

Are We Preaching “Another” Gospel: A 31-Day Journey toward Rediscovering the Gospel of the Grace of God

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Day 26

IN THE SPIRIT OR IN THE FLESH

Are believers “in the Spirit” or are we “in the flesh”? Or, do we battle to “stay in the Spirit” and choose not to live “in the flesh”? There are two big hurdles to face when attempting to answer these questions.

One difficulty we confront comes from the multiple uses of the word “Flesh” (sarx) in Scripture, varies in meaning based on context. It can refer to actual flesh, the human body (Lk. 24:39, Jn. 6:51), kindred relationships (Rom. 9:3), the state of being human (Gal. 1:16, Gal. 2:20, Eph. 6:12), personal abilities or religious accomplishments (Phil. 3:3-4, Gal. 3:3), human desires (Rom 13:14), the flesh as opposed to the spirit (Mt. 16:17, Jn. 1:13, Jn. 6:63), and our condition before coming to faith in Christ (Rom. 7:5, Gal. 5:24, Eph.2:3, Jn. 3:6, Rom. 8:9).

If we are unaware of these different uses, we can become confused as to who we are in Him when we read the word “flesh”. We are “flesh” in the sense of being human. **This has to do with our current mortal state, and not our standing before God in Christ.** Here is a classic example. When Paul writes “in the flesh” in this verse, he is not declaring anything sinful about himself. He is referring to the life he lived in his human body.

Galatians 2:20

*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life **which I now live in the flesh** I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*

The other obstacle we face, perhaps more formidable, is tradition. Now, tradition, in and of itself, is not evil if that tradition is based on truth. However, when our traditions are not founded on truth, we can become confused and irrational in our thinking.

David’s and my former understanding of this topic was based on tradition, one that is still believed by many Christians today. We believed that Christians have a *choice* of whether to be in the Spirit or in the flesh. We viewed “being in the Spirit” as choosing to do what is right and dedicating ourselves to spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Bible reading, or perhaps being in tune with the Holy Spirit. “Being in the flesh,” we saw as giving into our fleshly desires and neglecting spiritual practices, or living devoid of the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

We never stopped to analyze what we were actually thinking—that we believed that we were “in the Spirit” based on following laws and by our own religious effort instead of on what Jesus accomplished in us.

Let us consider these very crucial passages to further our understanding.

Jesus, in speaking of being born again, said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit **is spirit**,” (Jn. 3:6). Since we Christians are born of the Spirit, then we are spirit.

Paul wrote, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus **have crucified** the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live **by the Spirit**, let us also be guided by the Spirit,” (Gal. 5:24-25 MOUNCE). So, we who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh, right? Believers are spirit and we live by the Spirit.

Paul also declared, “But you are **not in the flesh, but in the Spirit**, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, He is not His” (Rom. 8:9). Does the Spirit of God dwell in believers? Do we have the Spirit of Christ? Are we His? Yes, yes, and yes indeed! So, then, we ARE in the Spirit and not in the flesh.

It is from this perspective that we can answer the question emphatically. **Believers are in the Spirit at all times.** “Being in the Spirit” isn’t based on what we *do*, but on the Person in whom we have *believed*. Because we believe in Him, because we are born again, we are spirit, not flesh. When we understand this, we see that Romans 8:1-17 is not a discussion of *believers* being sometimes in the Spirit and sometimes in the flesh (which is what we used to believe for so many years). Romans 8:1-17 is a demonstration of the differences between those who are in the flesh, non-believers, and those who are in the Spirit, believers. Let's put it in context.

Romans 8:1-18

*There is therefore now no condemnation **to those who are in Christ Jesus**, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.¹*

Now, formerly, we interpreted this to mean that if we would walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh, there would be no condemnation for us. However, now with the understanding that believers *are* in the Spirit, this verse lights up. Those who are in Christ Jesus are those who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit—we believers. For us, there is no condemnation (negative sentence/judgment). Continuing:

¹ Some excellent translations omit the second half of verse 1. I won't debate that here because when we understand the context, the second half of the verse makes sense.

*² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ that the **righteous requirement of the law** might be fulfilled in **us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.***

We walk in the Spirit because we are free from the law.² The law could not (and cannot) make us perfect, but Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law (death) in those who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit—in other words, in believers.

⁵ 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, the things of the Spirit.

Paul is saying that non-believers, those who are in the flesh, set their minds on the things of the flesh, but we, believers, who live according to the Spirit, set our minds on the things of the Spirit. We could not do this if Jesus had not made us new creations. It is now our divine nature to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh.

*⁶ For to be carnally (fleshly) minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.⁷ Because the carnal (fleshly) mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ⁸ **So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.***

Too long we have used this verse to tell **believers** that they are not pleasing God if they are “carnally minded”, but Paul is not saying that. He is showing a contrast between the righteous and sinners. **Sinners are** carnally minded. Their minds are opposed to God and not subject to the law of God. In fact, Paul says, as if to make it entirely clear, they *cannot* be subject to the law of God, which he would have never said about believers. Those who are in the flesh—sinners, as opposed to those who are in the Spirit—believers, cannot please God. However, those who are in the Spirit—we believers, do please God. Now, Paul clarifies.

*⁹ But **you** are **not** in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.*

What is the qualification that Paul gives to be in the Spirit—isn't it that the Spirit of God dwells in us? The Spirit of God permanently dwells in believers (Jn. 14:16). Thus, we are in the Spirit because we are His. If the Spirit of Christ does not dwell in someone, he is not a Christian. Believers are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. We don't go in and out of being in the flesh or in the Spirit. One is either in the Spirit, or he is not.

¹⁰ And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

Christ is in us, and we are dead to sin as Paul just penned in Romans 6, but the Spirit is life because we have been made righteous. We are no longer dead sinners under law and dominated by flesh. We are the living righteous under grace and freed from sin.

¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

This is our present and future hope. God, who raised Jesus from the dead, dwells in us, and He will raise our mortal bodies by His Spirit. This mortal will put on immortality.

¹² Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Most translations of these verses lean toward the understanding that if *believers* live according to the flesh, they will die, and if they live according to the Spirit, they will live. Think about this, please. Is our eternal salvation to be determined this way? Are we saved initially by grace through faith (not of works), but then after salvation, life or death is determined by whether we live according to the Spirit or the flesh? Now, perhaps it would be reasonable to say that wrong choices keep us from enjoying the life we've been given, but these verses aren't normally taught this way.

The only way we can make sense of these verses is to recognize that Paul is continuing to contrast the believer and the non-believer. Those who are in the Spirit, believers, are not obligated to the flesh. We are the ones who put to death the deeds of the body and have life. Those who live

according to the flesh, non-believers, are headed toward death.

Notice that the next verse affirms this truth: that the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God (not the flesh).

¹⁴ For as many as are led (who are being constantly led)³ by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Verse fourteen is not saying that we need to *try* to be led by the Spirit of God (as I thought for most of my Christian life), nor is it saying that we are led by the Spirit of God *if* we are in the Spirit, not the flesh (since believers *are* in the Spirit). It is saying that since we are the sons of God, since we are of the Spirit, we *are* being led by the Spirit of God. What a different perspective. It takes all the work and mystery out of this whole idea of being led by the Spirit. He leads. We follow. How simple and revolutionary. What rest! We **are** in the Spirit, and we can trust that He is leading.

Let us also look at a somewhat parallel passage.

Galatians 5:16-18

*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. ¹⁸ **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.***

Remember that Galatians is Paul's rebuke for those who were adding law to grace, who began "in the Spirit" but then were trying to be perfected by the flesh—by obeying religious laws. Notice in verse 18, Paul shows that those who are led by the Spirit, which we now know means the sons of God, are not under law. When we try to add law to grace, we end up like Paul in Romans 7, not doing the things we wish to do and doing the things we don't want to do. This is important to connect with "fulfilling the lust of the flesh". **The flesh is closely associated with law.** We are not under the law. We are not in the flesh. We are under grace. We are in the Spirit. So, because we are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, we simply walk in the Spirit—in grace, not law.

Romans 6:14 Amplified

For sin shall not [any longer] exert dominion over you, since now you are not under Law [as slaves], but under grace [as subjects

³ Wuest Expanded Translation

of God's favor and mercy].

I hope you are beginning to see this glorious truth. It can revolutionize your walk with Jesus. We are new creations who are in the Spirit, not the flesh. It is our new nature to love God and want to please Him. We don't need to be led by the law because we *are* led by the Spirit. Glory to God in the highest!