

Sermon 62: Romans 8:5-6: What the difference between a Christian and an unbeliever?

OUTLINE

Those who live according to the flesh
Those who live according to the Spirit

INTRODUCTION

What is the difference between a believer and an unbeliever? If you ask the world this question you will get an answer like, Christians are unenlightened, dependent and dogmatic and unbelievers are intelligent, independent and tolerant. Another shallow evaluation would be that Christians are those who don't swear, don't dance, don't smoke, don't have sex before marriage, and don't have much fun. Paul gives his answer in verses 5-8, Christians are those who can fulfil the requirements of the law and please God, unbelievers are those who cannot fulfil the requirements of the law or please God. In 8:4 Paul revealed the purpose for which God saved us. God sent His Son to live and die so that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us. Last week we established that this meant that God is restoring the fallen image of our humanity to look like Christ's law keeping one. And that He is doing this in two ways, justification whereby He imputes the righteousness of Christ to us giving us a new legal standing as perfect in His sight. However, like a tapestry our underside is unfinished so God has filled us with the Spirit of Christ in order to make us like Jesus by the imparting of Christ's righteousness through progressive growth and transformation into His likeness. The verses that we are looking at v5-8 follow on with a comparison between those who are Christians and those who are not to further elaborate on why Christians can fulfil the law and unbelievers cannot. The final answer will be, because those who are unbelievers are still in the flesh, in Adam and in the weakness of their fallen conditions; however, Christians are in the Holy Spirit and enabled by Him to grow in sanctification.

We will be looking at these verses in two messages, today we will be looking at Paul important contrast between those who live in the flesh and those who live in the Spirit. And then next week we will look at verses 7-8 as Paul gives us an even closer look at the bondage of the unbeliever in their sins.

Those who live according to the flesh

I have often used these verses to help Christians see that we cannot save ourselves, that we cannot even believe the Gospel without the help of the Holy Spirit enabling our faith and repentance. The reason these verses are one of the first places I go to prove this is because they speak about the unbeliever and their inabilities. Unfortunately the clear teaching of these verses, that they are a contrast between the believer and the unbeliever has been clouded. There is a brand of teaching that talks about carnal Christians and spiritual Christians, and instead of realizing that Paul is here talking about a contrast

between Christians and unbelievers. They have misread Paul's references about the flesh as referring to defeated Christians, this is a terrible twisting of the overall intention of these verses. If we take these verses as referring to two different types of Christians, one carnal and the other spiritual, then we deny the very premise of the text that there is no more condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Look at verse 6, it tells us that the mind set on the flesh is death. This is not the description of the Christian we are alive in Christ and no longer under the condemnation of the law. So then our first observation is this, Paul is contrasting the life of the believer with the unbeliever.

To summarize the life of the unbeliever he uses the idea of those who live according to the flesh. Flesh you will remember has several meanings here Paul means our humanity under the control of sin. So the logic between v4 to v5 is this. Paul makes a statement in v4, God has saved us by Christ in order that we would now live holy lives fulfilling God's law. V5 adds to this statement by showing why the unbeliever cannot fulfil God's law. Paul's first point is, they live according to the flesh. The word 'live' indicates the whole life submerged under the power of sin. It does not merely refer to actions but the whole atmosphere of life.

The next part of Paul's reasoning goes like this, the reason why people who live under the power of the flesh cannot please God is because they set their minds on the things of the flesh. Paul's exact words are, 'For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.' The unbeliever is unable to fulfil the requirements of the law because their minds are set upon the flesh. We must not think that it is only their minds and their hearts, will and bodies are not. Paul is using the word mind as a summary of the whole person. The unbeliever cannot keep God's law because he is under the power of the flesh and so is fully invested in the things of the flesh, that is Paul's meaning.

It is important to note that Paul is describing not prescribing, he is speaking in the indicative not the imperative. What he reveals here about the flesh and the Spirit are facts that occur every time, they are not conditions to live up to, they are the facts about the two conditions that Paul is contrasting. Those who are unsaved, are under the power of the flesh and are set upon it. And those who are of the Spirit are influenced by the power of the Spirit and do fulfil the requirements of the law. This undergirds the underlying argument that Christians can and do fulfil the law and unbelievers will not and cannot. In other words there is no such thing as a Christian who does not also pursue and grow in holiness. And there is no such thing as an unbeliever who does not deny God in everything that they do.

We want to linger on Paul's statement that those who are in the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, what does this look like? When I say these words, what picture comes to mind? For most of us we think of the works of the flesh as all the really bad stuff that goes on in society. When we think works of the flesh we think murder, adultery, homosexuality, rape, and all those obvious outward acts that have to do with excessive carnal appetites. What we need to remember when we read these words is that Paul who is uttering them, he was a person who was once very religious and did not do all the things that we have just described yet he would say that he was under the flesh and set upon it. Paul gives us a graphic description in Galatians 5:19-21, '19 Now the works of the flesh are

evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.' There are a few different categories of sins that Paul collects together here.

Firstly, there are the obvious ones, the sexual sins. One would not think that these would have to be stressed as sin, as symptoms of being a slave to a contrary nature, but in our day and age where everything goes it is important for us to heed Paul's words. Sexual immorality is the word used in Scripture to describe sinful sex, sex that is before marriage and other sexual activities not between a husband and a wife are described with this word. It is a fixation of those who are in bondage to their sinfulness that their energies, minds, purposes and all that they are get swallowed up in this. Impurity is a word that describes not only sexual sin but all uncleanness. And sensuality describes a brazen advertising attitude that openly parades its sins.

Secondly, we have spiritual sins. Idolatry in Paul's day would have related to the various pagan deities, the Greek philosophies, and even to those forms of religion that mixed Christianity with error. Paul's pride and self-righteousness mixed with a wrong view of God's holiness would result in spiritual sins, sins that were sending Paul to hell. Sorcery is the next work of the flesh mentioned. The original word in the Greek is the same word from which we get our word 'pharmacy.' Sorcerers were not only sinful because they consulted demons, tried to manipulate God for blessing with charms, but they also mixed up poisons in order to kill babies and end lives as an early form of euthanasia.

The next set of sins, and the longest part of this short list, relates to break down in relationships. 'Enmity' is similar to the Greek word for enemies. Those under the power of the flesh have enemies. 'Strife' this is endless fighting and quarrels. 'Jealousy' is wanting what others have for yourself. 'Fits of anger' the person controlled by the flesh will be given to fits of anger. 'rivalries' this where you always seek to beat and better others, to eradicate them from favour and blessing and to promote yourself at their expense. 'dissensions, divisions,' sinners are always looking out for number one and are at war with those who do not serve their agendas. James tells us that this is the reason for every fight and war. 'envy' is when you not only want what someone else has but you want them to not have it. You not only seek your good, but their disadvantage.

These are some of the works of the flesh, every unbeliever is dominated by these and other sins, that is why they cannot fulfil the law. Martin Luther described our sinfulness as being deeply being bent in on ourselves. We were made to be outward looking giving worship to God and love to our neighbours. Sin is when our worship does not go to God but ourselves, our thanksgiving does not go to God but ourselves, when our joy comes not from serving Him but ourselves, when we love ourselves not others, give to ourselves not others, serve ourselves not others, put our wills as central not God's. We are deeply bent in on ourselves and these works of the flesh are the outward signs of our captivity. Paul is telling us that you cannot be a Christian and be a tree that bears this fruit. All those who are born of the

Spirit walk according to the Spirit, that is just a fact. Jesus said it this way, "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.' (Matt. 12:33). When we were dead in sin, our minds were set upon the flesh and this was the inevitable fruit that we bore, there is no hope for someone in this position to suddenly produce good fruit and fulfil God's law, it is impossible. Only if we are saved by God, united to Christ and filled with His Spirit can we bear such fruit.

Paul tells us in verse 6 that to set the mind on the flesh is death. It both reveals a state of deadness in sin, and it leads to final death and condemnation as well. Death is the inevitable fruit of sin whether you are looking at the short term or the long term effects. Death is revealed in the way in which we are handed over to sin, the way in which we are slaves to sin. Think on Adam and Eve for a moment. After they ate, we are told that the punishment would be death. They did not die bodily, that day. Their judgement in various ways, death in the bible means cut off from God who is the source of eternal life, it means to be enslaved to our sinful natures and unable to give ourselves life, it means dying and being buried and it also means eternal judgement. Paul describes the state of deadness as dead in sin and captive to it in Ephesians 2:1-3, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' Now think of Adam and Eve they may not have experienced the death of their bodies or final judgement but we certainly see them getting cut off from the life of God and enslaved to sin. When Adam is questioned about his sin, he turns against God accusing God for the sin in giving him Eve, and he tries to blame Eve when he was the husband who had failed to lead Eve. From that first moment of sin we can see the signs of the death that we all know so well. The day they ate of it they certainly did die. It is now only through Christ that we can experience a measure of freedom in this life from that bondage of death to sin, and we will one day be finally free from it in death or the resurrection.

Those who live according to the Spirit

We have looked at those who live according to the flesh, whose mind is set upon the flesh, and the consequences of which are death. We now want to look at those who live according to the Spirit, who set their minds on the things of the Spirit, and the condition and consequences of the Spirit in their lives is life and peace.

Paul describes two conditions, with two descriptions resulting in two consequences. We need to remember that Paul is not commanding us to do anything yet, he is merely describing the realities as they are. Those who are in the flesh will inevitably bring forth the yield of the flesh. They will inevitably produce the works of the flesh be they crass and criminal or self-righteous and religious. But the reverse is also true. Everyone who is born of the Spirit will also, always yield the fruits of the Spirit. Paul's descriptions have approached the whole person through a one word summary, 'mind.' The person in bondage to sin will be obsessed, focused, preoccupied, pursuing those things that correspond with

the flesh. But those who are born again, they will be handed over to, and given to those things that are of the Spirit. So what does a mind set on the Spirit look like?

It is a mind that is set upon God. Sin makes us invert all our proper relations where instead of worshipping and serving God we serve ourselves, well, when we are born again and the Holy Spirit writes the law upon our hearts we are also given hearts that seek for God's glory. God's holiness and truth fill our gaze and act as a filter on everything that we think. The Christian knows God is real and God is holy and now seeks in everything to please Him. The believer can see how beautiful and true He is and he longs to worship Him and tell others about Him. The believer sees sin as terrible and barren, as more than merely destructive but insulting to God's goodness. The believer thinks about his or her soul and spiritual good. They think about prayer and all the wonderful truth in the Bible. They love to go to church and hear the preaching of God's word and discuss it with other believers. Every Christian has this mind. The Spirit reorients the pointing of our compass away from the magnetic north of our sins to the true north of God.

Paul describes the works of the Spirit in the rest of Galatians 5 in the fruits of the Spirit. 5:22-23, 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.' Love: not love for sin, love for self or love of fleeting sinful pleasures. The Christian has experienced the flood of God's love and the remodelling of their hearts, they love God, they love their neighbours. By observing the selfless love of God to them they learn to be selfless and love others. The Gospel has power not only in its unmatched example but in its power that it exerts to bring us into conformity to it as well. This love is a concern everyday, it is the test by which we measure ourselves and confess our sins by. Joy: it is no longer the joy of shallow pleasures like drunkenness, highs, crass humour, consumer satisfaction or any other fleeting joy. It is the joy of sins forgiven, the joy of knowing God's love and forgiveness, the joy of true significance, meaning and purpose. By the Spirit basic pleasures like enjoying a sunset become rapturous worship sessions of delight. A joy that can survive cancer and grief, joy that can still be joyful when we have nothing but God. Peace: this is not the peace of a drug induced state, nor the peace that is merely the absence of war, this is the deep settled conviction that all is well between us and God and with the greatest of wars ended all other disturbances are nothing by comparison. This peace between God and His church causes the believer to seek peace with all those who are at war with them. The Gospel grips our hearts and we cannot bear a grudge or stand a grudge to be born against us, so we become peacemakers, pursuing peace as God pursued us. Patience: God has been and is patient with us as undeserving sinners. This Gospel feeds into our lives by the Spirit as the Spirit using the Gospel shapes our behaviour and we want to bear long with others, go the extra mile for others. We no longer have only the knee jerk reaction to fight for everything that will continue to guarantee our comfort but want to model God in our longsuffering with others. Kindness: The Spirit uses the Gospel to teach and shape our dispositions so that we want to be kind where once we were ruthless, merciful where once we demanded vengeance. Gentleness: As God has not killed us, nor snuffed out the smouldering wick, as He has not dealt with us as our sins deserved and has dealt with us as a Father and not as a judge we want to emulate His gentleness and loath all our old self-

righteous anger and harshness. Goodness: the God who is the sum of all virtue and who is altogether good is now the standard of moral excellence that we strive after. Faithfulness: We who have been so well served by our God who has loved us from eternity past and has not lost sight of His love for us is the mould into which we now long to be poured. His integrity, His truthfulness, His faithfulness is the pursuit of our hearts. We want to abandon the unfaithful heart whose only faithfulness was to self-interest. Self-control: The God who was angry at our sins but who did not lash out at us in anger but stored up the wrath for the day His Son would be the propitiating sacrifice, we seek to be as God has been to us. This is the mind of the Spirit, the mind that is taught us in the Gospel and that is formed in us by the Spirit who is seeking to restore us to the original image of God lost in the fall. For those who have been taught the Gospel by the Spirit and for those who are being fashioned by this wonderful gospel into God's likeness; this is mindset of the Spirit.

If you are here today because this is what you do, you go to church on Sundays and you have no wonder over the Gospel and desire to magnify God's glory through you, then you are not a Christian but merely doing religious flesh works. For those who long for these things but feel they fall far short, join the club. I am talking about the general direction and motivation of our lives, I am not suggesting that we have perfected it. However, the very desire is proof that your heart is no longer set upon the flesh and under its sway. It is only those who have been set free in Christ whose aspirations can rise above self. The good news is not only that we have been saved from guilt but that God by His Spirit is also transforming us and is enabling a partial fulfilling of the requirements of the law, even for us wretched men.

Is it any wonder then that Paul tell us that the condition in which we find ourselves, and the final results of our lives will be, life and peace? In Adam and Eve we saw what death looked like. It was alienation from God, from each other, from their world and from themselves. In Christ we now have life. Eternal life that can never be taken away! But just as the consequences of death were staggered and our first parents did not bodily on the day they ate, likewise we do not live bodily, receiving our resurrection bodies the day we believe. However, just as they manifested death in their antagonism towards God and each other, likewise we experience life in being in fellowship with God and in a community of love with each other. It is interesting to note that Paul does not offer a parallel for the peace that we enjoy. It is inferred that the unbeliever has no peace, but the believer, now that His judgement day decision is already determined, eternal life is already begun, renovation is already started, fellowship with God is already enjoyed, likeness to Christ already beginning, new creation power already being tasted, resurrection life a reality, and many other future realities guaranteed and enjoyed, is it any wonder that we enjoy peace?