

# ROMANS BIBLE STUDY

Romans 8:1-8

Lesson #18

## Introduction

We're moving now into chapter 8 of Paul's epistle to the Romans, but chapter 8 is just a continuation of the same thought that Paul was discussing in the end of chapter 7. Paul was speaking of the sin that still lives in the flesh of even the born again believers. We remember that he said: *So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.* Since the believer's mind has been renewed, and his heart replaced, he now joyfully concurs with the Law of God in his inner man, but the fallen flesh has not yet been replaced, so with that portion he finds himself still serving the law of sin. For those who think this is describing a before and after salvation situation, this last verse of Paul makes that an impossibility. Paul has been describing a conflict between the new regenerate mindset (innate nature) and the old flesh that's unredeemed. The renewed mind (the new self) versus the old flesh, these are the opposing forces at work in Paul's discussion. The last verse of chapter 7 leaves us trapped in this tragic situation. But Paul had already asked the question: *Who will set me free from the body of this death?* And Answered his own question with the exclamation: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* And it's at this point that we resume the discussion. I've titled this lesson using the opening words of the chapter:

## No Condemnation for Those in Christ Jesus

*1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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, [set their minds on] 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.*

Romans 8:1-11 (NASB)

## Verses 1-2:

*1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.*

The therefore, which is the opening word of this chapter, is given as the subsequent effect of Paul's preceding exclamation: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* We thank God for His abounding mercy because He has allowed His Son, Jesus Christ, to substitute Himself as the object of punishment for the sins of His elect. And having paid their just penalty, He has freed us from the legal jurisdiction of sin and made it legal and proper to be joined to Jesus Christ as His eternal mate. Our ownership has been transferred from Satan to God, through Jesus Christ, and by the work of the Holy Spirit, in the impartation of new life to our dead spirit, and a new heart (meaning heart attitude) toward sin and righteousness. Our dead spirit, with which we were born, is now alive, and our mind that was enslaved to sin has been freed from that enslavement and made to love God and earnestly desire righteousness. This is the essence of what we call regeneration. It is this of which Jesus was speaking when He said *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* (Jn 3:3) I've actually heard someone say that they were a Christian but that they weren't one of those crazy born again kind. Now I'm not entirely sure what they meant by crazy, but if they aren't born again then they certainly aren't Christian, these are two different terms but they're describing the very same thing.

One becomes a Christian by virtue of having been born again, and using the term Christian implies that this rebirth has taken place. Usually what they mean is that they don't take the terms born again or Christian very seriously, and they don't allow it to influence their thinking and behaviors. The world and the church is filled to overflowing with just such as these.

Paul goes on to say: *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.* What is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus? Paul uses this term for the purpose of comparison to the law of sin and death. Actually the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is simply the inalterable effects of Christ's perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His proven righteousness imputed to those whom God has chosen. Along with His resurrection to eternal life. It is these things that have freed those who believe in Jesus Christ both from the innate mental enslavement and the bodily penalty of death, imposed by the law of sin and of death. And it's for this very fact that Paul practically shouts out: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Because there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The full consequential effects of His substitutionary work, (the law of the Spirit of life) are applied to all who believe in Him. And the reason that they can, and do believe in Him, is that the Holy Spirit has imparted to them the gift of saving faith through the unmerited grace of God the Father. (Eph 2:8-9) And the reason that it works this way is described in the next verses:

#### **Verses 3-4:**

*3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

Do you remember an earlier statement Paul made in this same epistle, where he said: *because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.* (Rom 3:20) Here he says that the law could not produce the righteous lifestyle of the people that God requires because those people are too weak to keep that Law. And among the reasons is that the desires of the flesh have enslaved the mental nature and there is neither desire nor capability to keep God's Laws. Just listen to the news on television and see and hear what's being said. Virtually everything that's being called good and loving and tolerant is in fact a direct violation of the Laws of God. Why is this? Because the fallen nature of humanity, that is enslaved to sin, simply does not see and perceive sin and righteousness in the same perspective as God. How can humanity possibly ever fulfill the Law of God when they fully believe that those Laws are wrong and unloving? The flesh has corrupted their minds, and their thinking has been enslaved to the pleasures of sin. This is a hopeless situation, in as much as those who are caught in it don't want to be released, in fact they fight with all their might to stay that way, and they desire to rid the world of all the Laws of God. And they're doing a pretty good job of it, but only because God has preordained that they will get such a world eventually, for a short time, and then they'll see what it is to live in the demonstrated wrath of God.

It's for this reason that God did what man can't do, and doesn't want to do, He sent *His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh.* Make no mistake, this is not saying that Jesus was sinful, but that He was made of the same flesh and blood bodies that we're made of, but without sin. (2Co 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1Pet 2:22) And by living a perfect sinless life, in a body of flesh and blood, just like ours, He condemned sin in that flesh body. How did He condemn it? By living without sin, and thereby demonstrating the utter sinfulness of it. His perfect life served as a public example of the righteousness of God, and provided the eternal visible example of the perfect Man of God. This served to both display and vindicate the righteousness of God, and, to provide the means and source of imputed righteousness necessary to save God's chosen children from their hopeless enslavement to the law of sin and death.

Paul further says that the reason for Christ's actions on our behalf is: *so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* There's a resultant affect that was desired by the actions of Jesus Christ, and it's stated in plain language right here. Paul says that it's so that we would *not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* We do understand don't we that the word "walk" as it's used in this verse, is a metaphor for behavior and actions and attitudes. Justification is performed to produce sanctification, and regeneration is performed to make practical sanctification possible. How do we know if the requirement of the Law has been fulfilled in us through Jesus Christ, because if it has then we no longer walk (meaning think, live, and behave) in the former manner that we did.

Now some may argue that they were saved so young that they don't remember any difference. I fully acknowledge the possibility of this, that if salvation was at a very young age it might be difficult to remember the before condition, but it's not difficult to know the here and now, and this is what matters. As an example I myself can produce an old Bible from 1951, from a Baptist Church, that says that I was saved on that particular day. I was seven years old at the time.

But this I know, I most certainly did not walk in newness of the Spirit. Nor did I comprehend or regret my sinfulness. I wonder how many more there are just like myself. It wasn't until I was 35 years old that I experienced that miraculous gift of saving faith, and then I comprehended and regretted my sin and experienced a change of thinking and attitudes. Then my behaviors immediately followed suit and my walk was truly and radically changed. If the experience of my youth had been genuine then I would have already been thinking and behaving in keeping with the word of God. It's how one thinks and behaves right now that's the best indicator of their condition. What is the general pattern of our life? Do we joyfully concur with the Laws of God in our inner man? Or, do we agree with secular humanity on many of the issues of this day, like homosexuality, abortion, same sex marriage, pornography, filthy language, and self indulgence. Do we view these issues as God says He views them in His holy scriptures, or do we feel differently? If you don't think like God thinks, then you don't have His Spirit residing in you, it really is that simple.

Walking according to the Spirit is speaking not just of behaviors themselves, but also of the beliefs that drive those behaviors. If your church accepts a homosexual or promiscuous pastor then your church does not believe the word of God. If your church has a female pastor or teachers then your church does not believe the word of God. Walking according to the Spirit means some specific things, and first among those things is that the word of God is perfect and holy and not subject to alteration. A failure to voluntarily and joyfully submit to the word of God is the demonstration of a lack of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We've used the terms born again and regeneration several times already, but I want to discuss some of the implications of these terms. Of course there's probably many aspects of these terms that are beyond our comprehension, but there are also very many that are not. Regeneration is about having our consciousness, our mind, our self, our inner man, reconfigured to correspond to that of Jesus Christ. We still have a body of fallen flesh but we ourselves have been born again in our inner being, in our thinking and feelings and affections. This is most certainly discernable to us, in fact it's who we are, or at least who we perceive ourselves to be. This is the part that has died to sin and been raised in newness of the Spirit. Newness of the Spirit is the whole new and Christlike mindset that constitutes regeneration. We discussed earlier that the difference between the newness of the Spirit and the oldness of the letter is entirely about inner attitude. (Rm 7:6) Unless this inner attitude has changed then regeneration has not taken place. Unless there is a loving desire to obey God in every situation, every situation, then His Spirit is not in us. (Jn 14:15; 1Jn 2:3-5) Our inner desire to obey the Law of God is the evidence of our being born again, and the fruits of regeneration. To casually ignore and intentionally and regularly disobey any of the smallest commandments is to demonstrate a lack of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit within us will never lead us to disobey the word of God, never ever. The Spirit and the Word are one. Our flesh will, but our new spirit will not. So our general pattern of life, our objectives and goals and desires are those which tell us for sure if we have the Spirit of Christ within us or if we're still thinking like the rest of the world. We cannot have it both ways, we either have the mind of Christ, or the mind of the world, and these are mutually exclusive. Now, this brings us to the next verse:

#### **Verse 5:**

*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, [set their minds on] the things of the Spirit.*

I want to clarify something here. In an early church that I attended we were taught that our minds were a part of the flesh and the mind was defiled and polluted, so we were told that we needed to learn how to live in our spirit and not in our mind. Everyone was trying to find some way to turn off their mind and let their spirit take over and make all the choices and decisions. In the three and a half years that I went there I never found anyone who said they and discovered how to do that. We all knew that this was impossible but no one wanted to say that, because it wasn't politically correct. So the poor saints spent their whole time striving to do something that we were never intended to do. I'll speak more of this later.

Since the beginning of chapter seven Paul has been speaking of his inner man, which he also calls his mind, as the very object of regeneration. Remember what he said:

*22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.* (Rm 7:22-23)

and again:

*So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.*

Romans 7:25 (NASB)

From a purely practical point of view, it is our conscious mind that relates to God. Now it's true that before regeneration our conscious mind was enslaved to sin, so it could not rightly interact with God nor agree with His Laws. But this is what God changes, He changes our minds, including all those things that make us who we are in our inner being. The born again person no longer has a mind that's contrary to God, but one that's been regenerated to correspond to His mind, and that of Jesus Christ. Our mind was enslaved to the flesh, but it has been redeemed and changed, and this is our means to relate to what has happened to us. We know we've been saved because our mind has been radically changed, even though we can't see any physical differences in our tangible bodies. This change of mind is also called a change of heart, and a change of spirit, and many other terms, but these all mean essentially the same thing. If we really have been born again then we do not have a fallen and sin corrupted mind any longer, we have the renewed mind made in the likeness of Jesus Christ. (1Co 2:16)

I know that you've met professing Christians who knowingly disobey the word of God and then claim to be doing so in the name of love, or the name of expediency. They quote the verses about love and stand on those verses, ignoring the context and proper object of Who should be our first love. It is never loving of God to disobey the word of God. (Jn 14:15)

Our mind, meaning our feelings and opinions and affections, and our sense of right and wrong, are those things that have been changed within the truly born again believer. How we think shows us what lies at the source of our innermost being. We often say that we choose what we believe, but the truth is that's not a conscious choice that we can make and we know that. We can choose what we do, but we can't choose what we believe, any more than we can choose before hand if we'll like a food or hate it. We can choose whether or not to eat it, but we can't choose whether or not we like it, that happens at a subconscious level that we can't influence. In today's world of computers we have files that are marked "read only" meaning that we can freely access all the information that they contain, but we cannot make any changes to that information, we're locked out of that process. Our minds are very much the same. We fully know what we believe but we can't really change what we believe by a simple conscious choice, the file is locked. We have to have someone with administrative rights to access the file and make the changes. Mankind has not been granted administrative privileges to make deep level changes to his own innermost beliefs and feelings, that has been reserved by the divine administrator, God himself. We can choose what we do, and we're responsible for those choices, but we can't help or change what we truly believe and how we think and feel in our innermost being. This is the main point that I got out of Jonathan Edwards' book "Freedom of the Will" where he argues that the term itself is contradictory. There can be no freedom of the will to choose what it believes because unless the will is already in place and set there's no criteria for such a choice. The innermost will is the platform on which all choice rests. We can certainly make choices, and we do that all the time, but the faculty that we use to make those choices is programmed into our genetic structure.

Let me make an example. When I was younger I would occasionally listen to Billy Graham on television. His presentations were very moving to me and I would sometimes even have teary eyes at the end, because I half believed what he was saying. And therein lied the problem. I was frightened for my eternal soul, but I knew that I didn't fully believe in God or Jesus Christ. Oh sure, I could have said that I did, but if He really is God won't He know that I'm exaggerating? Won't He know that I don't really believe? I actually wanted to believe, but I had no way to make myself believe something that I did not, even if I wanted to. And several times I told this to God, and argued that it seemed unfair to me to require something from me that I had no ability to do. Why wouldn't He give me some way that was at least reasonably possible for me? Well, the good news is that He eventually, but not immediately, granted me His gracious gift of saving faith, and then I did believe, one-hundred percent without reservations. He had shown me that it was entirely His grace, and not my own doings that afforded my faith and salvation, a lesson that I've never forgotten. What had formerly seemed unfair and callous on God's part now became clear as a bell, and I appreciated the manner that He used to accomplished it, because it afforded a perspective that I totally required. This man knows that his faith and salvation was totally impossible for him by his own resources, and he owes his very life to Jesus Christ through the Grace of God alone.

Because we created beings do not have base level control of what our heart desires, (which I'll call our underlying will) all of our decisions and opinions, made with our conscious minds, will be based on what resides within our inner will. The unregenerate person will perceive situations and make decisions of what's good or bad based on something residing in their innate nature. Therefore *those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.*

They have no innate capacity to do otherwise, *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.* There is literally no underlying innate capacity within the unbeliever to love and appreciate the law of God. That source is not resident within them. They are hostile to the law of God because their innate will is contrary to those laws and there is nothing within them that likes them or agrees with them.

For instance, Geese fly back and forth half way around the world every year when the seasons change and they surely can't tell us why they do that, nor do they even know themselves. All kinds of birds, and mammals repeat their actions year after year with predictable consistency, even when they have no idea why. But we know that they have a genetically inherent propensity to behave as they do, and it's passed on from generation to generation. They behave as they do because they are driven by an innate set of laws and functions that they don't understand and didn't choose by their own decision. For the entirety of our recorded history, the behaviors of the human species has been just as predictable as the behavior of geese. We still desire what we desire and we hate what we hate, and we didn't choose these things by our own will any more than the geese chose to migrate, they are genetically innate to our species.

*Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh* because this is how they think, this is how they feel, this is who they are, at the basest level of their existence. And we're all born with the genetic tendencies of our parents that control our innate will. Expecting an unregenerate person to really appreciate righteousness, as God defines it, is something like expecting a goose to no longer migrate, it is against their very nature. We often hear many good citizens calling us to lead a revival of our nation, and surely this would be wonderful, but don't we see that what we call revival is to them repugnant? Why is the morality of our country declining so rapidly? Because this is what the vast majority of our citizens want it to do, to them it's getting better, and what we Christians call revival is a reversal of those things they consider to be improvements. I know there are some people who think authentic Christians make up a substantial part, or even a majority of our country's population, but that's simply not true. While there may be a lot of churches that call themselves Christian, there are painfully few that demonstrate the authenticity of that claim by a loving obedience to His word. There can be no revival of morality of those who are in the flesh, it contradicts everything they desire and love and appreciate. God is eventually going to completely replace this whole creation because it was handed over to corruption by an act of God to fulfill a specific purpose. (Rev 21:1; Rom 8:20) We cannot save that which God has predestined to slowly decay and die. His Son couldn't do that, His Holy Spirit hasn't done that, the Apostles couldn't do it, so now do we really think that we can lead our predominantly atheist nation to return to an age of higher morality? Christianity is a remnant religion that shares this planet with a vastly greater number of unbelieving pagans and atheists. And the reason that God implemented it (Christianity) was not to change the whole world, but to redeem a chosen few out of it and set them apart for His glory and His service. It was like this in the days of Elijah, and the days of Jesus, and it's like that now. Those who are according to the flesh, which means that they think and feel and have yearnings only for those things that are of the flesh, cannot please God because all the things that are pleasing to Him are contrary to their own innate nature. They have not been born again so they do not have the Spirit of Christ resident within them. This is what Paul is about to say in the next verses:

### **Verses 6-8:**

*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.*

These are some very important verses to rightly understand from a practical aspect as well as a theological one. In the version that we're quoting, which is the New American Standard Bible, this verse uses two separate words to translate this Greek word that refers to the thoughts of the mind. Other versions translate it with the same two words but they're often hyphenated. As small as this syntax difference appears, the implications are really pretty big. When hyphenated the general inference is that it's speaking of something innate, something at a source level. But when rendered with two separate words it would seem to be speaking of something at a volitional and controllable level. Now I want to say that I agree with both interpretations, but I believe this verse, in the general context of Paul's discussion, is implying something volitional, something that we consciously choose to do with our mind. Our mind is that portion of our persona that resides in between those opposing forces that are acting upon us. I want to make it perfectly clear that our mind is not our flesh, nor is it an extension of that flesh. It is our conscious mind that interprets and responds to the regenerative work of the

Holy Spirit. Yes, the work was a spiritual work, it affected us at an invisible level of our existence, but it is our mind that is directly affected by this invisible work. It is our mind that knows we've been redeemed and changed. The mind change is a resultant effect of a divine spiritual work, but it is that part of us that we are conscious of, and able to relate to. I have been in churches that say the mind is the same as the flesh, but this is only true of the unbeliever. The mind of the born again believer is that very element with which we perceive and comprehend the nature of what has actually happened to us at the invisible level of our being. If you are born again, it means that your mind is new and different, and that it is not a slave of sin anymore, but rather a slave of righteousness (Rm 6:17) and spiritual maturity and progressive sanctification are both vital aspects that, through voluntary participation, use this new innate mind-set to grow and learn and mature. Our mind is the battleground of our lives. It is our mind that ultimately chooses what our bodies do or don't do, and what we say or don't say. We win or we lose every battle over sin or righteousness first and foremost in our mind, then what we do with our body is just the visible demonstration of who won that particular fight.

In an earlier church we were taught that the mind is the flesh, and we all must learn how to turn off our fallen minds and learn how to live "in the spirit." This came from the Eastern mystic influences that drive those religions. This is meaningless nonsense, (it's mumbo jumbo), it's impossible to evaluate situations, make godly decisions, to deny unrighteousness and worldly desires, and to live our lives sensibly, righteously, and godly in this present age (Tit 2:12) with our mind's turned off. It is our mind's that God has given us, and then renewed according to His Spirit, to make this possible in us.

Our minds (which we also call our hearts and our spirits) have been regenerated, and at its base level it now loves and appreciates and earnestly seeks after God's righteousness. But our flesh component is always opposing what we joyfully concur with in our minds, so that we see ourselves all too often doing the opposite. It is our renewed mind that we must use to put to death those deeds of the flesh. This is our weapon, or at least the means to use those weapons. For this reason I prefer the non-hyphenated version, because these verses are a call to us believers to use our renewed minds against the desires of the flesh. And to do that voluntarily and aggressively all day long. That is the logical point of Paul's words.

Now, as Paul says, the mind-set (hyphenated) meaning the innate nature, of the mind that is still in the flesh is ultimately death, because all of its voluntary deeds will be worthy of death. But the mind-set (also hyphenated) of the Spirit of God is ultimately life and peace with God, and the voluntary daily activities will be in keeping with that innate thinking. So, we wholeheartedly agree with the hyphenated version as well, but the hyphenated version is speaking of the base, innate level, and the non-hyphenated version is speaking of the daily experiential and volitional use of that renewed mind. For example, we might own a car, but simply owning it doesn't do anything for us unless we choose to get in it and drive it to our destinations. Of course we have to own it first, but then we have to use our minds to make choices of when and how we use that car. In similar manner, all of us who have been born again have the new mind, (meaning heart and spirit), but it's only as useful as we make it, by our own voluntary use of it in our daily choices and decisions. And like the car in our example, neglecting to use and properly maintain it will have undesirable results.

A good and thorough understanding of these verses will give us a proper perspective of the capabilities and the limitations of humanity. I'm constantly amazed at the number of nice people who seem to really think that we Christians can actually make unbelievers come to agree with us on what's best for our country. They want to open a dialogue, and sponsor debates, hoping that our kind gestures and good common sense will somehow change the unbelievers minds. These verses make it clear that unbelievers do not have within them any innate capacity to agree with the things that God has established as good and righteous. The ability is simply not there within them. No amount of dialogue, or persuasion, or facts and statistics, can change how they think. This is why so many otherwise intelligent people can actually say they believe in evolution, even when such an idea is patently absurd. Nothing in this created universe can change the human will except the One who designed that will and controls the way that it works. Salvation, and with it the renewed mind and way of thinking, is entirely of the Lord, and no man or woman can change the way it works by their own resources. It (salvation) is not about him who wills or him who runs, but by the mercy of God. And it's implemented by the free gift of saving faith, imparted by a work of the Holy Spirit upon those who are chosen of God. (Rm 9:16; Eph 2:8-10)

For this reason Paul opened this epistle with the declaration: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.* (Rom 1:16) *To everyone who believes*, and the ability **to** believe is itself a gift of God, not a human work or simply a human decision, so that no one may boast of their own wisdom or accomplishment. God does not share that glory with anyone.

In verse 7 Paul says: *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*, According to this verse the unregenerate mind, that is set on the flesh because it is still “in the flesh” does not subject itself to the law of God because it isn’t even able to do so. Why can’t we make our nation see the error of its ways when it makes laws that directly violate and contradict the laws of God? Very simply, because they are not able to see nor perceive these violations of God’s laws as wrong, in fact they see them as good and tolerant and loving to others, but just not so much loving to an antiquated and mythological God.

A pastor that I knew in a former church said that the way to get the members of the church to follow the church program was through appealing to their sense of comradery and community, because people don’t respond well to obligation. I was astounded at this comment. What he was saying was that the church would only respond if appealed to with secular humanistic emotions, and the sense of obligation to please God was admittedly ineffectual in his churches. Apparently he had pastored unregenerate churches for so long that he didn’t even want to try to appeal to a common spirit of holiness and righteous affections among the members, because he had seen that it’s not effective. He was essentially admitting that he had given up on the effectuality of the Spirit of God and had accepted his job of leading a church of predominantly unregenerate cultural Christians. And this is not a rare exception, it is unfortunately the general rule. The unregenerate mind is not able to subject itself to the laws of God because it’s not able to approve of, or desire, the laws of God. It does not have that capacity anywhere within it. It isn’t that it’s there, but it’s just suppressed, it’s that it isn’t there at all, period. And for this reason:

Verse 8: *and those who are in the flesh cannot please God*. Just like an average person off the street cannot perform open heart surgery, neither can those who are in the flesh please God. It’s not possible because the necessary knowledge and abilities are not present. It isn’t just because they don’t want to, (which they don’t) but it’s also because they lack the essential knowledge and ability. This is a two part problem. They can’t because they don’t want to, and they don’t want to because they can’t. One will never become accomplished at a task that he is unwilling to learn. But then there are some things that we just don’t seem to be able to learn even if we do try. This would be a great place for a golf joke but I’ll pass on it because I threw all my clubs into the water trap on the third hole. (Just kidding, kind of) But seriously, we are always hoping we can reason with unbelievers, and find a common ground with them, but Jesus himself did nothing of the sort. He proclaimed the word of God concerning the coming kingdom, and preached the good news of God’s favorable day of forgiveness of sin through faith in Himself to all who would believe in Him. And He made no mention of social reform or political power as the means of furthering those vital objectives. Neither did he say anything that would prohibit or deter the believers from taking part in these matters, but never as the intended means for furthering the eternal kingdom of God nor attaining the salvation of souls. For these, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the exclusive power that God has designated. (Jn 14:6, Acts 4:12)

Now, lets make it clear that anybody can do things that we call good things and things that we call bad things. The fall of man gave him the ability to discern the difference. It’s often said that the unregenerate can’t do anything that’s good, but is that what the scriptures mean when they say that the one who is in the flesh cannot please God? It’s very common to take a very casual approach to interpreting the meaning of the scriptures, but time has shown that this will inevitably cause errors. For instance, on a purely human level we all may know some people who we think are down right evil, and we don’t like those people. But would we say that those people are incapable of doing anything whatsoever that’s good? Probably not, but what we mean is that even if they do a few good things, we know their heart, and they themselves are still evil, so they can never be pleasing to us, in spite of a few good works that they might perform. This verse literally says that those who are in the flesh cannot please God, it does not say that they cannot do any good deeds whatsoever, and to infer that, is to overstep the legitimate boundaries of interpretation. All this legitimately teaches us is that a few good deeds done by those who are in the flesh are not enough to make God pleased with them. It takes a fundamental change of heart and mind, not just a few good deeds, for God to be pleased with His children. Motive can be as important as actions.

I really want us to see and understand what Paul is telling us in these verses, because if we do then we'll know how to interpret all those complex situations and opinions that fill up our lives. We'll understand our own thinking and values and worldview, and we'll understand the thinking of the world. We can be less hostile and more compassionate for the lost people when we know why they feel like they do, even when we can't accept or condone their actions and beliefs. How difficult it is for us to have the mind of Christ, wherein He said: *"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."* Sometimes it seems to be easier to desire the judgement of sinners than to find compassion for them. Of course I take immense delight in the salvation of every sinner, but there's so few of them, and so very many of the others, that the work can wear us down, but we must not lose heart. (Jn 3:17)

The only possible situation for those who are in the flesh, which is another way of saying those who are not reborn of the Spirit of God, is that they do not have the mandatory knowledge, skills, nor innate desires to be pleasing to God, no matter how many good things they try to do. Unregenerate people can do good works, at least as we perceive them, but those good works are not sufficient to save them from their sins nor make them pleasing to God. So, we grieve for them, and pray for their salvation by the gracious gift of God. Don't be afraid to pray for anyone whom you desire to know the precious gift of God, whether or not they're among the elect is not our concern, that's God's purview, and He hasn't chosen to share it with us, so we pray without ceasing for all of those whom we love and care about, even occasionally for our enemies. Not that they would prosper, but that they would repent and be saved.

Now, it was my initial intention to include verses 9-11 in this lesson, but I can see by the amount of time that we've already used that, that's not going to be possible, so we'll end this lesson here and began at verse 9 in our next session. To God be the glory forever. Amen.

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