



Good News for Mental Health

Romans 8:5-11 | April 5, 2020

We've all heard the line, "attitude is everything." And even if we're not a fan of motivational clichés, we have to admit this one contains a lot of truth. Even the Bible says it. In Philippians 4:11-13, Paul shares his secret to contentment in every circumstance: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." That's the attitude; that's the mindset—but can we all have it? Or is it just for naturally optimistic people?

Our passage today boldly declares that every Christian can have a foundation of true mental health grounded in the gospel because "the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace." But we have to set our minds there. You see, there are two kinds of people: those with their minds set on flesh, and those with their minds set on the Spirit. What's the difference?

The flesh is "the life of the soul in itself." It's the sum total of who we are apart from Christ. Not just our sins, but our strengths: our robust bodies, our nimble minds, our problem-solving acumen. We humans can be quite formidable; just look at all we've discovered, built, and achieved. But we're also quite fallen; just look at all the evil and corruption we've unleashed. Yet many depend solely on themselves for life, which makes them hostile, unsubmissive, and unable to God. Thus "the mind set on the flesh is death" (8:6).

But the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. That's because truly *spiritual* people have union with Christ. They experience "the life of God in the soul of man," to borrow a book title from the great Henry Scougal. This mindset gives weight to God and the gospel; it feeds on his Word; it draws hope from God's promises; it senses the abiding Christ within, who promises to never leave us nor forsake us. That's *life and peace*. That's ballast for the soul in the storms of life. That's the secret of contentment in every circumstance.

How do we cultivate this mindset? Well, we set our minds! We tell our brains what to think; we remind our souls of Ultimate Truth (Christ, his kingdom, our position in him now, our glorious future later). When we're down, we say with the psalmist, "Why so downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God." And then we think about all the reasons we have for hope in Christ. In other words, we preach the gospel to ourselves (Col. 3:1-4); we wash our minds with the word (Eph. 5:26); we let God's word abide in us (John 15:7; Col. 3:16).

It's all about training our neural pathways. It's about taking advantage of the wonders of "neuroplasticity," the brain's ability to change. We have old fleshy patterns of thought that will grow weak through disuse, while fresh new ways of thinking will become the "new normal" as we set our minds on the things of the Spirit.

By the way, one of those "things" is our future resurrection. Paul makes much of this in 8:10-11. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead in the past, and who lives in us presently, will also raise us from the dead later. In other words, eternal life starts now and continues forever. The Spirit is life and peace now, present tense, because we've been brought into a righteous relationship with God through Christ. But he will be resurrection life and perfect shalom to us in the future, because the same thing that happened to Jesus on Easter Sunday will happen to us!

That's enough to sustain us through any crisis. "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come. 'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

Discussion Guide

1. On a scale of 1—10, from “dying inside” to “thriving,” how are you doing mentally and emotionally? With vulnerability and humility, share your numbers.
2. Read Romans 8:5-11 from 2 or 3 different translations.
3. What, to you, is the most thrilling, inspiring thought in this text?
4. Henry Scougal, in *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, says that flesh and Spirit “are like the scales of a balance; as the one falleth, the other doth rise.”
 - In our moments of weakness, what makes the things of the flesh weighty and substantive to us?
 - What can we do to make the things of the Spirit weighty to us? What works for you?
5. In the sermon, a principle was mentioned for dealing with wayward thoughts and emotions: “Name it and tame it.”
 - How does that work? How would you explain it to someone who hadn’t heard of it?
 - Have you ever tried it? Does it work for you? Explain.
6. In Romans 8:10-11, Paul helps us to revel in our future resurrection. Do you ever do that? What does the promise of resurrection mean to you? How much does it encourage you?
7. Process the closing quote from Jonathan Edwards. How does this apply to you? How can you make use of what Edwards says?

“As the covetous man desires earthly riches, so the regenerated person desires spiritual riches. He esteems grace in his soul as the best of riches. He looks upon wisdom as better than gold. He is ambitious for the honor of God, and to be his child and an heir of his glory.

“We may be as covetous as we please (if I may so speak) after spiritual riches, and as eager as we please to heap up treasure in heaven, and as ambitious as we please for eternal honor and glory, and as voluptuous as we please with respect to spiritual pleasure....

“Neither ought we to rest in any past or present degree of gracious appetite or enjoyment, but endeavor by all possible ways to influence our desires to obtain more!”