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MINISTRIES

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What is Living According to the Flesh?

The Bible frequently contrasts the flesh and the spirit. Generally, its message is that the flesh is bad, and the spirit is good. For example, Paul said:

Romans 8:8

Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:13-14

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. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

He also said this in Galatians:

Galatians 6:8

For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

And Jesus himself, whose Hebrew name was Yeshua, said this:

John 6:63a

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.

So, it's clear that following the flesh will lead to death, and following the spirit will lead to life. But, what does it mean to “live according to the flesh?” How does that cause death? And how does being led by the spirit lead to life?

Sometimes, the Scriptures use “flesh” to mean physical things—things that we can see and touch and taste—and “spirit” to mean non-physical things. For example, Isaiah was referring to the physical body of a horse when he said this:

Isaiah 31:3a

The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit.

Also, Yeshua was referring to his literal body when he said:

Luke 24:39

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.

So, perhaps when Paul says, “one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption,” he means that it is bad to do things that our physical bodies desire. We “sow to our flesh” when we act according to our natural instincts. If we deprive our bodies of things that it wants, things like food, comfort, and intimate relations, then we will be weakening our flesh and thereby empowering our spirit. This idea is called *asceticism*, and it was practiced by people in the first century, when Paul was writing his letters. However, Paul himself condemned those ascetic practices. He said:

Colossians 2:20-23

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

So, Paul indicates here that depriving the body of pleasure does not stop “the indulgence of the flesh.” These ascetic practices do not empower the spirit, so they do not lead to life. It’s clear that Paul was not advising us to deprive ourselves of all physical comforts when he said that being “in the flesh” will not please God. So, we’re back to the original question: if living “according to the flesh” is not the same as doing what our body desires, then what is it? What is Paul getting at when he contrasts the flesh with the spirit?

One clue that we can follow is the terms “life” and “death.” The Scriptures say that following the spirit brings life, while following the flesh brings death. There are other scriptures that use the same language with reference to obeying God’s commands. Here are some of those scriptures:

Deuteronomy 30:15-18a

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD [YHWH] your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD [YHWH] your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then **you shall live** and multiply, and the LORD [YHWH] your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that **you shall surely perish**.

Moses says that walking in God’s ways, his commandments, leads to life, and that living according to our heart’s desires and obeying other gods leads to death. Yeshua said the same thing:

Luke 10:25-28

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with

all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

Both Moses and Yeshua’s words align with the way God set things up in the garden of Eden, where obeying God would lead to life, and disobeying him would lead to death:

Genesis 2:9b

The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:16-17

And the LORD [YHWH] God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Again, if they obeyed God, they would live; if not, they would die. This same concept persists into the New Jerusalem described at the end of Revelation:

Revelation 22:14-15

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

So, these scriptures indicate that obeying God’s commands leads to life, and disobeying God’s commands leads to death. Could this be what Paul is talking about when he contrasts the spirit with the flesh? When we read the context of Romans 8, it appears that this is exactly what Paul has in mind. Here are some of his statements from Romans chapter 7:

Romans 7:5

For while we were living **in the flesh**, our **sinful passions**, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

Romans 7:14

For we know that **the law is spiritual**, but I am of the **flesh**, sold under **sin**.

Romans 7:25b

So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but **with my flesh I serve the law of sin**.

It looks like Paul is using the term “flesh” to mean the desire to sin, and “spirit” to mean the desire to obey God. The desire to sin will lead to death, but the desire to obey God will lead to life. He continues this theme in chapter 8:

Romans 8:2-8

For the law of the **Spirit of life** has set you free in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] from the law of **sin and death**. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, **who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**. 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 set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and

peace. For **the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law**; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Paul says that the mind that is set on the flesh does not submit to God's law (v. 7), and that such a mindset is equivalent to death (v. 6). This is the exact same message that we find in Genesis 2, Deuteronomy 30, Luke 10, and Revelation 22. Obeying God's commands leads to life, and disobeying God—sinning—leads to death.

So, then, this presents a question: how does the spirit lead to obedience to God's commandments? God explains this through the prophet Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 36:26-27

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Ezekiel says that God's spirit within us *causes* us to obey God's rules. Peter said much the same thing when he was being questioned by the high priest:

Acts 5:30-32

The God of our fathers raised Jesus [Yeshua], whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, **whom God has given to those who obey him.**

So, then, the spirit of God can overcome our flesh, our desire to sin, and fill us instead with a desire to serve God. It will produce righteous fruit in us (Philippians 1:9-11). Paul refers to this process as “**crucifying the flesh**” in Galatians 5:

Galatians 5:16-24

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

So, we do not need to reject our physical bodies in order to avoid “**walking according to the flesh.**” What we must reject is our desire to disobey God. The way we do that is to walk by God's spirit, which we receive when we repent and accept forgiveness for our sins through Christ (Acts 2:38). God's spirit will fill us with the desire to obey God, and empower us to overcome our inclination to sin. We will be saved, and will inherit eternal life in God's kingdom. Paul summed it up best:

Romans 6:22

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get

leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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