

Setting Our Minds Right

Romans 8:5-11

*“Those who are **in the flesh cannot please God...You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit**”*

Introduction: There is a battle that is raging, ongoing, and relentless, and it is happening right now. It is both seen AND unseen, acknowledged by some but ignored by many, and the casualties have piled up. It is intense, unrelenting, and deceptive, since our enemy knows weak points to exploit and soft spots to take advantage of. The weapons are diverse and manipulative rather than sharp and explosive, but are no less devastating. It is not taking place on foreign soil but in our homes, churches, schools, online, and culture in general. It is, of course, the **battle for the mind of mankind, knowing that whatever captures our mind gets all of us.** This is a battle that **must be** identified, fought, and engaged in, since the cost of losing is nothing less than the soul of all who are on the wrong side.

God has made mankind in a fascinating way. We are created as *free standing moral agents* with the ability to reason, think, process, learn, trouble-shoot, adapt, and come to convictional decisions. We have been given the **physical part** of our body, called the brain, which can be studied, damaged, and operated on, but we also have the **immaterial part** called the **MIND**, which is NOT part of our body though it can affect and be affected by our body. It is this second part that God gave a holistic and overarching command to:

Matthew 22:37-38 (cf. Luke 10:27; Deut. 6:5) *“And he said to him, “You shall **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and **with all your mind.** 38 This is the great and first commandment.”*

We are to love God with those **immaterial parts** of ourselves where our thinking, feeling, will, volition, and decision-making take place. The word *froneo* meant the *faculty of thinking, processing information, and forming opinions.* Our minds govern our decisions, inform our heart as to our affections, and dictate to our body what direction we are going to go. Win the mind, win the person. But the problem with our **minds** is that it has been **tainted by sin**, thus are broken and ill. The Bible says that our minds can be **confused** (Deut. 28:20), **anxious** (Job. 17:3-4), **evil or restless** (Ecclesiastes 2:21-23), **rash or deluded** (Isa. 32:4). Our minds can be **troubled** (2 Kings 6:11), **depraved** (1 Tim. 6:5), **dull** (2 Cor. 3:14), **blinded** (2 Cor. 4:4), and **corrupt** (2 Tim. 3:8). On top of this, we have the unique ability to lie, not just to others, but to ourselves, in our minds:

1 John 1:8 *“If we say we have no sin, **we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**”*

Because our heart is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9), we can lie to ourselves in far too many ways: thinking better of ourselves than we should, or worse than is actually true. We can convince ourselves that we are okay when we are not, or far worse off than we are. Not only this, but every time we sin we convince ourselves that we know more than God. So our minds are ill and left to ourselves, we can begin to affect our lives in negative ways. **Let’s do a quick exercise.** See if you can fill in the blanks:

“A mind fixated on the unknown future will produce _____.” What would this produce in that person long-term, including health issues?

“A mind fixated on what one lacks, or that everyone else has will produce _____.”

“A mind given to thinking every bad thing that can and will happen to them WILL happen will produce _____” *What consequences will this have in their life?*

What Paul lays out in this next section of Romans 8:5-11 deals with a battle that goes on in our minds. He will address that battle by comparing **two different minds, both produced by WHO THEY ARE**. The one who is *in the flesh* and thus apart from Christ will have a mind set on the flesh, and one who belongs to Christ and is saved will have their mind set on the Spirit. The whole argument is based NOT on someone who has partly flesh and part Spirit, but that those who have the Spirit SHOULD actually think, feel, act, and decide based on that fact. In other words, true believers, though they may have moments or times of thinking wrongly, should remember that they have the Spirit, and thus their minds should reflect that reality.

The Mind of the Unredeemed & Redeemed Contrasted (5-8)

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. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 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. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Before explaining the text, let's take a minute to make a few observations. Look at these four verses and note the repetitions and contrasts: “*setting the mind*” is repeated five times, and the **flesh vs Spirit** are clearly contrasted. This, then, makes clear what Paul was doing, in showing the vast difference between a mind set on the flesh and one set on the Spirit. What he offers is NOT two of a multitude of choices, but two of the ONLY options. A person is either “*in the flesh*” or “*in the Spirit*”, with no other middle ground. We will see there can be **degrees** in both categories, but these are the only two options. He gives descriptions of each one, with the goal that those who are IN THE SPIRIT to no longer walk or think like they once did in the flesh.

The Mind of the Person in the Flesh Described:

- **Flesh driven person has their mind set on the flesh** – When we see this idea of a mind that is set, it's important to see it as a *direction of life that creates both a mentality and lifestyle*. How and what we think about intertwines with what we actually do. Our thoughts direct our actions and our actions influence our thoughts. A mind set is the drift of our thoughts, the habit of desires, and the governing of what we believe. What does a mind set on the flesh look like? It may look like overt and obvious sin (a mind that is filled with lustful thoughts that seek to satisfy them physically), but more often, this simply means a mind where **God is on the outside of the mind**, forgotten, ignored, or resisted. It is the daily regimen of a **practical atheist**, one that may say they believe in God but live like He does not exist. The flesh is always directed at **self** first, and views everything through that lens. A mind set on the flesh will delight in the *earthly, material, selfish, prideful, and physical* things, and if God is thought of at all, it is merely to help accomplish these. The fleshly mind will produce the **works of the flesh: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, fits of anger, jealousy, divisions, envy, drunkenness, etc.** (Gal. 5:19-20).
- **Mind set on the flesh is DEATH (8:6)** – Now notice it does not say “leads to death”, but rather IS death. Can sin *lead to death*? Absolutely, but Paul's point here is on the state of death in which

every unbeliever already exists, even while one still has an active mind. Here is how John MacArthur stated it:

*“The unsaved person is already spiritually dead. The apostle is stating a **spiritual equation, not a spiritual consequence**. The consequence involved in this relationship is the **reverse**, that is, because unredeemed men are already spiritually dead, their minds are inevitably set on the flesh.”¹*

This is important to see since it leads into the next description of a person in the flesh.

- **Mind set on the flesh is HOSTILE to God** – God is NOT a neutral force for those outside of Christ, but has made himself an **enemy** of God and is **hostile toward** God. For someone who is in the flesh, God is not someone to be savored and worshipped, but there is bitterness and frustration toward Him. If He is so sovereign and loving, why is there so much _____ in the world!?! If He can do anything, why doesn't He fix _____?! When God does not live up to OUR FLESHLY EXPECTATIONS, He is not One to be worshipped but one to hate.

James 4:4 *“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is **enmity** with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an **enemy** of God”*

Colossians 1:21 *“And you, who once were alienated and **hostile in mind**, doing **evil deeds**”*

- **Mind set on the flesh DOES NOT SUBMIT to God's law** – Submission is *voluntarily, joyfully, and willingly placing oneself under the authority of another*. The fleshly mind rejects this completely, even when they may follow some version of God's commands, they do not do it out of submission. But Paul also adds the sobering line ----- **They actually CANNOT submit to them**. Now put this together with the last description:

- **Mind set on the flesh CANNOT PLEASE GOD** – This is a sobering phrase in verse 8. Those in perpetual flesh not only do not but CANNOT please God, which by definition is the purpose of our life (see Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:10; Phil 4:18; 1 Thess. 4:1). This means AT BEST the life of someone in the flesh can be lived in a superficial, artificial, and vain attempt at purpose, meaning, joy, and satisfaction. Without Christ, one can gain the world and forfeit his soul. He can have all he ever wanted and miss the true longing of his soul. **A few implications before we move on to those whose mind is on the Spirit:**

- 1) This again, is a description of an UNBELIEVER, one who is still under the wrath of God, still living in rebellion, and still facing judgment. Though these descriptions may happen to a believer for a time, they should never categorize our life.
- 2) The unbeliever, then, is one who is in the perpetual prison of their own mind. They only think of worldly things and earthly solutions, are constantly at odds with God, and CANNOT submit to God or please Him. **What would be the result of someone in this condition?** Peace?! Rest?! Healthy outlooks?! Confidence in the future?! Kindness toward those who disagree?! This explains the constant angst of those in our culture outside of Christ, who blame God and everyone else for their plight, are angry, and cannot figure out the source of a solution.
- 3) The SOLUTION to this prison is obvious but missed far too often by believers who should know that **spiritual problems require spiritual solutions**. The gospel, which requires humility,

¹ John MacArthur, “The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans”, p. 416.

knowledge, and repentance of faith is what actually changes this course. The gospel can get denigrated to second chair by well-meaning believers who think that the problems in this world can be solved by psychology or medication, which are worldly means to help people who refuse to submit themselves to God in Christ. We must continue to hold out the **hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ** in love to all those imprisoned in the jail cell of their own minds.

The Mind of the Spirit Filled Person Described:

Now Paul describes the opposite reality of those who *live according to the Spirit*, which connects back to those who are in Christ (8:1-2) and of whom are under no condemnation (8:1).

- **The one who lives according to the Spirit SETS THEIR MIND ON THE SPIRIT** – Knowing that there is a battle for and in our mind, the believer, who has been given the Holy Spirit, will actively tune, train, and exercise their mind in proactive ways. When we come to Christ by faith, we are not only given the Spirit, but **“the MIND of Christ”** (1 Cor. 2:16), so that we can now understand the *mind of the LORD and the instruction He gives*. **What does it mean to set our minds on the Spirit?**
- 1) **Set our minds on things above, not on earthly things alone** – This means an intentional exercise of thinking and dwelling on what is to come, but more importantly on Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God. Our minds drift toward those things that are most important, valuable, and interesting, so this means training our thinking to default to what is truly most important.

Colossians 3:2 *“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”*

- 2) **Set our minds on things that profit** – Not only is the goal to train our minds TO think, it also means training our minds on WHAT to think. Unfortunately, we are easily swayed by both **the deceptive and worthless**, prone to intake those things that are opposed to God and simply inane. With the creation of social media and phones connected to the internet, things like “Zombie and Doom Scrolling” have become a thing. **Brain rot** is slang for the mental fatigue, lack of focus, and cognitive sluggishness caused by overconsuming low-quality or highly repetitive online content. Generations have trained their minds to become weary of thinking, and thus cannot do the work necessary to comprehend the depth, height, and breadth of the greatness of God. That is why Paul exhorted the Philippian church this way:

Philippians 4:8 *“Finally, brothers, whatever is **true**, whatever is **honorable**, whatever is **just**, whatever is **pure**, whatever is **lovely**, whatever is **commendable**, if there is any **excellence**, if there is anything **worthy of praise**, **think about these things**.”*

This was sandwiched in between passages addressing both **anxiety AND contentment**. Both of these are a result of **thinking about the wrong things**, with the antidote to focus on those things that profit.

- 3) **Set our minds against the ONSLAUGHT of the enemy** –

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 *“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have **divine power to destroy strongholds**. 5 We **destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ**,*

Strongholds, arguments, and lofty opinions can be both issues of **worldview** (secular humanism, materialism, atheism, etc.), or **personal attitudes in our mind** (idols, fear, shame, etc.). Both of these can lead our mind astray to believe the lie, so we must see the battle for what it is. Taking every thought captive means we are not only aware of what is going IN our mind but what happens when it gets there. It's why David asked God to **search him and know him, to know his thoughts, in order to identify any anxious way about him and lead him to the way everlasting** (Ps. 139:24). In this, we are bringing our minds under control and submitting them to Christ. The battle in our mind can be won, but only when the factors of the next verses are there.

The Life Defined Where the Spirit Dwells (9-11)

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. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 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.

Verses 5-8 sound bleak if not for 9-11. Notice that Paul ends the contrast with the resolution of verse 9: YOU believer, ARE NOT in the flesh but the Spirit, because everyone who is born again has the Spirit **dwelling in them** (see also 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:14). The word "dwell" is the same word as **house or residing in**. When God declares us righteous because of our faith in Jesus Christ and the work He did on our behalf on the cross, we not only get Christ's righteousness accounted to us, but we get the Holy Spirit IN US. The Holy Spirit is not a force but a Person, and by definition, is personal, meaning that He enters in each of us individually. He takes up settled residence, with the goal of helping direct our lives. **Who is the Spirit and What does He do?**

The Spirit is co-equal with God the Father and God the Son, since He is of the same essence, yet with distinctive features. He is personal, since he *teaches, guides, comforts, and intercedes* (John 14:26; Rom. 8:14; 26). He has *emotions, intellect, and will* (Eph. 4:30; 1 Cor. 2:10-14; 1 Cor. 12:11). He can be *sinned against and lied to* (Acts 5:3-4). He possesses the attributes of deity, since He is described with omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence (1 Cor. 2:10-11; Ps. 139:7; Zech. 4:6; Heb. 9:14). He is key in salvation, since He brings *conviction to the unbeliever* and *sheds clear light on the truth of the gospel* (John 16:8-11). He unites a believer with Christ and places him in the body of Christ, the Church (1 Cor. 12:13). When a believer lives in the power of the Spirit, He produces fruit in them (Gal. 5:16, 22). He seals a believer (Eph. 1:13), bringing security and assurance (Eph. 4:30). He gives each believer spiritual gifts in order to build up the Body of Christ and to serve each other (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4).

But what does Paul assure here in verses 9-11 in the Spirit?

- **The presence of the Spirit assures the presence of Christ** – We've already seen that believers have died to the law and thus *belong to Christ* (Rom. 7:4), and Paul clarifies this one level more by clarifying that the Spirit dwelling in us assures us that **Christ is in us**. This is why we need to pay attention to our mind, because our goal and the goal of the Spirit is to point us to an ongoing, growing, and intimate relationship with Christ. Eternal life is defined by **knowing Christ** (John 17:3), not about what we gain or get. Christ is the goal of life, death, and eternity, and the Spirit guides, points, and convicts us to that end.
- **The same Spirit that could raise Jesus from the dead gives US LIFE** – This speaks to both *presence AND POWER*, where we have the ability to LIVE a life of sanctification because we have

the Spirit DWELLING in us. This is hopeful for the present AND the future. Sometimes we forget who dwells in us when we jump too quickly to earthly solutions for our problems of **sin or mental struggles** ----- jumping to needing accountability from a friend (which is important and good), but forgetting that we have the Spirit IN US ALL THE TIME, and Christ IN US, and in this, we have life and ability to do all that He commands and hold to what He has promised.

What does this mean for us? The point is clear: if we have been justified in Jesus Christ by faith, we have been given the Holy Spirit, and if He dwells in us, we should absolutely set our minds rightly, actively, on the One He is pointing to, who is Christ Himself. So the point to ponder is simply, are we actively engaged in the battle in and for our minds? Are we taking every thought captive? Are we SETTING our minds above, or are we living like practical atheists? Are we making choices, every day, that are consistent with who we are in Christ and in the Spirit?

Jonathan Edwards, in his timeless work "On Religious Affections" said, "*True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections. He who has no religious affection, is in a state of spiritual death. Holy affections do not have heat without light.*" In order to grow in our intimate relationship with Christ, we must feed our minds with the light of Scripture and knowledge of God. This takes work, but the payoff is infinitely valuable.