

Life According to the Flesh

Romans 8:5-8

March 4, 2018

Introduction:

Benjamin Franklin is one of those famous Founding Fathers of our country who every grade school kid learns about, if for no other reason as a cautionary tale against flying kites during lightning storms! But besides his role in helping us understand electricity, he was also one of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence, the publisher of the highly popular *Poor Richard's Almanack*, and an incredibly gifted wordsmith. Some people have a knack for saying things in short, memorable ways and Benjamin Franklin was one such person. One quote, which I was surprised that actually came from him because it seems more like something you'd get from a fortune cookie or a Joel Osteen book, is one I'm pretty sure most of us would be familiar with and it goes like this: "You can do anything you set your mind to." Ever hear that before? Perhaps you've used it to encourage your child not to give up? It sounds like some modern positive-thinking, self-help manta, but it's actually been around since the time of the Revolutionary War.

Now I'm not going to harp on the quote because while I wouldn't say it true in an absolute sense - after all, if you're only 5'3' I don't care how much you set your mind on playing basketball for Chicago Bulls, it ain't gonna happen! - there is a general principle behind it that I do think is true: what you think about determines what you do. Or if I might slightly alter another well-know phrase, instead of "You are what you eat," Benjamin Franklin is essentially saying, "You are what you think." What preoccupies your mind will affect the way you live your life.

I'm not sure if Benjamin Franklin's quote was partly inspired by the apostle Paul, but the idea that what you set your mind to will significantly impact the way you live your life is found in the passage we'll be looking at together this morning. Paul has a lot to say about what we set our minds on and how that affects us. So if you haven't already, please turn open your Bibles to the eighth chapter of the book of Romans, which can be found on pg. 944 of the hardcover pew Bibles should you not have your own personal Bible with you. Our focus this morning will be on just four verses, v. 5-8. Please follow along as I read. **"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. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 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. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."**

As you can see, there's a contrast being made between two kinds of people: those who have their minds set on the things of the flesh and those who have their minds set on the things of the Spirit. Today we are going to focus on the negative side: on those who set their minds on the flesh. Next week we'll unpack the other side: those who set their minds on the Spirit. But before we can go much further, we need to clarify who Paul is talking about here. Is Paul contrasting two ways a believer can live, sometimes by setting our minds on the things of the flesh and sometimes setting our minds on the things of the

Spirit? Or is he contrasting those who are unbelievers who live by the flesh with Christians who live by the Spirit? As I hope to be able to demonstrate to you as we go through this passage, as well as from what we'll look at next week, Paul is contrasting those who are unbelievers with believers. Paul's lack of any imperative here along with the third-person language of the paragraph makes it clear this isn't warning Christians about living in the flesh but is rather describing the marked difference between those who are believers with those who are unbelievers.

So then, our focus this morning will be on what Paul has to say about unbelievers and as we do so, I think we can identify four characteristics Paul highlights in v. 5-8. Let's begin then with our first characteristic, which is this...

1. An unbeliever has thoughts preoccupied with worldly concerns (v. 5)

Paul sets up the first contrast in v. 5 saying, **“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.”** Christians, who have been born again through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, focus their minds on the things of the Spirit of God, whereas unbelievers don't. Instead, they set their minds on what? **“Things of the flesh.”**

What Paul means by the word **“flesh”** here is much broader than how we might use the word to refer to things such as sexual lust. While it certainly includes that, it's often used by Paul to refer to sinful attitudes and desires across the board, whether they be pride or selfishness or anger or jealousy or lust. The term **“flesh”** is Paul's way of referring to the things of this world as opposed to heavenly things, the things of God. When Jesus told his disciples to seek first the kingdom of God, he was calling them to turn away from being preoccupied with worldly concerns and instead to set their minds on God's kingdom.

I can remember how this was in my life before I became a believer. It wasn't until my first year of college that I came to Christ and so I can remember well what it was like to be an unbeliever. In high school, I didn't give much thought to the things of God. I did what I had to do - such as go to church with my mom - but I didn't care for it. I had no love for it and was happy when, due to weather or sickness, we weren't able to attend. And while I acknowledged the existence of God, I didn't give him much thought, except in those instances when either I felt I was in danger or really wanted him to make a girl I had a crush on like me. Besides those things, God didn't fit into the picture of my daily life. My mind was completely preoccupied with worldly things: my friends, school, job, girlfriends, cars, and so on. Those were **“things of the flesh.”** My thoughts didn't gravitate towards God; my concerns involved matters in the here-and-now. God was at best an after-thought, if thought of at all.

But after I became a Christian, that all changed. Suddenly my mind was focused on God and his kingdom. I wanted to read the Bible for myself. I wanted to go to church. In conversations with friends, I was eager to talk about my new-found faith. I became interested in reading books that helped me understand and defend my faith. Anyone

who knew the pre-conversion Rob Borkowitz and the post-conversion Rob Borkowitz could tell that my heart had been re-focused. Not everyone was happy with that change, but they certainly couldn't deny that something had significantly changed me.

So one of the ways to tell whether someone is a Christian is to observe what they set their minds on. What kind of things do they do talk about? What are their goals? What's important to them? What are they passionate about? What do they spend their time and money pursuing? Unbelievers aren't necessarily atheists. I've professed belief in God my entire life, but it wasn't until I was saved that my heart and mind were truly focused on him. I have many friends I went to high school with who will claim belief in God and would identify themselves as Christians, but if you look at their life, you would be hard-pressed to find any evidence of a mind set on the things of the Spirit. They act and speak and are concerned about the things of the world and only those things. It doesn't mean they're constantly doing what we would call evil things - they aren't robbing 7-11's or dealing drugs or assaulting people - but they simply don't have any real concern with Christ and his kingdom. They're indifferent at best. Their hearts are set on things of the flesh and not things of the Spirit.

So a good point of application here is to take time for self-evaluation: What do you set your mind on? What monopolizes your thinking? Your conversations? Your desires? Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We will preoccupy our minds with what we treasure the most. So where does God fit into that? What is your mind set on? Those questions are important diagnostic tools to help us see if we are indeed seeking first the kingdom of God or if your true desire is the building of your own kingdom of wealth, power, relationships, reputation, and possessions.

So then, the first characteristic of an unbeliever is they have minds set on the things of the flesh and not on God. Moving on now, Paul once again sets up a contrast between believers and unbelievers saying this for our second point...

2. An unbeliever is under the sentence of eternal death (v. 6)

Look back in your Bibles with me at v. 6. **"For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."** Just as there are two kinds of people - those whose mind is set on the flesh and those whose mind is set on the Spirit - there follows from that two kinds of results. For the believer who is indwelt by the Spirit, there is **"life and peace."** Our spiritual condition apart from Christ is to be dead in our trespasses. Previously, we were enslaved to sin and dead to the things of God. But when God saves a person, he causes that person to be born again by the power of the Holy Spirit and thus made spiritually alive. Then once one's spiritual eyes are opened to Christ, they can respond in faith to the gospel and thus have peace with God because God's wrath against them has been satisfied by Christ.

But for the unbeliever, there is a different result. Paul says, **"For to set the mind on the flesh is death..."** To begin with that means such a person is spiritually dead, enslaved to sin, unable and unwilling to respond to God in faith. For a person whose mind is set on the things of the world, they may be physically alive but that's as far as it

goes. Their spiritual state is one of deadness, of loving darkness rather than light, of bondage to sin, which they cannot escape. But second, it also means they stand under the threat of eternal death. God's wrath is against them for their sin and the unavoidable end for those who remain in their sins is eternal death in hell. So that means there are only two roads that lead to only one of two destinations: you can live according to the Spirit through faith in Christ, which leads to spiritual life now and eternal life in heaven, or live according to the flesh, in unrepentant sin, which leads to spiritual death now and eternal death in hell.

We need to be reminded of this because it's so easy to forget. We can get so caught up in focusing on the physical riches of a person's life that we become blind to the spiritual reality that lies behind it. We can be like the writer of Psalm 73 who spoke of envying the wicked after seeing how they prospered materially, how they were healthy and wealthy, with their life beaming with ease and comfort. He said his foot almost stumbled - that he almost gave up on God, figuring it wasn't worth following him - until he considered their final destiny. Have you ever thought like that? You look at those famous actors or musicians who own multi-million dollar mansions and have beautiful women surrounding them and can travel to exotic locations and enjoy the cheers of thousands upon thousands of adoring fans and think to yourself, "They are living the life! Wish I could trade places with them. Must be nice to live like that."

But we forget that so many of them who gained the world will lose their souls. They've set their mind on the things of the flesh and have achieved their sinful heart's desires, but their end is death because they don't know and love Christ. They treasure what is created instead of the Creator and therefore their wealth and fame is only a paper thin mask covering their spiritually dead souls. A hundred years of worldly success is not something I would trade for an eternity of death in hell, and yet apart from Christ, that is what awaits all who love the world instead of God.

So then, we've seen that unbelievers are those who have their minds set on the flesh, on the things of this world, and that their end is death, spiritually now and in hell later. But Paul has more on to say more about those whose minds are set on the flesh in v. 7 and that concerns their relationship towards God. So point three adds this...

3. An unbeliever lives in hostile rebellion towards God (v. 7a)

Notice what Paul says in the first half of v. 7. **"For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law..."** This is in line with what Jesus told us. He said, "No one can serve two masters. For you will love the one and hate the other." If you love the things of this world, if your mind is set on things of the flesh, then you will hate God. You will be hostile to him because you won't like what he demands of you.

Let's use a few examples. If you love money and your heart is set on gaining riches, then you're going to be hostile to a God who expects you to give generously in support of the church. You aren't going to like God calling you to place him above your career goals, such that you may need to turn down a promotion because of it would take you

away from serving in the church or because it demands you to be deceptive as part of the job. Putting God first can cost you financially and if you have your mind set on worldly ambitions, then you'll resent the limitations God's Word places on you.

Or let's talk about sexual behaviors. If you what to do want you want sexually, then you are not going to be happy when God's Word has something to say against sleeping with your girlfriend, or against homosexual behavior, or adultery. You will either set your mind on God's Word and commit yourself to obeying it, or you will reject it and find excuses to do what you've set your mind to do in according with your fleshly desires.

When unbelievers reject God's Word in order to live their life on their terms, they are being **"hostile"** toward God, even if they aren't expressing it angrily. Apathy is just a less violent form of hostility than anger. To say, "It doesn't matter what God's Word says, I'm going to do this anyway" is in the end no different than someone shaking their fist at God and saying, "I hate you" and running headlong into sin. Passive or active rejection of God's Word is still hostility towards God because it refuses to believe and submit to what their Creator demands of them.

So perhaps we need to be reminded that no one is in a neutral state in relationship to God. You're either at peace with God through faith in Christ or you are hostile to him because you're choosing the things of the world over humble submission. You're either bending the knee or raising the fist: there is no middle ground between the two. There are no spiritual Swiss that get to remain neutral. Either your committed to the things of the Spirit or the things of the flesh and as far as your mind is focused on the things of the world, you are hostile to God.

But there's one more observation Paul makes about an unbeliever we need to come to terms with, and it's one we readily misunderstand because we don't really grasp the devastatingly crippling effects of sin upon our hearts and minds. So then, our final observation about unbelievers we get from this passage is this...

4. An unbeliever is totally incapable of pleasing God in any way (v.7b-8)

Please look back in your Bibles once again as I read v. 7-8, focusing on the last half of v. 7 and v. 8. **"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. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."** That word "cannot" is extremely important for us to understand. Paul is not saying that although an unbeliever has his mind set on the flesh and is hostile to God and refuses to submit to God's law that he could do otherwise if he wanted to. Paul is not saying this is a situation an unbeliever could at any point decide to change should he choose to set his mind to it. Rather, he's saying an unbeliever possesses no ability by which he of his own volition can alter his circumstances.

Notice how Paul moves from stating the fact of the situation to the reason for the situation. He says the mind set on the flesh **"does not submit to God's law."** That's a statement of fact and if that's all Paul said we might have reason to think that maybe

such a person could submit to God's law if we wished to do so. But Paul then tells us the reason why an unbeliever doesn't submit to God's law. He says, "**Indeed, it cannot.**" An unbeliever doesn't possess the ability to do so. Every person who is an unbeliever is unable to respond to God in a way that would please him. He cannot submit to what God's Word says because his heart is enslaved to sin, his mind is set on the things of the flesh, so that he can only continue in sin.

Thus Paul states it even more clearly in v. 8. "**Those who are in the flesh** (that is, those who are unbelievers) **cannot please God.**" This is just one of many places where we find the doctrine of total depravity taught. An unsaved person is not just bent towards sin and wickedness but could possibly choose otherwise; he is bound fast, unable to break free of it. He's not free to either choose God or choose sin: he has only one option: to sin. Because his mind is set on the things of the flesh, he cannot please God because he doesn't want to and can never want to by his own will power or reasoning.

Now this is so important for us to understand because we so readily believe unsaved people can choose to turn to God of their own violation. We proclaim this narrative that Jesus stands at the door to our heart and knocks, but it is up to us to open the door and let him in. But that implies the person on the other side of the door has the power to open it. But what does the apostle Paul say about that? Paul says here he "**cannot**" do so. Jesus can knock all day but if it is up to us to open the door, then no one would be saved. Dead people don't open doors and spiritually dead people don't open the door of their hearts to Jesus. They cannot. They are unable to do so.

Every single unsaved person will never believe unless God does for them what they cannot do for themselves. God must open their eyes to see and believe and that is called spiritual rebirth, or being born again. If God doesn't first do that to overcome our depraved hearts, we will never believe. But when God does that, you will believe. So this is why we say that salvation is by grace alone, because we can contribute nothing to it, including our own decision. God sovereignly chooses to save sinners who are unable to choose him by choosing them to receive the new birth, so they can believe on Christ and be saved. If God does that, you will be saved. If he doesn't, then you won't because you cannot do anything to please God or obey his Word, including to believe in Christ.

Now this is a hard doctrine for us because number one, we are sinful people and it strikes at our pride to hear that we cannot do anything to please God and number two, our evangelical Christian culture keeps proclaiming the false myth that people possess the power to either chose or reject Christ. But we need to believe what Scripture says about ourselves, even if it makes us uncomfortable: as unbelievers, we cannot submit to God's law or please him in any way. We are unable to do so. We are in bondage to our sin and will never chose Christ unless God chooses us first.

I'm making a point of this because later in chapter 8 and later on in chapter 9, we're going to need to talk about predestination and election, which are biblical doctrines people get very uncomfortable with. But I think part of the tension that comes with

those doctrines can be relieved when we come into it with the biblical understanding of human depravity. If we can grasp this truth that as unbelievers we're unable to respond to God in a pleasing manner, that we're enslaved to sin, our wills in bondage, our minds set on the flesh, unable to escape our condition by any power of our own volition, then we can see that if God doesn't first do it for us, it will never happen. So this passage, and so much of what we've talked about over the past year in Romans in regard to sin, helps us to see how desperately we need the sovereign grace of God that predestines and calls and draws men to himself not because of anything in them but purely by his grace. So this passage helps to lay that foundation we'll need later. If I am totally helpless, unable to choose God or do anything to please him, then the only one who can rescue me is God himself, who must do for me what I cannot do for myself.

Conclusion

So wrapping this all up then, these four verses don't paint a very pretty picture of those who have their minds set on the things of the flesh. Those who are unbelievers are in a precarious situation. They are spiritually dead, under the wrath of God which will lead to eternal death in hell as punishment for their sins. They are hostile to God, unwilling and unable to submit to God's law. They cannot please God by either obeying the law or by surrendering themselves to Christ. But that is the reality that is true for all unbelievers: our sinful depravity and inability is total. God must do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Thankfully, for those of us in Christ Jesus, our situation is radically different. God has given us the grace to believe through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, so that we don't need to live according to the flesh any longer but can set our minds on the things of the Spirit, and live a life pleasing to God through the Holy Spirit. So next week we'll flip to the other side of the coin and learn what is true of us now that God has liberated us from the power of sin and death and given us new life in the Spirit.

But with that, let's close our time together now with a word of prayer. Let's pray.