

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Resurrection Ethics

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. (Romans 8:12-14, KJV 1900)

Paul's "Therefore" takes us directly back to his teaching on the resurrection in Verse 11. The Bible often teaches the doctrine of the resurrection, but it never teaches this doctrine as either speculative and imaginative, the sadly common teaching of our day, or as a detached "Pie in the sky bye and bye" dream. Speculation? Yes, indeed. For example, a few years back I heard a popular radio preacher who mentioned the Isaiah passage about the lion lying down with the lamb; he speculated that he would have his own pet lion in heaven. A fundamental premise of sound Biblical interpretation is that you build your beliefs on the literal passages of the Bible that teach the topic, and you use the symbolic passages as support texts. It seems at times that much of modern teaching on the doctrine of final things has reversed this principle, building its ideas on a speculative interpretation of the symbolic passages and effectively ignoring the literal passages altogether.

Why teach on the Second Coming and our literal bodily resurrection? In First Thessalonians, Paul urges the Thessalonians to comfort each other with this teaching, especially as they faced the death of loved ones. In the passage before us, Paul teaches that our present Christian conduct must build on our belief in the fact of our future resurrection and eternity with the Lord. Filling out the New Testament model with John's teaching, especially in First John, we must include our conduct toward other believers, not merely our personal moral conduct.

If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? (1Jo 4:20)

In our study passage, Paul's opening analogy compares our obligation to live out the moral character of the Lord Jesus Christ to a debt. A contextual reading of the lesson leads us to conclude that the resurrection of Jesus, fully ensuring our own resurrection in His image, obligates us to a specific lifestyle. I have a good friend whose lifelong studies and humor make him quite popular as a "CD-preacher," one whose sermons people seek out and obtain on CDs to listen to them. Over the years I have occasionally

heard people comment, "I average listening to ten sermons a week from Elder 'P,'" the man in question. Every time I hear comments such as this, I want to ask the person. You keep track of how many sermons you listen to in a week. How many sermons do you practice in the same week? Often the professional sermon-listeners sorely need to become sermon-practicers. Listening to a sound Biblical sermon is an excellent habit, but failure to learn from it and put it into practice reduces an otherwise model habit to near meaningless value. My counsel to these folks would also add another point. You can easily think of sermons heard on electronic media to a form of entertainment, a good form for sure, but the actual spiritual exhortation that you personally need the Lord most often sends to you through the church that you attend and through the pastor who knows your life and who preaches to you face to face. Paying one's financial debts requires more than words. It requires writing a check and giving it to your creditor. How we act toward our brothers and sisters reveals whether we respect them as our spiritual creditors or not. We would not at all approve of a person who claims to be a believer in God, but who works to avoid paying his debts. How faithful are we to pay our spiritual debts toward our brothers and sisters in Christ? If someone asked them about our spiritual "Credit rating," would they agree that we pay our debts? Often when I participate in the washing of the saints feet, I make the point. Jesus practiced this act and commanded us to follow His example. If we do so, we do a good thing, but He instituted the practice for a reason. It is not an end in itself. It was intended to teach us a lifestyle of submission and service to our brothers and sisters in the faith, of paying our spiritual debts. If we engage in the practice and then contradict the object lesson before our feet get dry, what is the purpose or value? And if we so contradict the ethical intent of this lesson, can we honestly claim that we pay our debt to the Lord or to His people?

As I ponder the New Testament's teaching on godly, Christ-centered, other-serving Christian conduct, I can find no stronger Biblical motive than the realization of resurrection reality, the point of our study passage. In 1 Corinthians 6:14, Paul uses the literal resurrection of our bodies to motivate the Corinthians to maintain sexual purity in

their lives. If God cared enough to purpose the resurrection of your body to praise His matchless grace for eternity, should you not care enough about that body to use it for His praise now, and to avoid using it in ways that dishonor Him?

...*not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.* Much of our human culture builds on the corrupt idea that we owe our primary debt to our carnal nature and its sinful appetite. "It is my life. I'll live it as I please." Or, "God wants me to be happy, and I can't be happy doing what the Bible teaches me to do, so God is okay with me being happy and not doing what Scripture teaches." Yes, as a pastor, I've heard these words. Paul clears the air on this twisted issue. You do not owe your flesh or its sinful appetites anything. The debt that you owe is not to that "Creditor." You owe your use of your body the conduct that sanctifies that body as an honorable temple of service to God and to His people. And do not neglect; Scripture teaches clearly on the subject of happiness, but it always associates godly and true, lasting happiness with obeying God's commandments in Scripture, not living contradictory to them.

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. Paul has not shifted his focus from how God commands us to live our life of discipleship over to how we get to heaven when we die. He is not writing to unbelievers, but to Christians, children of God who have been born again, children of the King. His sobering point reminds us that there are consequences to what we do. We can't do as we wish and avoid the consequences of our actions. If, despite believing in Jesus and the resurrection, you choose to ignore the moral and spiritual commandments of the Lord in Scripture and the gospel, you must face the frightening reality that a very real spiritual element in you shall die. You do not lose your new birth or your eternal inheritance. However, the fact that Paul associates this loss with death should gravely remind us that the consequences for such sinful conduct are grave indeed. When you face the stress of your career and the uncertainty of your financial future, do you prefer to face it with God's kind grace at your side or alone without His sheltering providence? When you finally go to your doctor with those nagging symptoms, and you sit in his office waiting to hear the results of the medical tests, are you comfortable sitting there alone, or would you prefer to have the Lord's sustaining grace with you to face the news? A believer in Christ should never devalue the importance of fellowship with the Lord through life's trials.

Scripture simplifies our life choices. In this key passage, Paul follows the consistent pattern of Scripture. We face only two options. We may choose to "live after the flesh," and we shall surely live through the "Living death" that Paul warns in this verse. Or we may choose to "through the Spirit mortify the deeds of the body," and we shall

experience the "Living life" that Paul teaches here. We could rightly say that Paul presents us with a matter of "Life or death." We choose the path of life after the flesh, and we realize the living death of broken fellowship with the Lord and the death that is associated with that broken fellowship. Or we choose the path of killing, "Mortifying," the deeds of the body, and the Lord promises that the blessings of a life in fellowship with Him shall be ours. The power that enables us to live the lifestyle of fellowship with the Lord is not ours based on our human intellect or even our human values. We live this lifestyle "through the Spirit." But Paul in no way suggests that the Spirit makes the decision for us or that He, auto-pilot style, does the doing for us. He is present to aid and to empower our godly choices, but He does not force or manipulate us apart from our conscious moral/spiritual choices. Paul didn't write that the Holy Spirit makes the choice to mortify the deeds of the body. He instructs—he commands—us to make two decisions and to act on both. He commands us to mortify the deeds of the body, and he commands us to live our life according to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit provides His presence, wisdom, and aid when we choose to mortify the deeds of the body and to live according to His commandments. We can't do either the negative or the positive apart from His aid, but He commands us to make those choices and to act on them, knowing that we need Him and His assisting and directing power to accomplish either task. You and I are the actors in this conduct, but we engage both activities, mortifying the deeds and associated appetites of the body and filling our lives with love for God and love for His people, "through the Spirit." (Back to 1 John 4:20) You and I face these two choices every moment of our life. And we, not the Holy Spirit, must make the choice, either to live after the flesh and face the consequences, or to mortify the deeds of the body. When we choose to mortify the deeds of the body, the Holy Spirit provides His aid, and we need it.

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. The Holy Spirit leads us in this conduct; He doesn't make the decisions for us. Nor does He move us as mindless robots in His hand. He leads us to choose the right way and to mortify the deeds of the body. Do we follow His leading, or do we choose to ignore Him and His leading? Scripture never leaves us free from consequences to choose our way. Scripture commands us to follow the Holy Spirit's leading. And when you do follow His leading in your life's choices, He assures you that you are His child. In this assurance that you are a child of God, no preacher holds control over your assurance. The Holy Spirit Himself personally leads and assures you. Ah, and should you choose to cultivate the deeds of the body, you die to that assurance. He will not assure you if you walk in the flesh. You do not lose your eternal life, but you truly die to His assurance that you are the Lords. (2 Peter 1:8-9)

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor