

WALKING AFTER THE SPIRIT

A Study on Romans 8:5-13

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

A number of years ago I preached through Romans 8, and at that time I felt I had the right interpretation of Romans 8:5-13, but I must confess I was somewhat shaky on this section. I understood this section to teach that a Christian could walk according to the Holy Spirit or according to the flesh (sin nature). I still believe that the Christian can stop relying on the Holy Spirit and yield to the flesh in him, but I do not believe that Romans 8:5-13 teaches this truth. I can still remember that at that time I struggled with this passage, and was not satisfied with my own interpretation.

I have now come to accept the traditional interpretation of this passage, specifically, that it contrasts the walk of the saved and the walk of the unsaved, and that it adds a special exhortation for Christians to persevere in the faith. This section speaks categorically of the state and practice of the non-Christian over against the state and practice of the true Christian.

BACKGROUND

As we have learned in Romans 7, as a saved man the Apostle Paul found himself in a mighty spiritual struggle. He loved the spiritual requirements of the Mosaic Law and he had a genuine desire to keep the Law, but because of indwelling sin still in him, he found himself in a spiritual struggle. He wanted to do right, but found himself sometimes doing wrong.

In Romans 8:1-4, we saw how Paul had to learn about the Holy Spirit whom Christ sent to empower believers to live the Christian life. We discovered that a Christian lives by a higher law than the Mosaic Law, and that is “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:2). The Holy Spirit gives the Christian the power to live the Christian life, and enables him to keep the spiritual requirements of God’s law.

An unsaved man cannot fulfill the righteous requirements of the Law but a saved man, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, can and does fulfill the spiritual requirements of the Mosaic Law (Rom. 8:3,4). A person who walks according to the flesh is one who is unsaved and dominated by the sin nature. A person who walks according to the Spirit is one who is saved and dominated by the Spirit. This does not mean that a saved person always yields and submits to the Holy Spirit, but he does have a leaning or propensity towards spiritual things. The bent of his life is towards Christ and walking in the Spirit.

THE PRACTICE OF THE UNSAVED — Romans 8:5-8

“For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.” The unsaved man is dominated by the sin nature and walks according to the flesh in all things. The predominating influence in his life is how to feed the flesh or sin nature. He lives for himself. All his actions are somehow directed toward building his human ego. The non-Christian is a worldling and shuts God out of his thinking because he is interested in fleshly pursuits. He is always trying to get something he desires or do something he wants.

Think back to the time before you were saved. Every decision you made and every course of action you took centered around fulfilling your own needs, pleasures and lusts. God was never a major factor in any of your thinking.

“But those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.” On the other hand, the saved man is dominated in his thinking by the things of the Spirit. God’s will is given consideration in all of his decisions, and he longs to have Christ as master of his life. The saved man’s practice and disposition are towards spiritual realities.

Of course, we know that as Christians we do not always depend upon the Holy Spirit in our Christian walk, and we sometimes fall into carnal acts, which are displeasing to God. But the main thrust of a Christian is towards Christ and the things of the Spirit.

Think about your relationship to Christ now that you are saved. You now consider God in every decision, even though you do not always obey perfectly. You must admit that the bent of your thoughts, affections and pursuits is towards God.

“For the mind set on the flesh is death.” The unsaved man has a different practice because he has a different state or condition. He is dead in sin, and this produces a different lifestyle which results in spiritual death:

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest” (Eph. 2:1-3).

The fleshy, unsaved mind pursues carnal objects as a way of life. The unsaved man cannot act differently because he is operating totally on the flesh. The unsaved man’s lifestyle should not surprise us or shock us — he can only sin!

“But the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.” The saved man pursues the things of the Holy Spirit, and experiences God’s life and peace. The unsaved man can know nothing of life and

peace until he is born of God's Spirit through faith in Christ Jesus. Life and peace belong to God's children alone.

In the whole world, there are just two mind sets — that of those who are saved and spiritually minded; and that of those who are lost and fleshy minded. The world is divided; all men belong to one or the other. Men are either in the flesh and walk according to the flesh, or they are in the Spirit and walk according to the Spirit.

When a Christian stops submitting to the Spirit, he will experience yielding to the sin nature and lose a sense of God's life and peace in life. Still, he will never pursue the flesh as he did in his unsaved state.

“Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God.” The unsaved man is an enemy of God and is alienated from him. The carnal mind seeks to shut God out from his thinking and does not want the true God of Scripture. The unsaved man rebels at God's justice, his sovereignty, and even his love and mercy because of the way he dispenses them. The non-Christian in reality hates God because he will not submit to the one, true God as he is revealed in the Holy Scripture.

Unsaved men are very deceived, for many will tell you that they believe in God (and in their own way they are sincere). They are offended when you tell them that they hate God because in their sin-riddled minds they imagine that they love God. But what god do they love? They love only the god of their own imaginations, not the God of Scripture. There is only one God — the God of the Bible — and those who do not bow to him are his enemies.

“For it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so.” The unsaved, fleshy mind does not want to subject itself to God's Law because it hates the whole idea of submission to God. The unsaved man does not want to be ruled over by anyone but himself, but a saved man desires to keep the spiritual requirements of the Mosaic Law as they are revealed in the Ten Commandments.

The unsaved, unregenerate person can never fulfill the spiritual requirements of the Law because his mind refuses to submit to God. An unsaved person may outwardly seem to keep the external letter of the Law while all the time hating the God who gave the Law. He cannot keep the spirit of the Law without loving God, for the Law is a reflection God's character.

“And those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” The natural, unsaved man has no ability to please God. The unsaved man may be good, kind, nice, and even religious, and he most certainly will please men, but the unregenerate man cannot please God in any way. Man has no ability in himself to please God; he must be given that ability by God who gives the Holy Spirit to empower the Christian to do things that do please God. The only person who can please God is the born-again Christian who has Christ as his Saviour and the Holy Spirit in his life, enabling him to produce the spiritual requirements of the Law.

THE POSITION OF THE SAVED — Romans 8:9-11

“However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed (since) the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Paul states clearly that the Roman Christians were not unsaved; they were not “in the flesh” but “in the Spirit.” They were in the sphere of and dominated by the Holy Spirit. Why? They were permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They had the capacity and the power to please God.

The distinguishing characteristic of the true Christian which sets him apart from all unbelievers is that the Holy Spirit indwells him. How do we see the indwelling of the Spirit? We don’t, but we see the evidences of the indwelling through the life of the Christian. A person cannot be indwelt by the Holy Spirit and fail to manifest this in some way. If God dwells in a person, there will be ample evidence of the fact!

Those who are saved can never be the same again, for God the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in them:

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19,20).

They are responsible to walk in dependence upon the Spirit in their lives:

“If [since] we live by [in] the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

“But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him.” Any person who does not have the Holy Spirit does not belong to the Lord and is unsaved. Once again, how can we know if the Holy Spirit indwells a person? Only as we see the fruits of the Spirit appear in a Christian’s life.

I have been in both large and small groups of rank unbelievers and professing Christians. With unbelievers I know I have no spiritual fellowship and so I spend time with them to reach them for Christ Jesus. But I have been around groups of professing Christians or church-goers and felt very out of place because Christ was not present there. There was no kindred-spirit, and the spirit that was missing was the Holy Spirit. People who do not have the Holy Spirit indwelling them are on different wavelengths from the true Christian.

“And if [since] Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive [Spirit is life] because of righteousness.” A Christian’s body is still sinful, but the Holy Spirit is working spiritual life and righteousness on the inside of a Christian. The Holy Spirit is producing progressive sanctification in the Christian so as to produce the life of Christ in him.

“But if [since] the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal body through His Spirit who indwells you.” The

indwelling Spirit is not only a guarantee of progressive victory over sin now, but a guarantee of complete and final victory over sin when the Christian receives his new, resurrected body in the future.

THE PRACTICAL EXHORTATION TO PERSEVERANCE — Romans 8:12,13

“So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” The true Christian is not a debtor to the sin nature and is not under obligation to obey it. Why? God has positionally judged the sin nature, has indwelt the believer with the Holy Spirit, and has guaranteed progressive as well as ultimate sanctification from sin.

Obviously Paul did not finish his sentence, for he should have said, “But are under obligation to the Spirit.” Christians are under obligation to walk in the Spirit and to be dominated by the Spirit.

“For if [maybe you are and maybe you are not] you are living according to the flesh, you must die.” This is a warning to professing Christians who may not be regenerated, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and producing the fruit of the Spirit. This is merely saying that if a person professes Christ, but does not have works to back up that profession and is constantly living for the flesh (sin nature), he will die spiritually. The true Christian will not live continually according to the flesh, but one who is only a professing Christian will.

“But if [maybe we will and maybe we won’t] by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you shall live.” It is absolutely necessary and possible for the Christian to fight sin. The true Christian has the responsibility to put to death the evil passions and desires of his sin nature. Why? Because his sin nature has been judged and he is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who empowers him to do it. The Christian must put to death the cravings of the sin nature:

“You must put to death [Put to death], then, the earthly desires at work in you, such as immorality, indecency, lust, evil passions and greed [for greediness is a form of idol worship]” (Col. 3:5, N.T. in Today’s English Version).

If he does not kill sin, sin may well kill him. As the Christian puts to death sin in his life, this is evidence that he really does have the life of Christ in him.

We cannot put down the sin nature in our own strength, we must yield to and be controlled by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives the Christian the power to put acts of sin to death in his experience.

Matthew Henry says, “We cannot do it without the Spirit working it in us, and the Spirit will not do it without us doing our endeavour.”

CONCLUSION

There may be someone reading this who has never made a decision for Christ. We read in the Bible that those who are in the flesh or unsaved cannot please God in any way. God is not pleased with a man’s good works, his meager attempts at morality, his pride of life or his rebellion to Jesus

Christ. God is only pleased with those who have Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour and who are living the Christian life by means of the Holy Spirit. If you have never made this decision for Christ, I urge you to do so. Your present spiritual condition and your eternal destiny hangs on what decision you make for Christ in this lifetime.