and actively opposed to Him as His enemy. Also,

2. The mind set on the flesh does not submit to God (8:7b).

Romans 8:7b: "for it does not subject itself to the law of God." God's law reveals who He is and how He commands us to live. While we're not under the law of Moses (Rom. 6:14), we are under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). We are subject to the two great commandments, to love God with our entire being and to

love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:9). The New Testament gives many specific commands about how we are to live as believers in Christ. But the unbelieving mind does not subject itself to God's Word. Its mindset is, "I love my self and its will first and most" (H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Christian Literature Crusade], pp. 213-214).

Unbelievers often say that they do not believe because of intellectual reasons: "Give me enough proof and I'll believe." "If I saw a real miracle, then I'd believe." Or, "If God would speak to me from heaven, I'd believe." But God has given sufficient evidence through creation (Rom. 1:18-20) and through the biblical witness to Jesus Christ. But unbelievers suppress the truth in unrighteousness because they do not want to submit to God. The root of unbelief is not intellectual; it's moral. They do not want God to rule over them. They do not want to obey His Word.

By implied contrast, those whose minds are set on the Spirit do submit to God's Word. John Calvin describes his own conversion from Catholicism by saying, "God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], preface to the Psalms, p. xi). A good test of whether your mind is set on the flesh or on the Spirit is, "Do I have a teachable heart in submission to God's Word?" The test of having a teachable heart comes when you encounter some of the difficult doctrines in Scripture, such as the Trinity, hell, predestination, and handling trials. Do you fight God regarding these truths, or do you submit to Him?

Speaking of difficult doctrines, this leads us to a difficult truth which many who profess to know Christ do not accept:

3. The mind set on the flesh *cannot* submit to God or please Him (8:7c-8).

Paul does not stop by saying that those who are in the flesh *do not* submit to God's law. He goes further by saying that they are *not even able* to do so, adding (8:8), "and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." *Cannot* is a word of inability. It goes back to the matter of a sinner's fallen nature in Adam, which is incapable of obeying God or pleasing Him. Just as a pig is free to act in line with its pig nature, but not in line with a human nature, so fallen sinners

are free to act in line with the flesh, but not in line with the Holy Spirit, whom they do not possess.

But many who contend for so-called “free will” argue that God has given all people the ability to choose salvation. This is called “prevenient grace.” I don’t have time to go into the arguments for this doctrine, but they are biblically weak. (For a full refutation of this idea, see Thomas Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?” in *Still Sovereign* [Baker], ed. by Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, pp. 229-246.)

Suffice it to say that elsewhere Paul also teaches human inability to respond to the gospel apart from God’s gracious enabling power. That is clear from his reference to sinners as dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1-5) and as being blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4). Dead people cannot choose to live. Blind people cannot choose to see. Paul also says that the natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God, which includes the message of the cross, which he says is foolishness to the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14; cf. 1:18-30).

Jesus also taught that no one *can* come to Him unless the Father grants it and draws him (John 6:44, 65). He pointedly asked the skeptical Jews (John 8:43), “Why do you not understand what I am saying?” He answered His own question, “It is because you cannot hear My word.” Obviously they could hear what He was saying, but they lacked the spiritual ability to hear with obedience.

And since those in the flesh cannot please God and faith pleases God (Heb. 11:6), sinners cannot believe in Jesus Christ for salvation by their own free will, apart from God’s special saving grace. The fallen human will is not free; it’s in bondage. This means that in the order of salvation, regeneration precedes faith. God must impart life to dead sinners so that they can believe the gospel (John 1:13; and, note the Greek verb tenses in 1 John 5:1).

The frequent response to this biblical truth is, “That’s not fair! God commands sinners to repent and believe, but they aren’t capable of repenting and believing unless He grants it!” First, I would say, be careful about accusing the Sovereign of the universe of being unfair (Rom. 9:11-20). God would be perfectly fair to send us all to hell with no opportunity to receive His mercy. Second, let me share a story that speaks to this issue (in Murray, *Revival*, pp. 373-

374). During the 1840's at a time of revival in Savannah, Georgia, a young man complained to Pastor B. M. Palmer:

"You preachers are the most contradictory men in the world; you say and you unsay, just as it pleases you, without the least pretension to consistency. Why you said in your sermon that sinners were perfectly helpless in themselves—utterly unable to repent or believe and then turned round and said they would all be damned if they did not."

Pastor Palmer decided that it would be best to reply in an off-hand or seemingly indifferent way, so he said:

"Well, my dear [friend], there is no use in our quarreling over this matter; either you can or you cannot. If you can, all I have to say is that I hope you will just go and do it."

Pastor Palmer did not raise his eyes from his writing, which he continued to do as he spoke, so he did not know what effect his words had until after a moment's silence he heard a choking cry, along with the words, "I have been trying my best for three whole days and cannot." "Ah," responded Palmer, raising his eyes and putting down his pen, "that puts a different face upon it; we will go then and tell the difficulty straight to God." He then reports:

We knelt down and I prayed as though this was the first time in human history that this trouble had ever arisen; that here was a soul in the most desperate extremity, which must believe or perish, and hopelessly unable of itself, to do it; that, consequently it was just the case for divine interposition; and pleading most earnestly for the fulfillment of the divine promise. Upon rising I offered not one single word of comfort or advice . . . So I left my friend in his powerlessness in the hands of God, as the only helper. In a short time he came through the struggle, rejoicing in the hope of eternal life.

Conclusion

The unbelieving mind is spiritually dead and hostile toward God. It does not and cannot submit to God or please Him. This means that salvation is not a matter of the human will, but rather of God's imparting new life to those who are spiritually dead (John 1:12-13). This means that salvation is not even a joint project between God and sinners. Rather, salvation is of the Lord (1 Cor.

1:30; Jonah 2:9). Since salvation is completely God's doing, He gets all the glory (Eph. 1:3-12). Two brief applications:

**These truths have important implications for how we share the gospel.* Don't get overly enmeshed in intellectual debates about evolution or the existence of God or the problem of suffering and evil. Rather, zero in on the person's rebellion and refusal to submit to God. And, while you should be as cogent as possible, salvation is not a matter of convincing someone with persuasive arguments. Rather, it is a matter of God's opening blind eyes and changing hardened hearts. So pray as you share that God would grant repentance and saving faith (Acts 11:18; Phil. 1:29)!

**These truths pertain to how we evaluate ourselves.* Am I reconciled to God as His friend or am I hostile toward Him? Do I subject myself to God's Word? Do I seek to please Him with my thoughts, my words, and my deeds? Is my mind set on the Spirit, not on the flesh? May God grant that these evidences of His grace would be growing in each of us!

Application Questions

1. Why is it important to understand that lost people are not just spiritually sick, but dead? What are the implications of this?
2. An unbeliever tells you that he doesn't have anything against God. How would you help him see that he is hostile toward God? Why would this be important to do?
3. Someone says, "If unbelievers cannot repent and believe, it's not fair of God to demand that they do." Your response?
4. In the order of salvation, why must regeneration precede faith?

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