

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** “Walk According to the Spirit”

**Sermon Text:** Romans 8:3b-11

**Rom. 8:1** ¶ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

**Rom. 8:2** For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

**Rom. 8:3** For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

**8:3b** By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

**Rom. 8:4** 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.

**Rom. 8:5** 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 set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

**Rom. 8:6** For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

**Rom. 8:7** 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.

**Rom. 8:8** Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

**Rom. 8:9** You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

**Rom. 8:10** But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

**Rom. 8:11** 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.

**Main Point:** Because God condemned sin in Christ and gave every believer His Spirit, Christians should set their minds on the Spirit and so walk in new obedience that truly pleases their Father (with resurrection hope).

**Outline:**

1. All Christians Have the Spirit
2. All Christians Are Called to Walk in the Spirit
3. All Christians Are Able to Please God

**Introduction**

Last week, I got to the end of verse 4 and I knew I was in trouble, because Paul says that the righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in us. But then he says something about us that needed a sermon all its own. Because he says that we “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

And there wasn't time to open that very important passage up in the way it deserved.

So this week, I want us to keep following along with Paul here by asking, “How can we do that? What does it mean to ‘walk according to the Spirit’?” And I want to do that by giving us three important lessons from today's passage, and I think that this should bring all of these questions and answers together.

And our three points today are first, “All Christians have the Spirit.” Second, “All Christians are Called to Walk in the Spirit,” and then third, “All Christians are Able to Please God.”

On one level, there is a lot of teaching here. But God intends these things to penetrate the soul and to touch our lives at a very practical level. He is giving us the tools to see that wretched man in Romans 7 put down, and to see that wretched man grow into a spiritual man who walks in the spirit and pleases God.

And that's not a pipe dream. It's a real thing that we will see happen in our lives as Christians. Let me show you how Paul says that happens.

## 1. All Christians Have the Spirit

First today, we have to begin with this important word: that All Christians have the Spirit.

I was raised in the Wesleyan tradition. And for Wesleyans, you might be a Christian, but not have the Spirit. Or at least you might not have the *fullness* of the Spirit, or what they called the "second blessing" of the Spirit. The idea I was raised with was that while you might be a Christian, there is this bigger, better experience of the Spirit out there which you need in order to really have Spiritual freedom and success. When I asked my pastor, "How can I have this second blessing?" the answer I received was, "there's nothing you can do. God just does it on his own, apart from anything you do."

I think Paul here is rebuffing that theology by saying, "You either have the Spirit of you do not. Either you are in Christ, or you are not. You don't have *some* of the Spirit now and some later. You have him or you don't. Period."

From there I started walking in some Baptist circles that saw things a bit differently. They basically said there were two kinds of Christians: spiritual Christians, and carnal Christians. And the carnal Christian was the person who made a profession of faith, but who kept living life the way they did before, with no real evident change. The carnal Christian was the guy who raised his hand at the revival, came forward to get saved, prayed the sinner's prayer, but then seemed the same as before. He continues to drink and smoke and chew and run around with girls who do. So this idea of the carnal Christian is sort of creating this gray-area spirituality where you sort of have the spirit but you just completely live life as if you don't have Him at all. And I was told, this is what many Christians are.

I think that what Paul seems to be saying here in verse 8 is really helpful. He says, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." But then in verse 9 he says, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." So you see, if you are a Christian, Paul says, you *do* have the Spirit. So there is no category

of Christian who does not have the Spirit. Now, there is a word for a carnal Christian, and the term is “non-Christian.” If you do not have the Spirit, then you do not belong to Christ. And if you do belong to Christ then you do have the Spirit.

So how *can* you belong to Christ? Through faith in him.

So I think Paul would want us to dispense with these categories of Carnal Christians, fleshly Christians, or Spiritual Christians. We are either Christians or we are not. And if we are Christians—if we are trusting in Christ—then we *do* have the Spirit. And that means that we aren’t waiting for some second blessing, or some dramatic work to be done in us now. He has given us Christ, and he has given us the Spirit. He has given us the means of grace. “His divine power has given us everything necessary for life and godliness” (2 Pe 1:3). God has withheld nothing from us. You see, we have the Spirit. Walk according to the Spirit.

So for the Christian, God has already given us everything that we need in order to walk in him and please him. Which takes us to our remaining two points.

## **2. All Christians Are Called to Walk in the Spirit**

Our second point today is really important, and it’s sort of the answer to the question verse 4 left us with. “All Christians Are Called to Walk in the spirit.”

This second point follows on the first, because here’s what I can imagine someone saying: “Wait: God has given us everything necessary for life and godliness. He has given us his Spirit. He has given us the means of grace. So why is there still a gap between the person I’m supposed to be in Christ and the person I am right now? If I have everything I need, why does my Christian life seem to be so anemic, so disappointing?”

Well the answer, according to verses 4 and 5 is, we have the flesh and the spirit, but we’re meant to “walk according to the Spirit.”

And then he seems to open up what this means if we keep going. In verse 5 Paul says, “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.”

So the answer, Paul says, is to walk in the Spirit by setting our mind on the things of the Spirit. So it's not about *getting* the Spirit. It's a matter of the Christian setting his mind on the very gift that God has already given to him. It's about walking with what we already have.

It's easy to neglect this incredible blessing and to live as if you don't have it.

On the night Titanic sank (April 14–15, 1912), the ship *did* have lifeboats, and many people *did* get into them. But one of the tragic features of the evacuation is that a number of boats were lowered with empty seats. The U.S. Senate Inquiry report explicitly notes that only a few boats were fully loaded and others were “but partially filled,” and it contrasts lifeboat capacity (about 1,176) with the number actually saved (706). Almost 470 lifeboat seats that went unused on the Titanic! A British inquiry testimony likewise acknowledges the boats “were not all filled.” The tragedy is that it wasn't that the means of rescue wasn't there. The tragedy was that, in confusion and fear and hesitation, people did not make full use of what was right there. The means of rescue was right there, and it just went unused. And to devastating effect!

It was tragic when it happened with the Titanic.

But how many Christians are sorrowful over something that they wish they could have when in reality, they have it, but are neglecting to walk in it? They have the Spirit, but never really walk in the Spirit or set their mind on the things of the Spirit?

If we have the Spirit, then what does it mean to “walk according to the Spirit” or set our mind on the things of the Spirit?

Well maybe the first thing we should acknowledge is that the mind is incredibly important to spiritual health and success. And I won't say much on this, but a lot of what passes for evangelical spirituality today is extremely focused on feeling and experience, but is almost determined to empty the mind, and relax thoughts. But if you try to empty your mind, to think less, and to have deeper feelings, you are doing the opposite of what God has for us. He intends for us to have an *engaged*, full, and active mind filled with truth, which then feeds the affections with those deep, lasting truths.

When John Owen talks about being spiritually minded he says that that God intends for us to devote our mind to godly things, to incline our feelings and affections toward those things, and to then delight in and savor those things. So in other words, we live and obey, but from a heart that doesn't just say, "This is what I'm supposed to do," but from a heart that says, "This is what God is like, and because I have saturated my heart and mind in what is true and good and lovely, I've been sitting regularly under the preaching of the word. God has been at work shaping my mind and my affections so that I really want to be a man or woman of God... and now nothing would make me happier than to obey him."

When temptation comes our way, we have that moment where we think, "You know, you could do things your way instead and take it for yourself by sinning," but with my mind set on the things of the Spirit I instead say, "I'm walking in the Spirit today, because I love God and because I love him and want to reflect him in my life. And nothing would bring me more pleasure, more satisfaction, more happiness than to *be like him.*"

That's a mind set on the things of the Spirit.

But look at how important the mind, leading to the heart, leading to the affections actually is. And so if you follow the modern approach of letting go, thinking less, and feeling more... what you're doing is, you are cutting your own spiritual legs out from under you. The very weapons God intends us to battle our sin with is exactly the thing that many today tell us to run from. "Think less, feel more." No, that's wrong.

Let me give you some practical examples here of setting your mind on the things of the Spirit:

In Psalm 73 Asaph admits that his mind was captured by what he could see: he kept focusing on the prosperity of the wicked and the pain of the righteous. And this fed his own doubts. His thoughts spiraled into bitterness until a single, decisive act of Spirit shaped attention broke the spell: he says "until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end" (Ps. 73:17). In worship, under the Word, eternity comes back into focus. The same circumstances remain, but his mind is relocated. Asaph can say, "Whom have I in heaven but you?... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25–26). That is what it looks

like to set the mind on things above. Setting our mind on these things doesn't mean denial of trouble, but reassessing those things in light of the presence and promises of God. We see these things as they really are.

Hebrews 12 gives the same kind of medicine. Look what the author of Hebrews says: "Consider him who endured... so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb. 12:3). The Spirit doesn't merely tell us to try *harder*; he directs our thinking to *Jesus* in his cross, shame, and triumph. And so as we keep placing Christ before the eyes of the soul, the heart's focus and joy changes. Setting our minds on Christ, we run with endurance, we lay aside sin, we suffer differently, because our minds are being trained to live by the unseen, everlasting realities of communion with God in Christ.

So what we see in Scripture is really Romans 8:5 in living color: the flesh clings to the visible, but the Spirit trains us to think with heaven in view when life feels unfair or frightening.

This is just the beginnings of what this means, but it gives us a place to start and a goal in our own lives to be aiming for: the mind set on the things of the spirit, leading to affections that love what God loves, followed by a desire to actually please God and reflect his will for us, and to resemble him in the way we live. Walk according to the Spirit.

### **3. All Christians Are Able to Please God**

Third and finally today, I have something that I believe will be really precious and helpful, especially if you are particularly discouraged by what seems like a lack of progress in your own spiritual life. "All Christians Are Able to Please God."

This might seem obvious to you, but to many it is not. God calls us to think this way, to love this way, and to live this way. But some of us may stop in our tracks if nothing else than from raw discouragement. What do I mean? What is so discouraging to us?

Well it's this: there is a belief among some Christians that any good deed that we do are really just like "filthy rags." That even if we did do something good, that it wouldn't really be pleasing to God.

Maybe you've even said that, too: "all my good deeds are just filthy rags."

At first glance, it does sound like a very humble thing to say, and it seems like it might keep us from becoming prideful. But I would suggest it creates another problem: deep discouragement. It is so discouraging to believe that even in Christ, even in the Spirit, we can't really do a good deed or ever really please God.

This is just not what the Bible teaches.

This phrase about our righteous deeds being "filthy rags" comes from a misunderstanding of Isaiah 64:6. In that passage Israel says, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." That's the ESV. The NIV and the King James say "filthy rags."

Think of the context here. It's Israel speaking as a shattered judged people; and this is a confession that they had been obsessed with external lawkeeping, but they didn't love God or his law. So everything that they had been doing was surface level and didn't come from a love of God.

God hates those sort of deeds. He hates empty worship. He hates sacrifices done without love or faith. And that's what Israel had been giving him. So Israel has been severely judged, Zion has been laid waste, the temple has been destroyed. And here is Israel sitting in the ruins reflecting on what went wrong: they never really loved God. They just wanted his benefits and they treated him like a genie. It is this people who are able to truthfully say, "all of our righteous deeds have been like filthy rags."

Here's the issue though: that isn't us. We are not Israel sitting in the ruins.

It is an incredible disservice to the gospel, though, to tell a Christian, "Hey. You are broken down Zion with judgment upon you. That's who you are. You have never pleased God, and you never will please God." No wonder so many Christians feel discouraged. They can't imagine ever pleasing God because they've been told they're like Israel under judgment!

The thing is, we are not destroyed Israel! Our judgment was placed on Christ, and we have the Spirit! That's the first problem with this idea that our righteous deeds are like filthy rags: it misunderstands the passage where that phrase even comes from.

But the other problem is, Paul tells us here in verses 8-9 that we actually can please God if we are “in the spirit.” He says, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Why? Because (v. 7) “the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God.” You cannot live for and please a God whom your mind and your whole person is set against and regards as an enemy. But Paul says, if you have the Spirit, that’s not you.

There was enmity. But there’s not now. Romans 5:10, “While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son.” We were enemies. But no longer.

And Paul says, this enmity to God is the reason why someone who lacks the Spirit cannot please God. But then you might be wondering: I’m a Christian. I believe in Jesus, but I feel like such a disappointment. Maybe this idea of the fleshly or carnal Christian is really true. Maybe I’m a Christian and I’m just carnal.

Paul shoots that down in verse 9: “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

So look at the tight argument here: how do you know you belong to Jesus? You believe in him, and don’t trust in your own self or your own works. And if that is you, Paul says, you belong to Jesus. And if you belong to Jesus, you *do* have the Spirit. If you are a Christian, you have the Spirit.

The point here is not to make you doubt that you’re a Christian. The point is to make you certain that you have the Spirit. To make you see who you have and what you have so that you’re not filled with fear or discouraged that you will never please God. Paul is saying that every believer is “Spiritual;” we’re adopted. We’re family now.

Some of you may have had a parent who felt impossible to please. It’s easy to project that onto God and think that he is the parent who is always moving the goal post, always wanting you to go further, never really satisfied or proud of you. But if you are in Christ by faith, then God is your Father, and he is an indulgent, loving, generous Father.

Maybe in your house deep down it felt like that: like your parents almost saw you as some kind of enemy, or at least as someone whom they would never really be happy with because you could always be better. Some people take those family experiences and project them onto God and think, "He's like that too. Impossible to please, always asking more." The problem with projecting that onto God is that we're not his enemies. We are his adopted children now. It's not just that we're *not at war*, but we're in the family. Colossians 1:21: "You who were once alienated and hostile in mind... he has now reconciled."

If you're a Christian I want you to see today what a rich position you are in... what an incredible heritage is yours.

You've had a positional change: you were enemies, and you're now family.

You've had a spiritual change. In Christ, you have the Spirit.

You've had a dispositional change. You were hostile to him in mind, but now you've been reconciled by his Son.

And what does that mean now? Well it means incredible hope and living without fear or insecurity. Look at what this all leads to in verse 10: "If Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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."

There's a lot here, but if I could, look with me at the bottom line: in Jesus Christ, you have the Spirit. In Jesus Christ, you have righteousness. In Jesus Christ, you have hope of pleasing God. In Jesus Christ, you are adopted as his precious child. In Jesus Christ, you have hope of the resurrection. And that means that nothing can harm or destroy your soul or your body.

He has given us everything we need for life and godliness. And so now, let's walk in these things. Let's walk in the Spirit. Let's set our mind on the things of the Spirit. Let's live to please God. Because now we can.

*Let's pray.*