

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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LIVE LIKE A BELIEVER

Romans 8:5-17

Anglican Bishop and theologian N. T. Wright tells about a friend of his who, as a teenager, after coming to faith in Christ, went home and told his mother he had become a Christian. She was not a believer and thought he had joined some kind of cult. “They’ve brainwashed you!” she said.

But he was ready with a good answer. “Mom, if you had seen what was in my brain,” he said, “you would realize it needed washing!”

Had he been brainwashed? No. Jesus doesn’t do brainwashing. Not in the way we usually think of it. But Jesus does wash our brains and hearts so that we can see and think clearly, and live in the light of the truth of the gospel. If anything, as Wright points out, it is our surrounding culture that brainwashes us. It is the spirit of the world, with its insatiable appetite for more and more stuff, for money and things, for fun and pleasure, for fame and recognition, for power and influence, for personal fulfillment and a pain-free life, that brainwashes us into thinking that this is the only world there is, and these are the only things that really matter. It is the world’s idea of “the good life” that persuades so many of us to just go with the flow and conform ourselves to its – the world’s – way of thinking and living. We end up being brainwashed by the world. “What the gospel does,” says Wright, “is to administer a sharp jolt, to shine a bright light, to kick-start the brain, and (our) moral sensibility, into working properly for the first time” (Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1*, 43-44).

Jesus is not in the brainwashing business. He *is*, however, in the business of washing our brains and hearts both to cleanse us from the stain and filth and poison of our sin and to give us a new, gospel-believing, God-centered world view – a new way of thinking and seeing and living with the Lord Jesus Christ and His transforming love at the center of everything.

People who do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord, as the one and only Son of God and Savior of sinners, have, to one degree or another, been brainwashed by the world. But some Christians have allowed themselves to be brainwashed by the world, too. Some Christians have bought into the world’s way of thinking and, even though they have put their trust in Christ for salvation and profess to be followers of Christ, because they have set their minds on worldly things and desires, they do not live like believers ought to live. I don’t mean that they don’t come to church. Many do. What I mean is that the controlling influence in their lives is not the Spirit of God as the Spirit applies the Word of God to their lives, but their sinful, self-centered, corrupted human nature – what Paul refers to in this passage and others as “the flesh” (Romans 8:5, 8, 9, 12, 13). In other words, it is possible to be a Christian and still live according to our sinful nature. It is possible to call yourself a believer and still live like an unbeliever. Possible, but not good. It is certainly not God’s will for you or me or anyone.

There are different ways of living “according to the flesh.” One way is to throw off all restraint in one or more areas of life and to dive in to a life of sin, either not caring about the consequences you may reap, or just doing it anyway, because it is what feels good at the moment. Life is full of temptations to do this. The temptations are not the same for everyone. Often it has to do with sexual sin of some kind, or some unethical means of getting rich. But no one is exempt from temptation. Whatever the temptation(s) may be for you, do not give in to it for even a season. It is not worth it.

Another way to live according to the flesh is to try to become righteous by living a God-honoring life in the power of your flesh. By means of hard work. Such “fleshly thinking,” says Chuck Swindoll, “may have noble ideals and admirable desires, but it ... presumes to achieve godly objectives without God.” It is like the American ideal of rugged individualism celebrating the “self-made” man or woman applied to the spiritual life (Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 159). The bottom line is this: No matter how noble or virtuous it sounds, it doesn’t work and never will.

Paul presents us with a series of contrasts in this passage. First, beginning in verse 5, he distinguishes between two kinds or categories of people: those who live according to their sinful nature and its desires, and those who live in accordance with the Holy Spirit, who has come to take up residence in the lives of all who truly believe in Christ. Ultimately this is what it comes down to: You either follow the lead of the Spirit of God in your life, or you follow the lead of your own sinful nature.

Second, Paul distinguishes between two mindsets, two perspectives, two ways of thinking and looking at life and the world: There is the mind set on the flesh and its sinful desires, and the mind set on the Holy Spirit and what the Spirit desires (8:5-8). The way you live will be determined by what you set your mind on, by the way you think.

The difference between these two mindsets is all about what you set your mind on. (Which is why it is called a “mindset.”) It comes down to questions like this:

What do you think about all day?
 What occupies your mind as you go through your day?
 What do you watch on TV?
 What do you look at on your computer?
 What do you read?
 What or whom do you listen to?
 How do you view life in this world?
 Do you have God’s viewpoint,
 or the worldly viewpoint of your sinful nature?
 Seriously, what dominates your thoughts and desires?
 Is your mind set on the things of God,
 or on the things of this world?

There may be all kinds of variations on the mind set on the flesh and its desires, but in every variation it is built on the lie that we can make life work apart from God. Though there may be appearances to the contrary, from God's perspective, it just isn't so.

The third contrast is between two spiritual conditions or destinies. The result of the mind set on the flesh and its desires is "death;" the result of the mind set on the Spirit is "life and peace" (8:6). By its very nature, the mind set on self and its sinful desires is "hostile to God" (8:7). It is opposed to God and is in a state of rebellion against God and the righteousness that is a gift of His grace. It leads not to life in its fullness but to the spiritual death of being cut off from God and His righteousness, grace, and peace. If you are living according to the flesh and its desires, it is impossible for you to please God (8:8). If you are trying to please God by living a godly life in your own strength, you will never succeed. The only way you can please God is by letting God have your life, by submitting to His gracious and sovereign rule, by allowing God's Spirit to direct how you think and how you live.

Two kinds of people. Two ways of living. Two mindsets or two ways of thinking. Two spiritual conditions or destinies. The Bible highlights these contrasts in a multitude of places. For example, consider Deuteronomy 30:19-20, where Moses says to the people of Israel as they are soon to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land: "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life."

Or Psalm 1:

"Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on His law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither."
(Psalm 1:1-3c)

Or Proverbs 14:12 (also 16:25):

"There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death."

The Bible says that what seems to so many people to be the right way, the right road, to travel in life, turns out to be a dead-end. Literally.

Two roads. Two ways of living. With two different outcomes. Jesus speaks of this near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:13-14, where, in talking about life in His

kingdom, He says: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

That the gate leading to life – eternal life – is narrow and small is not to say it is difficult to become a Christian (though, in fact, it is not only difficult but impossible for anyone to become a Christian who refuses to acknowledge their sinfulness and their need for a Savior). What Jesus is saying is that there is only one way to be saved, one way to be made right with God, one way to receive the gift of eternal life.

Jesus goes on in the Sermon on the Mount to distinguish between two different kinds of fruit in people’s lives (Matthew 7:16-20) – the fruit of living in a vital relationship with Him, and the fruit of living for yourself – according to your sinful nature, as Paul would say. Then Jesus brings His sermon to a close by distinguishing between two houses and the foundations on which they are built, and the importance of building your life on the right foundation – the foundation of His Word. He says: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash” (Matthew 7:24-27).

In *The Message* paraphrase of these verses, it says: “These words I (Jesus) speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit – but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.

“But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards” (Matthew 7:24-27, *MSG*).

Two gates. Two roads. Two ways of life. Two kinds of fruit. Two foundations. Two outcomes. Life or death. Blessings or curses. Wise or foolish. Smart or stupid.

The question, of course, is this:

Which one are you?

Which road are you traveling on?
 What kind of fruit are you producing?
 On what foundation are you building your life?
 Do you have your mind set on the things of the world
 and the desires of your sinful nature?
 Or is your mind set on the Spirit of God and what He desires?
 Are you living according to your sinful nature?

Or are you allowing the Holy Spirit to lead you and guide you and
empower you to live out God's plan in your daily life?
How is it with you?
Does your brain need to be washed today?

One thing is for sure: There is an ongoing battle in your life between your old sinful nature and your new nature in Christ, between the desires of that sinful nature and the desires of the Holy Spirit, who has come to take up residence in your life. I don't know if he meant it in a distinctly Christian way, but poet Carl Sandburg expressed the inner struggle we all experience when he said: "There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud."

Which one is winning in your life, the hippopotamus or the eagle? It depends on what you have your mind and heart focused on.

P. T. Forsyth, a Scottish pastor and theologian from another era, spoke of the struggle this way: "Unless there is within us that which is above us, we shall soon yield to that which is about us."

The good news is that if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, if you are a follower of Christ, if you belong to Christ by faith, then you have the Holy Spirit living in you. Notice what Paul says in verse 9: "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit" – the Holy Spirit – "if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ" – meaning, again, the Holy Spirit – "he does not belong to Christ."

Do not miss the significance of what Paul is saying here: If you don't have the Holy Spirit living in you, you don't belong to Jesus. You are not a true believer and follower of the Lord Jesus. But if you *do* belong to Jesus, if you have been saved by His grace through faith in Him, if you are trusting in Him and Him alone for your salvation and forgiveness and peace with God, then you have the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not only *with* you, He is *in* you. The Holy Spirit lives in you.

If the Holy Spirit lives in you, then you must not live like an unbeliever in your thoughts, attitudes, desires, speech, and conduct. You must not live according to your sinful nature and its desires. As Paul says elsewhere (1 Corinthians 6:19-20): "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with (and in) your body."

There is more in this passage for us to meditate on. So we will come back to it next Sunday. This week, and until we take our final breath, may we live every moment not according to our sinful nature or the ways of the world, but in accordance with the Holy Spirit, who lives in all of us who truly believe in Jesus Christ our Lord. May we live like believers, to the glory and praise of God.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.