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More Than Conquerors

Studies in Romans 8

Study 3 – In the Flesh or In the Spirit (Romans 8:5-11)

William Wilberforce was the English legislator best known for his efforts to end slavery in Great Britain. William Pitt was the Prime Minister and a dear friend of Wilberforce. Together they plotted and worked to see the slave trade abolished once and for all. Wilberforce was a committed believer and a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Though Pitt fought the same moral battles and was a nominal Christian and a church member, Wilberforce was deeply concerned about his friend's soul and spiritual condition, as he gave no evidence he was a genuine follower of Christ. Wilberforce constantly invited Pitt to join him to hear a great evangelical pastor in London, Richard Cecil. Wilberforce was delighted when Pitt finally agreed to join him in hearing the powerful preacher. Cecil preached a tremendous message that exalted Christ and clearly proclaimed the gospel. Wilberforce was enthralled and could not imagine anything more wonderful or enjoyable. He anxiously wondered what would be the response of his dear friend. He soon knew as before they even left the building Pitt exclaimed, "You know, Wilberforce, I have not the slightest idea what that man has been talking about".

This story demonstrates the difference between one who is a genuine follower of Christ and one who is not. Wilberforce knew, understood, and loved the gospel. Though professing to be a Christian, Pitt did not know, understand or love the gospel. Wilberforce was "in Christ", Pitt was not. As we consider the lives of these two great leaders, it should drive us to study God's Word and examine our own lives to determine if we are living in the flesh or in the Spirit.

In Romans 1:18 – 3:20 Paul lays out the case that every person is a sinner, guilty before God, and under His righteous judgment. In 3:21 – 5:21 he shares the glorious truth that Christ lived, suffered, died, and rose again so our sins might be forgiven, and that through faith in Him we might be made right with God (justified). In Romans 6 and 7 he deals with some parenthetical issues related to what he has been teaching. Then he comes to chapter 8 and begins to share the wonderful results and implications of our right relationship with God in our lives. Paul is now writing to give peace and assurance to those who trust and follow Jesus Christ. He proclaimed, **"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"**. But he wants to make sure his readers understand the difference between those who are "in Christ" and those who are not. This brings us to verses 5-11:

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. ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹ But 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.

Paul clearly describes the great difference between those who, like Wilberforce and Pitt, truly are believers and those who are not. The difference? It is the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

In the Flesh or In the Spirit

Paul describes those who do not know and follow Christ in these terms: they are **"according to the flesh"**; they **"set their minds on the things of the flesh"**; and **"in the flesh"**. In contrast, those who are truly followers of Christ are **"according to the Spirit"**; **"set their minds on the things of the Spirit"**; and **"in the Spirit"**. The believer has the Spirit of God **dwelling in them**; the unbeliever does not.

The first thing we notice is the prominence and important of the Holy Spirit in these verses. The Holy Spirit is mentioned only once in the first seven chapters of Romans. Here in chapter 8 He is mentioned over 20 times as Paul describes the importance of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

We should stop for just a moment and consider the wondrous truth of the Holy Spirit and His place in the Trinity. There is only one God who exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three are spoken of in the Scripture as persons and as God. It is important for us to know that the Holy Spirit is not some impersonal force but is God. He is closely involved in both

our justification (salvation) and our sanctification (spiritual growth). The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (John 16:7-8). The Holy Spirit gives us new life when we trust Christ (John 3:5-8). The Holy Spirit sanctifies believers (causes them to grow in faith and become more like Christ – Romans 15:16). This fulfills the promise Jesus made to His disciples as He was preparing them for His departure:

16 I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-17)

6 But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. 7 But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. (John 16:6-7)

So, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, comes and lives in every person who repents of their sin and places their faith in Christ alone for salvation. It is this presence of the Holy Spirit that is the foundation for the promises and source of the assurance, peace, and joy about which Paul is writing in Romans chapter 8.

In the Flesh

Those who do not have the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives Paul describes as "**according to the flesh**" or "**in the flesh**". By "**flesh**" Paul is referring to our sinful natures and desires as well as the things of this world. "**According to**" speaks of our basic bent, disposition, or pattern of life. The unbeliever "**sets their mind on the things of the flesh**". This is the affections as well as the thoughts and reasoning and means to attend to, to savor, to seek, to enjoy and relish. The result; those without the Spirit are hostile towards God, rebels against His law, cannot please God, and ultimately face spiritual death and judgment.

How could this possibly describe a moral, "good" man like William Pitt who even professed to be a Christian? When faced with the claims of the gospel that all men are sinners in need of a savior; and that Christ suffered and died for sinful men; and that all men must repent and trust Christ for salvation, Pitt could not understand it and rebelled against it. Pitt likely felt his longstanding membership in the church took care of his relationship with God. Perhaps he believed his stand and fight for moral issues made him right with the Lord. Though a good, moral man, this was in rebellion against truth of the gospel as was demonstrated in his response to Cecil's message.

Paul further described those who are in the flesh in other passages:

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory

of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

In the Spirit

In contrast, Paul describes those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit as "**according to the Spirit**" or "**in the Spirit**". They "**set their minds on the things of the Spirit**". Where the unbeliever sets his thoughts and affections on the things of this world, the believer sets his upon spiritual things and the glorious truths of the gospel. The result for the believer is spiritual life and peace, the ability to please God, and ultimately, the resurrection of our bodies to eternal life.

This is why Wilberforce, when he listened to Cecil's sermon, found his heart lifted to the heavens and enthralled with the truth of the gospel. He had the Holy Spirit within him, giving him new life and opening his heart and mind to the truth.

May the story of these two men challenge us to examine our own lives close to determine if we do indeed have the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is vital that we know whether we are "In the flesh" or "in the Spirit".

In the Spirit but In the World

In Romans and elsewhere Paul reminds us that though we have the Holy Spirit within us and we have new life through faith in Christ, we still live in this sinful world and deal with the world, the flesh, and the devil. We struggle to "set our minds on things of the Spirit." This is why Paul assures us that we have no condemnation if we are in Christ and goes on to write in Romans 8 of the great promises and assurance we have in Christ. We are justified – made right with God – through faith alone in Christ. We are sanctified – made more like Christ – each day as we join in studying, learning, and striving to lay aside the sinful thoughts and actions in our lives.

It can be particularly challenging in the capitol to keep our minds set on the things of the Spirit. Our study of Romans 8 can help us do this during these challenging days of the session.

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. (Colossian 3:1-2)

Resources:

Piper, John. *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce*. <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/amazing-grace-in-the-life-of-william-wilberforce>

Piper, John. *Peculiar Doctrines, Public Morals, and the Political Welfare* (Audio).

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/peculiar-doctrines-public-morals-and-the-political-welfare>

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDIES

Thursday, February 1

8:00 AM House Government Org. Conference Room (East Wing)

12:00 Noon Senate President's Conference Room