

Contrasts between the Christian and the non-Christian, part 2

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
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⁵For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.” Romans 8.5 - 8, New American Standard Version

Introduction

Last time we started to consider verses 4 – 8 of Romans chapter 8, which speak about the differences between those who are not true Christians, who are not born again, and those who are Christians, who are born again.

This is a vitally important subject. A mistake that many make is to think that when a person becomes a Christian, all that happens is that he moves from being a forgiven sinner to being a saved sinner, but that his life does not significantly change in any other way. But the reality is that the person who has true faith is fundamentally transformed. He a new creation, as the apostle puts it elsewhere. It is vitally important that we should know whether or not we are born again. Our eternal destiny hangs upon this. Those who are not born again will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. It is also important that those who are born again should appreciate the change that has come upon them, and live according to the new nature that they have in Christ.

We noted four differences between the person who is not born again and the person who is:

1. The person who is not born again consistently lives according to the flesh, but the person who is born again consistently lives according to the Spirit. At the end of verse 4 the apostle says that those who are true believers “do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit”.
2. The second thing we saw is that the person who is not born again is in his very nature “according to the flesh”, whereas the person who is born again is in his nature “according to the Spirit”. The apostle says in verse 5, “For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.”
3. Thirdly, we saw that the person who is not born again sets his mind on the things of the flesh, whereas the person who is born again sets his mind on the things of the Spirit. The apostle says in verse 5, “For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.”
4. Fourthly, the person who is not born again experiences spiritual death, whereas the person who is born again experiences life and peace. The apostle says in verse 6, “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace”.

Today, I want us to note four further differences between the person who is not born again and the person who is:

1. The person who is not born again is hostile to God, whereas the person who is born again loves God

The apostle says in verse 7, “because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God.”

The apostle says that the mind of the person who is not born again, that is set on the flesh, is hostile to God. This is the fundamental position of the person who is not born again. He does not love God. He has a deep seated attitude of enmity towards God.

The apostle Paul writes to believers in his letter to the Colossians chapter 1 verse 21, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour." He says that before they became believers they were "alienated from God" and were "enemies" in their minds. He was not just singling out the believers in Colossae, as if they had been particularly evil before their conversion. What he said is true for every person who has not been born again. The attitude of the person who is not born again is fundamentally one of hostility towards God.

This hostility towards God comes out in different forms. For some it leads them towards a violent hatred towards Christians, so that they wish to murder believers.

For others it comes out in the form of completely ignoring God, and those who believe in him. They might say that they are atheists who do not believe in God, or they might say that they are agnostics who do not know if there is a God, or they might say that they are Christians, but they live their lives, to all intents and purposes, as if there were no God. Such "believers" are, practically speaking, atheists, even though some do claim to have some sort of belief in God. Why? Because they are hostile to God. They do not want to obey God. They do not want to know him.

Others might be, apparently, very religious, and claim to love God a great deal, and frequently attend a church, or mosque, or temple, and fast and pray, and go on pilgrimages and give money to the poor, but the so-called "god" that they claim to love is not the God of the Bible. He is another god. How do I know? Because if you say to such people that they are sinners, and that they cannot get to God through their works, and that it is only through Jesus, the eternal Son of God, that they can be saved, and offer them to receive from Christ salvation, they will universally resist the offer of salvation, saying that they will get to heaven through their own works. The only people who will not do so are those in whom the Holy Spirit is working. Why do religious people resist the offer of salvation in Christ, and often bitterly oppose Biblical Christianity? Because they hate the God of the Bible. They "loved darkness rather than the light."

For some this hostility towards God can take a very subtle form. They can learn the language of evangelical, Bible-believing Christianity. They can intellectually understand the doctrines of the Bible; they talk about receiving Jesus as Saviour; they claim to be Christians, but all the while having a heart that is not renewed, and still remaining hostile towards

God. Jesus warned about this in the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew chapter 7, verses 15 – 20:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them.

These people look on the outside as though they are sheep, true Christians, but inside they are ravenous wolves. They are not born again. They hate God, and hate his people. How can you tell? By their fruit. There is no fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Instead there are only the works of darkness.

But the person who is truly born again has been fundamentally changed. His heart has been renewed. He now loves God. The apostle does not spell out the contrast in this verse. He does not need to. From all the other things he has said in the verses before, and from what he is going to go on to say, it is clear that the true believer, who is born again, is the exact opposite of the unbeliever, who is not born again.

For the person who is born again, the hostility towards God has been replaced with love towards God. If you want a definition of a born-again Christian, here is one: A truly born again Christian is someone who loves God. The hatred towards God, that he used to have as an unbeliever, has been replaced by love. He used to regard God with hostility, as a distant being who gave him unpleasant laws that he had to obey. He now regards God as his loving heavenly Father, who has set his love upon him from eternity, who gave up his Son to death on the cross for his sins, and who has called him to share in his everlasting glory. The true believer says to himself, "How can I feel hostility to one who has loved me so much?" The true believer also has love for Jesus. He sees Jesus as his great friend, who laid down his life so that he could have eternal life. How can someone who truly believes that he is a sinner, and who truly believes that Jesus has died for his sin, have anything other than love for Jesus?

Peter writes in his first letter, chapter 1 and verses 8 and 9, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious

joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” John writes in his first letter, chapter 4 and verse 19, “We love because he first loved us.” The love that he speaks about, from the context of that verse, is both love for God and love for our fellow man.

Any Christian who has any sensitivity of conscience will be aware that his love for the Father, and his love for Christ, is pitifully weak. But if asked if he loves Jesus he will say, like Peter, who had failed his Lord terribly, “Lord you know all things. You know that I love you.” The Lord knows all things. He knows all the ways in which we let him down. But he also knows that for those of us who are truly born again, there has been placed in the core of our being, by the Holy Spirit, a genuine love for God.

So here is the first contrast that we are thinking about today. The person who is not born again is hostile to God, whereas the person who is born again loves God.

2. The person who is not born again does not submit to God’s law, whereas the person who is born again does submit to God’s law.

The apostle says in the second half of verse 7, “for it [the mind of the unbeliever] does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so.”

The mind of the unbeliever is in an attitude of fundamental rebellion against the law of God. He rejects the rule of God over him. The attitude of the person who is not born again is fundamentally the attitude of Pharaoh, who said, as recorded in Exodus chapter 5 and verse 2, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey him?” He does not acknowledge God’s authority over him. He is determined to do his own thing.

This reveals itself in a variety of ways. For some, it exhibits itself in outright and blatant rejection of God’s law. This person says that he will not obey God’s law, and he is proud to do so. He may blatantly take God’s name in vain, get drunk, commit sexual immorality, lie and cheat, be rude and violent. Others make a show of obeying God’s law. They live lives that are outwardly “good” and respectable. They do not commit adultery. They live work hard. They are honest in their dealings. They love their children. But even so, in a more subtle way, there is rebellion against God’s law in their hearts. They secretly love idols, whether these idols be their own status, or their career, or their family, or their house. They entertain in their hearts greed, lust, pride,

envy and other subtle sins. They are like the Pharisees, to whom Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew 23, verses 25 and 27,

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence....Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.

Not only is the person who is not born again not submissive to God's law; the apostle says that he is incapable of such submission. The heart of the person who is not born again is set against God. He is incapable of submitting to God's law.

But for the person who is truly born again something has happened. His attitude of rebellion against God has been fundamentally altered. His attitude is one of submission to God, and submission to God's law. He might fail, and from time to time live in a way which is inconsistent with that position, but his fundamental attitude is of submission to the law of God.

This is one way that you can tell the difference between someone who has been born again and someone who has not. They might both sin in the same way. But the person who is born again, when confronted with his sin, and with what the Bible says about that sin, will say, "You are right. I have sinned. I will go to God and ask for forgiveness." If he is badly backslidden this acknowledgement may take some time, but eventually he will come to that point where he has to make that acknowledgement. But the person who is not truly born again will often protest his innocence, and may well go on the counter-offensive, and make a counter accusation against the one who challenges him.

Not only is the position of the believer one of submission to the law of God, but he is able, in a way which is impossible for the unbeliever, to obey God's law properly, from the heart. The essence of the law of God is that we love God and that we love our fellow human being. It is only the true Christian, who has a renewed heart, who can do this.

So here is the second contrast that we are dealing with today. The person who is not born again does not submit to God's law, whereas the one who is born again does submit to God's law.

3. The person who is not born again is “in the flesh”, whereas the person who is born again is “in the Spirit”

The apostle says in verse 8, “those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” The person who is not born again is “in the flesh”. He is in the realm of the flesh. He is completely under the control of the flesh. The apostle also used this expression in Romans 7 verse 5, which in the New American Standard Version reads, “For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.” The unbeliever is in the realm of the flesh, and under its control.

But the Christian, by contrast, is “in the Spirit”. The apostle goes on to say in verse 9, “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.” We have seen previously in this series in Romans that the apostle says repeatedly that the true believer is “in Christ”. He is joined to Christ. He has become part of Christ. Here in this verse we see something else. The true believer is also “in the Spirit”. He is joined to the Holy Spirit. He is in the realm of the Spirit. He is under the control of the Spirit.

Again, I stress, this does not mean that the believer does not sin any more. Sadly, he does, and will continue to do so until his dying day. But, fundamentally, the believer is under the control of the Holy Spirit, because when he does sin, the Holy Spirit works in him to bring him to repentance.

So the third difference is that the person who is not born again is “in the flesh” whereas the person who is born again is “in the Spirit”.

4. The unbeliever cannot please God, whereas the person who is born again can please God, verse 8

The apostle says in verse 8, “those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

The person who is not born again, who is in the flesh, is incapable of pleasing God. Whatever he does is tainted with sin. The prophet Isaiah says that “all our good deeds are as filthy rags”. There is nothing that he can do which will be truly acceptable to God and bring pleasure to him.

By contrast, the true believer can and does please God. Once more the apostle does not spell this out, but it is clear from the context and from other Scriptures. The imperfections in the believer's obedience to God are blotted out by the blood of Christ, so his obedience to God becomes acceptable. Also, he has the motivation of genuine love of God, because his heart has been renewed. So there is a quality of his obedience which is far superior to the apparent obedience of the most "moral" and "upright" person who is not born again. Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew chapter 5 and verse 20, "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were apparently the most zealous keepers of the law of God. How can a person's righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Only by being born again.

When we are born again, and live as we should as Christians, we can live lives that are pleasing to God. Paul says in chapter 12 of this letter, verse 1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship." When those of us who are born again give ourselves fully to God, and offer our lives to him as living sacrifices, this is something that is pleasing to God.

Conclusion

We have seen from this passage four further contrasts between the person who is not born again and the person who is.

Firstly, the person who is not born again is hostile to God, whereas the person who is born again loves God.

Secondly, the person who is not born again does not submit to God's law, whereas the person who is born again does submit to God's law.

Thirdly, the person who is not born again is "in the flesh" whereas the person who is born again is "in the Spirit".

And fourthly, the person who is not born again is unable to please God, whereas the person who is born again is able to please God.

Now I must ask each of you to ask yourself this question. "Am I born again? Do I love God, or do I hate him? Am I submissive to God's law or am I a rebel against it? Am I in the Spirit, or am I in the flesh? Is my life one which is pleasing to God, or is it offensive to him?"

If the answer to those questions is, “Yes, I really do believe I am born again”, then rejoice! Give all the credit for this to God. If you are born again, then you truly are God’s child. You are not condemned. Nothing can separate you from God’s love. Be strong in God’s grace, and serve him gladly in your life.

What if the answer to those questions is, “No, I am not born again.” Or, “I fear that I may not be born again.” What should you do? Come to Christ. Confess your sin to him. Put your trust in him to be your Saviour. Ask him to do the miracle of the rebirth in your life.

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