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Differing Ways to View the Same Thing



RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8:12-13

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If you have ever traveled to a third-world country, you felt a sense of relief at the end of your return flight. It was not so much that the long flight finally ended, but that you were home in the USA. You show your dark-blue passport to the immigration agent. The passport some foreigners would literally die to possess. Then the agent says, “Welcome home.” You readily reply, “It’s good to be home.”

Life in most third-world countries can be vastly different from life in the United States. They do not have the conveniences of the lifestyle we often take for granted. Electricity, running water, and heat are often not available or only on certain days or during certain hours. Don’t even think about air conditioning, Burger King, or a Hilton Inn. In the United States we experience a standard of living unknown in a large portion of the world.

Living Where?

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (or better still the parable of the Waiting Father; Luke 15:11-32), we see the willful defiance of

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the youngest son. After some time away and realizing the futility of his foolish decision, the son decided to go home.¹ The passage tells that the father caught a glimpse of him some distance away. Rather than waiting for his wayward boy to make the long walk home, the father ran to meet him, smothering him with hugs and kisses. It is obvious that the father's first thought was, "He has returned to me."

Yes, it is a fact that for an extended time the son experienced a way of life in the "far country," poles apart from the one he had left. However, on his return, the father's major concern was not what the young man had done, but rather that he had chosen to come

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back. Amidst a flood of tears and an emotional outpouring of love for his son, the father's first words would have been, "Welcome home." If you are a parent, you can identify with him as you reflect on the times your own children have made foolish choices, maybe even left home and then returned.

Luke wrote that the son's return home was a matter of life and death. The father said, "This son of mine was dead and has come to life again" (Luke 15:24; cf. 32). Knowing a word's meaning and use in a particular context is critical. Death means *separation*. To understand its meaning in a passage the question must be asked, "Separation from what?" Death can be understood as eternal separation from God (a relationship issue), loss of physical life, or temporal separation from God (a fellowship issue). The intended use of life likewise has various options: eternal life, physical life, or abundant life. Obviously, the father was not speaking of physical life and death. The wording "has come to life again" indicates a prior life that preceded the son's travel to a far county, which Luke equated as being as good as dead. The point is that death in this passage signi-

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fies the loss of companionship or fellowship, the mutual sharing of life experiences by the son and the father. When the son was absent, common experiences were absent. Only after returning home could their intimacy be restored. To impose a singular-initial-salvation interpretation on this passage is to fail to understand a significant portion of the text.² An established relationship between father and son is understood. The variable is their fellowship—did it exist or not? When there are shared experiences with God, there is life, without them there is death, an absence of fellowship.

Consider the Source

In Romans 8, Paul presented a contrast between life and death five times (vv. 2, 6, 10, 11, 13). Like the parable in our discussion, there also are differing opinions as to whether the life-or-death theme in Romans 8 refers to a relationship with Jesus established at salvation or fellowship with Jesus as the believer lives the Christian life. The former option is a heaven-or-hell issue, whereas the latter concerns mutually shared experiences.

Romans 8:12-13, written to believers, concludes the unit of thought which began in verse 1.³

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

In this section of Romans 8, the apostle speaks of life or death, identifying the two life choices facing each believer. This theme parallels with that of the “home” and “far country” in the parable of the Waiting Father. In Romans 8, Paul explained that a believer can either *live according to the flesh* (“far country”) or *live according to the Spirit* (“home”) (vv. 4-5, 12-13). A believer has the choice to live in either.

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If a believer reverts to the flesh, should we conclude he is no longer a believer? Or does it indicate that he was not “truly” a believer in the first place, especially if he has a “far country” mindset? Can a believer actually walk in the flesh, perhaps routinely, and remain a believer? How you respond to each of those questions reflects your interpretation of the life-or-death theme in Romans 8.

Your answer is indicative of how you interpret the two influencing forces impacting the Christian—the flesh and the Spirit. If only the Spirit is able to effect the believer, your answers to the above questions will be far different than if both forces have equal influence. If the Spirit’s activity greatly surpasses that of the flesh to the extent that the flesh is *helpless* to the Spirit, then inevitably the believer’s walk will always be consistently according to the Spirit. The obvious conclusion would be that a believer would be unable to live habitually according to the flesh. In fact the Waiting Father parable could be construed to substantiate that position.

All Results Are Not Equal

Concluding the flesh-versus-Spirit argument of Romans 8:1-11, Paul wrote in verse 12, “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” Here he addressed believers, declaring that there is no requirement for them to live according to the flesh. This is not the first time Paul mentioned the believers’ new position in Christ as the result of His victory over sin (Rom. 6:1-14). Believers are no longer obligated to live under the influence of sinful flesh since Christ has set them free. The flesh no longer has a death grip on the life of the believer.

In verse 13 Paul ended this section with these words: “for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Here he presented the possibility that a believer can be lured back into the life from which he was freed, making him again a debtor to his

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old ways, and producing death. That's the bad news. But the good news is that if the believer lives by the Spirit, there is life.

These verses present the possibility of two ways of living in two opposite realms, yielding two results. Different outcomes imply that the believer clearly can choose to live in the flesh or in the Spirit. These two forces influence each life choice. The extent of their effect is the primary issue addressed throughout this book. In fact, how you understand this topic governs your answers to all the questions revolving around a believer with a "far country" mindset. If the flesh is powerless in regard to the Spirit, then the possibility of a choice is a moot point. In this case, the Spirit causes obedience,⁴ and the biblical commands not to walk by the flesh are meaningless. In fact, those commands would be unnecessary.

Choices have consequences! As we have seen, Romans 8 makes it crystal clear that choices bring either death or life, living in the "far country" or in the "father's house." In fact, *to live* according to the Spirit leads *to real living*. Abundant living (John 10:10b) is the result of walking under the influence of the Spirit. On the other hand, death is the consequence of walking under the influence of the flesh. Obviously physical life or death is not the issue. Again Romans 8 addresses life or death in the present.⁵ *Living abundantly* or *just living* is the outcome of each and every choice believers make. The option before everyone who claims to know Him is *enriched living*, being in fellowship with Christ, or *psuedo-living*, not enjoying His companionship.

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Romans 8:12-13 is addressing the subject of heaven or hell, then a believer's works determine his final destiny. To hold the view that the Spirit will continually produce good works in and through the

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believer means that the "brethren" who live according to the flesh are not truly saved and are bound for hell. On the other hand to walk according to the Spirit shows that a person is "truly saved." One might argue that minor lapses are allowed, but not habitual sin. If, however, continual good works are required, heaven becomes a matter of merited effort.

Salvation cannot be predicated on qualifying or quantifying good works. Salvation rests solely on Christ's work and on the promises of

God in His Word and on nothing else. The typical appeal to James 2 for support contains both interpretive and theological problems. It is not the purpose of this work to address that particular issue.⁶ In Romans 8, however, Paul was addressing the "brethren" who in fact were "believers." If this is a heaven-or-hell issue, there are only two possible explanations for death in the clause, "if you are living according to the flesh, you must die" (v. 13). Either believers so living can lose their salvation (the Arminian position) or they are not "true" believers (the Reformed position).⁷

In seeking to identify "to die" and "to live" as a heaven-or-hell issue, many have missed the import of the text. Addressing Romans 8:13, one commenter writes, "Paul...insists on the indispensability of holy living as the pre-condition for attaining that life [eternal]."⁸ However, fellowship with Jesus is the actual thrust of Romans 8:12-13. *Really living* and *really dying* is a present reality, not just a future

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event. In fact the better interpretation is to conclude that communion with Jesus, not union with Him, is addressed in Romans 8.

Point of View

For every interpretation of a passage there is an opposing view. The remainder of this book addresses critical passages that clarify not only the believer's participation and responsibility to obey but also God's provision in the Christian life. Special emphasis is placed on the extent of the Spirit's empowering presence. Does the Spirit *cause* obedience, or is His purpose to *influence* obedience? In light of the Spirit's ministry, we should strive to understand correctly how He impacts choices and behavior.

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Chapter 1, NOTES

1. This son had not only squandered his wealth but, in fact, his life. Only as he realized that his financial resources were depleted did he reevaluate his squandered life and return to his father.
2. The historical context of the Prodigal Son parable concerns the coming of the promised King and His offer of the promised kingdom to God's chosen people. The rebellious, covenant nation was being called back to God in preparation for the establishment of the kingdom as John the Baptist appeared announcing, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). The calling of the covenant nation to repent from its waywardness and turn again to God is the setting of the Baptist's and Christ's earthly ministry and the intent of Luke 15. As such, Luke 15 concerns needed national repentance and individual trust in their Messiah, which leads to fellowship with God.

Others say this parable refers exclusively to salvation. John MacArthur (*The Gospel According To Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 153) makes this misinterpretation. "Here is a perfect illustration of the nature of saving faith. Observe the young man's unqualified compliance, his absolute humility, and his unequivocal willingness to do whatever his father asked of him. The prodigal who began by demanding an early inheritance was now willing to serve his father as a bondservant. He had made a complete turnaround. His demeanor was one of unconditional surrender, a complete resignation of self and absolute submission to his father. That is the essence of saving faith."

MacArthur's heaven-or-hell interpretation misses the point of this parable which addressed the call for national Israel to return to their covenantal Father.

3. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 472.
4. Different authors teach that the Spirit causes the believer's obedience. If, as these authors suggest, the Spirit is actually causing and producing obedience, then the Spirit is the One making the choice for the believer to obey. Chapters 9–11 of this book address this teaching in detail. Consider what the following individuals from this perspective say:

John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Oregon; Multnomah, 1991), 147.

Piper writes, "God does not merely command obedience, *he gives it*" (italics added).

Then, for support (see also p. 147), Piper quotes, "I will put my Spirit

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within you and cause you to walk in my statutes' (Ezekiel 36:27; 11:20; see also Hebrews 13:20; Philippians 2:13)." The author's contention seems to correlate "God working in you" (Phil 2:13) and "cause you to walk" (Ezek. 36:27) with "he gives it."

Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 453-54.

Fee's contention throughout his book is that the Spirit is the energizer and producer of the believer's works, informing us that "the need of Torah...has come to end with the advent of the Spirit, God's way of fulfilling his promised new covenant. This is Torah being etched on the heart, so that God's people will obey him (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:27). Here also is the clear evidence that for Paul the elimination of Torah does not mean the end of righteousness. On the contrary, the Spirit *produces* the real thing, the righteousness of God himself, as his children reflect his likeness in their lives together and in the world" (italics added).

John F. MacArthur, *Galatians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 152.

MacArthur writes, "Holy living does not come from *our* performance for God but from *His* performance through us by His own Spirit" (italics his).

Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 915.

Fee explains, "Their [Paul and the early churches] experience of the outpoured Spirit caused them to turn...to the books God had inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16). There Paul discovered that he and the newly constituted people of God had been written about beforehand; there was the promise of the eschatological Spirit, who would reveal, reinstate prophecy, bring in a new covenant, and *cause* God's people to walk in his ways...The lavish outpouring of the Spirit on him and his churches was evidence for Paul that the End had begun" (italics added).

5. Also James 1:13-16 and Galatians 6:8 address these possible real-life experiences of a believer. Life and death are a present reality for the believer.
6. The following work addresses both the interpretive and theological issues concerning faith and works in James 2:

Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 58-72; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 187-94; Ken Neff, *Free To Choose* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2011), 81-91.

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7. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 494.

Representing the Reformed camp, Moo indicates that “death” is merely a hypothetical warning because “the truly regenerate believer . . . will be infallibly prevented from living a fleshly lifestyle by the Spirit within.”

8. *Ibid.*, 495.