

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Special Messages</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Romans 8:7, 12:1-3; Hebrews 12:1-3</b>		Gary L. W. Johnson
<b>Date:</b>	<b>August 29, 2021 (a.m.)</b>		

### APOSTOLIC IMPERATIVE (Part 7)

We are experiencing in our society the complete triumph of the sensate over the cognitive. This is evident, not only in our culture at large, but painfully obvious within the ranks of Evangelicals. In fact, what we see happening in Evangelicalism on a large scale is a drift away from a Biblical worldview, not only in theory but also in practice. Evangelicals are guided less and less by theological conviction and more and more by contemporary assumptions derived exclusively from the culture. This slide into modernity by many Evangelicals was actually hastened by an anti-theological, anti-intellectual mindset that has plagued the church for centuries. When once asked about his theology, the noted 19<sup>th</sup> century Evangelist D. L. Moody responded: “My theology! I didn’t know I had any!”<sup>1</sup> Sam Jones was another well-known Evangelist of the same period, who declared: “If I had a creed, I would sell it to a museum!”<sup>2</sup> The baseball player turned Evangelist Billy Sunday boasted that he did not “know any more about theology than a jackrabbit knew about ping pong!”<sup>3</sup> Is this something to actually brag about? These remarks, no doubt, were made in dramatic flair and perhaps off the cuff, but they reveal some appalling assumptions about how Christianity is perceived. This mentality has prompted Os Guinness to write: “We [Evangelicals] are people with a true, sometimes a deep, experience of God. But we are no longer people of truth. Only rarely are we serious about theology at a popular level. We are still suspicious of thinking and scholarship. We are still attracted to movements that replace thinking and theology by other emphases – relational, therapeutic, charismatic, and managerial (as in church growth).”<sup>4</sup> Note also Paul’s language in Ephesians 2:3 – “All of us also lived among them [the disobedient] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thought.” The word translated *thoughts* is *dianoia*. The word is used to express the whole of one’s inner life, particularly of a person’s disposition or mindset. Our cultural mindlessness<sup>5</sup> is an aspect of “the pattern of this world” and Christians are to recognize it as such and overcome it. “We have to contend with the modern mind, with its complete lack of interest in truth – especially the truth of God. And none of the other questions that now engage the Church will find any lasting resolution until this is understood and confronted.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise note the emphasis Paul places on the imagery of walking, i.e. how one lives. In Heb. 12:2 the imagery on running a race is a call to endurance in the Christian life. It is a prescribed race that requires a mature commitment – and like so many things that involve commitment, mental toughness is a necessary *attitude*. Which in turn is connected with the *mind*. “Those *in Adam* and those *in Christ*, walk separate ways, each according to their respective minds.”<sup>7</sup> The person described as being *in Adam* is the *natural man*, i.e. unregenerate. He is characterized by enmity against God, by rebellion against Him, and by the fact that he is dominated by the mind of the flesh. He is as unable to hear the voice of God in the Word as is a deaf man judging a music contest. He is the totally depraved man, whose whole being is touched by sin. Further, Paul says that the man cannot be subject to the Law of God. In fact, in the eighth verse he says the same thing again in a more concrete form. He is the man who cannot please God. His sphere of life is in the flesh (cf. v. 5). The verse is a clear statement of the inability of man. Fallen mankind does not possess the kind of Libertarian free-will that Arminians ascribe to humanity. The eighth verse is one of the clearest texts teaching that an unregenerate man cannot please God until a work of the Spirit has been performed on his inner man. In fact, it is a verse that plainly teaches God

(cf. Heb. 11:6), but they that are in the flesh, the unsaved individuals, cannot please God. Thus, they cannot exercise faith as long as they are in the flesh. They exercise faith only after the Holy Spirit in efficacious grace takes them out of the flesh and puts them in the Spirit by giving them new life. The first activity of the new life is to believe (cf. 1 John 5:1). The man dead in sins is given new life, which manifests itself in saving trust through the gospel. The late James Boice, in his analysis of this passage, asked, “What is it that most characterizes an unsaved person? These verses define the unbeliever in four important ways: (1) in regard to his thinking, (2) in regard to his state, (3) in regard to his religion, and (4) in regard to his present condition.”<sup>8</sup> Let’s examine the first of these in some detail.

I. **WHAT’S ON YOUR MIND? (Romans 8:7).** Paul has asserted that the only people in whom the law’s righteous requirement can be fulfilled are those who live not *kata sarka* (according to the flesh), but *kata pneuma* (according to the spirit, or better, the Spirit), that is, those who follow the promptings and surrender to the control of the Spirit rather than the flesh. It is this emphatic antithesis between flesh and Spirit which Paul now develops in verses 5-8. Implicitly or explicitly, it recurs in every verse. Paul’s purpose is to explain why obedience to the law is possible only to those who walk according to the Spirit. John Stott helpfully begins with some definitions. By *sarx* (flesh) Paul means neither the soft muscular tissue which covers our bony skeleton nor our bodily instincts and appetites, but rather the whole of our humanness viewed as “spiritual” (although in verse 16 he will refer to our human spirit), but rather the personal Holy Spirit himself, who now not only regenerates, but also indwells the people of God. This tension between “flesh” and “Spirit” is reminiscent of Galatians 5:16-26, where they are in irreconcilable conflict with each other. Here Paul concentrates on the “mind,” or (as we would say), “mindset,” of those who are characterized by either *sarx* or *pneuma*.

A. **First, our mindset expresses our basic nature.** On the one hand, there are *those who live according to the sinful nature*. They are not now those who “walk” according to it (literally), but those who simply “are” like this (literally). These people *have their minds set on what that nature desires*, whereas *those who live in accordance with the Spirit* (literally, “those according to the Spirit” – there is no verb) *have their minds set on what the Spirit desires*. The meaning surely is not that people are like this because they think like this, although that is partly true, but that they think like this because they are like this. The expressions are descriptive. In both cases their nature determines their mindset. Moreover, since the flesh is our twisted human nature, its desires are all those things which pander to our ungodly self-centeredness. Since the Spirit is the Holy Spirit himself, however, his desires are all those things which please Him, who loves above all else to glorify Christ, that is, to show Christ to us and form Christ in us. Now to “set the mind” (*phroneo*) on the desires of *sarx* or *pneuma* is to make them the “absorbing objects of thought, interest, affection and purpose.” It is a question of what preoccupies us, of the ambitions which drive us and the concerns which engross us, of how we spend our time and our energies, of what we concentrate on and give ourselves up to. All this is determined by who we are, whether we are still “in the flesh” or are now by new birth “in the Spirit.”

B. **Secondly, our mindset has eternal consequences.** *The mind of sinful man* (literally, “of the flesh”) *is death*, but *the mind controlled by the Spirit* (literally, “of the Spirit”) *is life and peace*. That is, the mindset of flesh-dominated people is already one of spiritual death and leads inevitably to eternal death, for it alienates them from God and renders fellowship with him impossible in either this world or the next. The mindset of Spirit-dominated people, however, entails life and peace. On the one hand, they are “alive to God” (6:11), alert to spiritual realities, and thirsty for God like nomads in the desert, like deer panting for streams. On the other hand, they have peace with God (5:1), peace with their neighbor (12:15), and peace within,

enjoying an inner integration or harmony. We would surely pursue holiness with greater eagerness if we were convinced that it is the way of life and peace.

- C. *Thirdly, our mindset concerns our fundamental attitude to God.*** The reason the mind of the flesh is death is that it *is hostile to God*, cherishing a deep-seated animosity against Him. It is antagonistic to his name, kingdom and will, to his day, his people and his word, to his Son, his Spirit, and his glory. In particular, Paul singles out his moral standards. In contrast to the regenerate who “delight” in God’s law (7:22), the unregenerate mind *does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so*, which explains why those who live according to the flesh cannot fulfill the law’s righteous requirement.
- D. *Finally, note the impossibility of pleasing God that characterizes the natural mindset.*** They *cannot* please him (8) because they *cannot* submit to his law, whereas, it is implied, those who are in the Spirit set themselves to please him in everything, even to do so “more and more.” To sum up, here are two categories of people (the unregenerate who are “in the flesh” and the regenerate who are “in the Spirit”), who have two perspectives or mindsets (“the mind of the flesh” and “the mind of the Spirit”), which lead to two patterns of conduct (living according to the flesh or the Spirit), and result in two spiritual states (death or life, enmity or peace). Thus our mind, where we set it and how we occupy it, plays a key role in both our present conduct and our final destiny.<sup>9</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** As contestants engaged in running the race, we have no time to look around. We must keep our eyes focused on Jesus and must do so without distraction. The writer of Hebrews does not place the name Jesus among those of the heroes of faith; he gives him special recognition, for he calls him “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus is “the author of [our] salvation” (2:10), who as forerunner has entered the heavenly sanctuary (6:19-20) and has opened “a new and living way” for us that leads to this sanctuary (10:20).<sup>10</sup> He is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega (Rev. 1:17; 21:6; 22:13). And he whom God perfected through suffering (Heb. 2:10) perfects his brothers and sisters who have placed their trust in him. As originator and perfecter of our faith, Jesus has laid its foundation in our hearts and in time brings faith to completion. He can do this because he is able, and he will do this because he is our brother (Heb. 2:11-12). In a similar vein, Paul encourages the Philippians when he says that God “who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6). The expression “turn your eyes upon Jesus” comes from the Greek word *aphorao* – to look away from one thing to another. In verse 3 we are told to “consider Him,” which comes from the Greek word *analogizomai*, literally to consider intently. In Heb. 3:1, we are told to “consider Jesus” – here the Greek word is *katanoesate*, which means to fix the mind on. In all three cases the stress is on mental concentration. Phillips says, “The point here is that we should meditate on or reflect on, take stock of Jesus’ life and death as it relates to our own struggle, and especially remember how God ordained his suffering for his and our glory.”<sup>11</sup> We are to remember that beyond the cross there lies a crown; it was so for our Lord, and so it will be for us. As Paul writes, doing the very thing our text suggests, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). That is the cure for our hearts when we grow weary in the long race of this life of faith.”<sup>12</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in S. N. Gundry, *Love Them In: The Proclamation Theology of D. L. Moody* (Moody, 1976), p. 66. One Unitarian minister claimed that Moody's preaching was agreeable to Unitarians. "The secret of the Evangelist's power," he wrote, "is the fact there is so little theology and so much morality in his preaching" (63).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in S. E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Yale University, 1973), p. 746.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in D. W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Eerdmans, 1986), p. 181. Sunday liked to say that a knowledge of theology had nothing to do with the fate of a person's soul. "I don't care if you're ten miles off in theology if you're right in your heart. Nobody was ever kept out of heaven because he didn't know theology." The fact that Sunday was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1903 (despite the fact that he refused to answer many of the theological questions) is an indication of the state of the Presbyterian Church at the time. Within two decades, the Modernist-Fundamentalist struggle would erupt and the Liberals would capture the denomination, mainly because so many ministers in the denomination had adopted attitudes about theology similar to Sunday's.

<sup>4</sup> Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Baker, 1994), p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Allan Bloom, in his monumental work *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987), and Neil Postman in his equally masterful *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin, 1985) have documented the mindlessness of our culture. Bloom writes, "Western rationalism has culminated in a rejection of reason" (p. 240). He argues, most convincingly, that the "inner-directed" stress of the 1960s led to the collapse of the American education structure in our universities (p. 321). Postman, a Professor of Education and Communication at Columbia University, traces much of the decline to television and the whole nature of multi-media entertainment. He contends that we live in an age where people are not trained to think – indeed are kept from thinking – because they are being entertained continuously (pp. 27-29).

<sup>6</sup> D. F. Wells, *God In the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Barness, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness* (Christian Focus, 2003), p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary II* (Baker, 1992), p. 807.

<sup>9</sup> J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994), pp. 222-24.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Kistemaker, *Hebrews: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1985), p. 368.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes points out that "It is important to recognize that the shame of the cross, where Christ bore the sins of the world, is something infinitely more intense than the pain of the cross. Others have suffered the pain of crucifixion, but he alone has endured the shame of human depravity in all its foulness and degradation. But the cross is the gateway to joy, his joy and ours; for Jesus, who endured the cross, despising its shame, is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (On the significance of such language see the commentary above on 1:3.). The theme recurs throughout our epistle (1:3; 2:9; 4:14; 5:5; 8f.; 6:19f.; 7:26; 8:1; 9:12, 24, 28; 10:12; 13:20), and has momentous consequences for the believer who, while sharing in "the fellowship of Christ's sufferings," is always in association with the experience of "the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10), and is one with his Redeemer also in his exaltation to glory (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1ff.). Sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, we have "the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (Eph. 1:13f.) and the constant assurance that "if we endure, we shall also reign with him" who is enthroned on high (2 Tim. 2:12). P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on The Epistle To The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 525.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Phillips, *Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P & R, 2007), p. 357.

