

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

Romans 8:5-17

Good morning! Today we're going to look at what it means to be a Christian. And that is exactly the title of my message this morning, "What it means to be a Christian". We'll go through Romans 8:5-17. Paul here actually starts by differentiating between the Christian and non-Christian. In verse 5, he says, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires." He says that the non-Christians live according to their sinful nature. But Christians live according to the Spirit. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Only a Christian has the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to live in a person when that person accepts Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The question is: How does the Holy Spirit work in my life as a Christian? Somebody said it's the difference between being in a car or on an elevated train. A car runs on the principle of storage. You put gas in the tank and you drive it. You burn the gas and when you're almost out of gas, you stop, you get more gas, you run it again, you burn it, you get more gas, you keep on driving until you run out. You're constantly running and stopping, running and stopping, filling and refilling. Even if you have an electric car, it's the same thing, you drive it, your car's battery runs out of energy and so you recharge the car. You run it again, the battery discharges, and you recharge. And the cycle is repeated over and over again until the battery is dead. On the other hand, an elevated train runs on the contact principle. You have the two rails on the outside and the electrified third rail in the middle. What is it that keeps the elevated train going? As long as the train stays in contact with that third rail in the middle, it will go and go and go and never stop.

Now, too many people think that walking with the Holy Spirit is like riding in a car. You get filled with the Holy Spirit and you get run down and you get filled up again and you get run down again. So they're constantly up and down, up and down, being filled and emptied, being filled and emptied. That's not the Christian life of the New Testament.

The New Testament tells us that the Holy Spirit is always here. Our job is to stay in contact with the Spirit. When we stay in contact with the Holy Spirit, he continuously provides the power we need for effective Christian living.

With that as background, we turn to Romans 8:5-17 where we discover three gifts of the Holy Spirit that are given to every believer. These are not things that you should seek if you are a believer. These are things that are given to you at the moment of conversion. You are told not to seek them, you're told to realize that you have them and to live on the basis of the fact that they've been given to you.

II. Three Gifts of the Spirit

A. A New Mind 5-8

“Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

There are two ways and only two ways of living in this world. You can live according to the flesh which leads to death or according to the Spirit which leads to life. There is no third alternative. It's one or the other. As our text makes clear, those two ways of living are diametrically opposed to each other. The flesh is on

one side, the Spirit on the other and never the twain shall meet. Those two ways of life are constantly moving in opposite directions.

Let me give you three practical applications of that truth. *First, when you encounter Jesus Christ, he gives you a new way of thinking.* God has given you a new mind so that you might develop a thoroughly Christian way of thinking. When someone says, “I love God with all my mind, wouldn’t you say that’s quite strange? It’s because we normally speak more about loving God with our heart. We are heart-oriented. But remember what Jesus said. The first and greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mark 12:28-30). So, when you meet Jesus Christ, he will change the way you think.

Second, one part of following Jesus Christ is having your mind continually transformed. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The word in Greek is a form of the word metamorphoses—the change of shape that takes place within a cocoon whereby a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. Let a “mental metamorphoses” take place in your mind. Let the very shape of your thinking be changed by the renewing of your mind.

This is the basis for all Christian education. It’s the basis for what we are doing in our Sunday School, in our IMPACT Class, in our home groups. We believe that our great calling is to go out into the world—into every field of endeavor—with truly renewed minds.

How does that happen? I know of only one way in which your mind can be transformed. It must be filled with the Word of God. Spiritual metamorphoses takes place by the careful, intentional, repeated, deliberate, thorough study of the Bible. God gave us his Word so it would be a spiritual change agent in your mind. As you

study the Bible, it will change the way you think. And as your thinking changes, so your life will slowly change.

Third, we need Christians who will serve God with their minds. Years ago, there was an article from the Chicago Tribune. The article was actually a commentary on another article in Newsweek magazine that told how the Baby Boomers are now returning to church. After a generation spent wandering in a spiritual desert, they are coming back to their spiritual roots. The tragic reality, however, is this: The Baby Boomers want the comfort of religion without the inconvenience of a changed life. They want emotion without the ethical demands. Religion for them is a purely private affair.

Newsweek also discussed the religious journey of Bill Clinton—who was raised as a Southern Baptist. He obviously knows the Bible well and has a layman’s grasp of biblical teaching. During his days as the governor of Arkansas he sang in the choir at the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock. Newsweek points out that Bill Clinton’s spirituality is a personal matter, limited to his family, friends, and a small circle of believers. He knows the hymns of the faith and weeps openly when certain songs are played. No one can doubt his sincerity. Yet for him, religion is one thing and the issues of life are something else entirely. The Tribune article simply pointed out that Bill Clinton perfectly represents his whole generation. He has religion but he keeps it to himself. He has religion but it doesn’t seem to matter when it comes to crucial moral issues like abortion and homosexuality. According to David Lewis Stokes, the author of the Tribune article, the real message seems to be, “He’s religious but it’s nothing to worry about.”

If you know Jesus Christ, it ought to make a difference in every area of life. The way you speak, the way you talk, the way you write, the way you relate to others and yes, the way you make decisions in the public arena. If you know Jesus

Christ, that will radically affect the way you approach the great moral decisions of life. Nothing will be simply private or personal. There's no such thing as a purely private Christian faith. If it doesn't affect all of life, how can your faith be called truly Christian?

That means we don't need lawyers who happen to be Christian; we need truly Christian lawyers. We don't need teachers who happen to be Christian; we need truly Christian teachers who will bring their faith into the classroom. We don't need businessmen who happen to be Christian; we need truly Christian businessmen who will let their faith in Christ shape every decision they make. We don't need nurses who happen to be Christian; we need truly Christian nurses who treat patients differently because they know Christ. We don't need doctors who are born again on the weekends; we need doctors who will express their Christian faith seven days a week.

For too long we who have been given new minds have been too willing to check them at the door as we leave church on Sunday morning. We think like pagans during the week but like Christians on Sunday morning. No wonder the world is little impressed with our Christianity. They've never seen the real thing in action. What a difference it would make if we began to "think Christianly" and "act Christianly" in the workplace this week.

You were given a new mind so you could make a difference for God. Too many of us are sitting in the bleachers when we ought to be fully engaged in the arena of life. We're spectators when we ought to be in the ball game. God gave you a new mind so you could be a difference-maker for the kingdom of God.

B. A New Nature 9-11

Now, verses 9-11 says, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not

have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”

Verse 9 gives us a clear definition of what it means to be a Christian. A true Christian is one who has the Spirit of Christ within him. One mark of genuine Christianity is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He actually takes up residence inside those who know Jesus Christ. When you say, “Lord Jesus, I want you as my Savior,” the Holy Spirit answers that prayer by coming into your life. The Third Person of the Trinity comes to live within you. He becomes incarnate in your life. That’s what Paul means when he uses the phrase—”in the Spirit.” To be “in the Spirit” means that the Holy Spirit himself moves into your life. He actually and literally lives within you.

These verses suggest two direct implications of this truth. *First, because the Holy Spirit has given you a new nature, you actually have a brand-new life.* That’s the meaning of the phrase—”your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.” The Holy Spirit makes your spirit come to life. The seeds of death have been planted in your body. That’s why it eventually wears out and dies. If you live long enough, you are going to die. Happens to all of us sooner or later. “The body is dead because of sin.” Your physical flesh is slowly wasting away. Yet God has placed life—eternal life, resurrection life—on the inside through the Holy Spirit. Dying on the outside, yet new life on the inside. We die, yet we live. We waste away, yet we live forever. Seeds of life spring up where death once reigned. Though our bodies perish, our spirit lives on with God. That’s the wonder of the gospel. Where death once reigned, life now reigns within.

Second, we have the promise of future resurrection. The Spirit who raised up Christ will one day raise up your mortal body out of the grave. Verse 11 is an explicit promise of future resurrection from the dead. The Holy Spirit who presently lives within you is like a “down payment” on God’s future deliverance. Do Christians die? Yes, we die like everyone else. But death for us is not the end. When your body is laid to rest, your spirit goes to be with Jesus. That’s not the end! When Jesus returns, your body will be raised from the dead—immortal, incorruptible, eternal, never more to die, never more to decay, never more to waste away.

C. A New Identity 14-17

“Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a Spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

Paul uses two different phrases to describe believers. He calls us “sons of God” and “God’s children.” There is a slight difference, although sons are children and children are sons. The term “child of God” speaks of the intimate relationship you have with God. God’s children call him “Abba”—an Aramaic term of endearment. It means “Daddy” or “Poppa.” Because we are God’s children, we can speak to God the same way little children speak to their earthly fathers. The term “son of God” refers to your official status within God’s family. It speaks of your privileged position. You have the official right to be a son of God.

That’s your new identity in Christ. You are no longer a son of Satan. You are now a son of God. You are no longer in the flesh; you are now in the Spirit.

You no longer live according to the world; you now live according to God's Word. You are now a blood-bought son of God.

Dr. James Montgomery Boice points out that this truth is radical, supernatural and far-reaching. It is radical because your life has experienced the greatest change that could ever be. Once you served Satan, now you serve God. Once you walked in darkness, now you walk in the light. Once you followed your own desires, now you live to please God. Once you were dead, now you are alive. That's a radical change. It is supernatural because only God could do something like that. It is far-reaching because it touches every aspect of your life.

Now, because you have this new identity being a child of God, let me share with you the five privileges you have.

1. Personal Guidance of the Holy Spirit 14

“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.”

To be “led” by the Spirit is a very personal term. It means to be led by the hand, to be personally escorted by a tour guide. The Holy Spirit takes your hand and leads you through the difficulties of life. So many Christians have said, “If it had not been for the Lord, I wouldn't have made it.” But we don't know the half of it. When you are perplexed, you have the right to say, “Holy Spirit, please show me what to do.” “Holy Spirit, I am confused. I don't know which way to go. I'm counting on you to lead me.” He will do it. Thank God for the leading of the Holy Spirit.

2. Freedom From Fear 15a

No more slavery, no more bondage, no more abject fear, no more living in terror. All of that is gone because we have received the “Spirit of sonship.”

3. The Right to Call God “Father” 15b

“The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”

This is truly good news. You don't have to scream at God to get his attention. You simply say, “Daddy,” and he hears your voice. You whisper his name in the darkness and he comes to your aid.

Every father understands this principle. I can be in a room filled with people and a welter of voices. But let one of my children say “Daddy,” and somehow I will hear his or her voice. I don't know how that happens, but it does. A father knows when his children are speaking to him. The same is true with our heavenly Father. He hears the faintest cry of his children.

4. Inward Assurance 16

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.”

You as a believer have the right to expect that the Holy Spirit will give you inner assurance that you know Jesus Christ. This is the “peace that passes all understanding.” Is that important? Yes, because Satan would like nothing better than to pull you down by causing you to doubt your own salvation. He accuses you and makes you think you aren't really born again. “You sorry so-and-so. You go to that church and call yourself a Christian. Yet look at how you live. You're nothing but a fake. You're lousy, you're no good, you're rotten.” And the Holy Spirit comes along and says, “You're not perfect, but you are a Son of God. Jesus paid for all your sins. You are a child of God.” When the devil whispers in your ear, the Holy Spirit speaks up from deep within your heart to testify that you are indeed a child of God.

5. Right of Heirship in God's Family 17

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

You are an “heir” of God. We all understand what heirship means in human terms. My will specifies that my children are my heirs. It specifies that after my death my children will inherit all that I own. Well, of course, my wife will inherit some, too. Why? Because I want to ensure that what I have worked for will be passed on to the members of my family. I don’t want my fortune—such as it is—to be given to people I don’t know and who have no relationship to me. God feels the same way. He wants the riches of heaven to go to the members of his family. When you trust Christ, he writes you into his will, so to speak. Not that God will ever die—He won’t!—but you are included in God’s family fortune because as a child of God you now share in the family wealth, which includes the riches of the universe. All that God has is yours in prospect ... and some day will be yours in reality.

So we have three great gifts of the Spirit—a new mind, a new nature, and a new identity. That leaves us with one great obligation.

III. One Great Obligation 12-13

“Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.”

These verses tell us two things about our obligation:

1. We owe nothing to the flesh. 12

Why don’t we owe anything to the flesh? One, because we’ve been set free from the power of the flesh. We are no longer “in the flesh” but “in the Spirit.” The flesh once controlled us, but now we are free. Two, because the flesh does us no

good. Consider the “ministry” of the flesh: It tempts us to do evil. It pulls us away from God. It wars continually against the Holy Spirit. You don’t have to live in the flesh any more because you don’t owe your flesh anything.

2. We owe everything to the Holy Spirit. 13

Dr. Ryrie call Romans 8:13 the most important single verse on the spiritual life in the New Testament. *He liked it because it contains a beautiful balance.* There is God’s part—”if by the Spirit”—and there is our part—”you put to death.” Spiritual growth comes when we do our part as we rely upon the Holy Spirit’s enablement. This verse balances a moment-by-moment dependence upon the Spirit with a tough-minded attitude toward the flesh.

Is the spiritual life dependent upon God or upon me? The answer is Yes! I cannot do it without God. God will not do it without me.

That brings us back to our opening illustration about the car versus the elevated train. One operates on the storage principle, the other on the contact principle. The Christian life operates on the contact principle. Just as the train moves forward as long it stays in contact with the third rail, even so your spiritual life moves forward as you stay in constant contact with the Holy Spirit. The whole question of the Spirit-filled life resolves itself into this: Are you keeping in contact with the Holy Spirit? Your job—your only real job as a Christian—is to stay in contact with the Spirit day by day. Hour by hour. Moment by moment.

Let’s talk about you and the Holy Spirit for a moment. How well have you been staying in contact? Remember, there are only two ways to live—in the flesh or in the Spirit. There is no third option. Either you follow the dictates of your flesh—and the sinful pull it exerts, or you follow the Holy Spirit of God—which leads you in paths of righteousness. Who have you been following this week? What power have you been living by this week?

Some of us would have to admit that we have been living too much in the flesh this week. Romans 8 makes one thing clear: Living by the Spirit is not automatic. A decision is required. You must choose to live by the Spirit's power. It doesn't happen by chance. The flesh and the Spirit are at war. The flesh has desires for you. The Spirit has desires for you. They are moving in opposite directions. But they have this in common—Both want to control your life! You cast the ultimate vote. How have you been voting this week?

Remember, you don't have to live in the flesh this week. You can live in the Spirit. But the choice is up to you.