

# Understanding Mindset

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## ***Romans 8:6***

*For the mind set on the flesh is death,  
but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.*

### **Mindset & Grandma**

Remember your grandma who was so “set in her ways” that she refused to deviate from her routines? Our mind can act like grandma and get “set in its ways.” That’s what mindset means – not the occasional thought, but concentrated, ongoing focus. Mindset refers to whatever fills our awareness, that person or event or object or feeling on which we set our minds. Understanding mindset is crucial, because our mindset shapes the entire tone of our lives.

We choose what we pay attention to. I can look at the person I’m having lunch with or take in the hockey game on the big screen behind their head. You can listen to what your friend is saying or think about what you’re going to take out of the freezer for dinner. And each of us can attend to either the flesh or the Spirit. We know about wavering between hockey and our lunch companion; we understand the conflict between friend and freezer, but the switch between “fleshly inclinations” and “Spirit” is less clear.

### **Focus on the Flesh**

Most Christians would have a hard time explaining what “flesh” means. They’re sure it’s something bad (maybe the same as sin?), and they know we should stay away from it, but they can’t identify exactly what it is or how it works.

The New Testament often uses the word flesh to refer to that part of us that wants to function on our own apart from God. Think of “flesh” as a resource on which we rely. When we focus on our flesh we’re looking to our own innate strengths and abilities to cope with life and to ensure that our needs are met. We’re being capable. We’re being strong. We exhaust ourselves.

Have you ever considered that relying on your own strength is a fault? Even a sin? We think of sin as something more blatant, like lying or cheating or petty theft. Identifying self-reliance as sin catches us by surprise. It shouldn’t. We’re supposed to be relying on God’s abilities rather than our own.

God says that such independence from Him leads to death, that the mind set on the flesh brings death. Not necessarily physical death, but experiences that suck the life out of us: frustration, weariness, failure, stress, a sense of futility, even depression. Part of that death is the natural consequence of sin (Romans 6:23), and part is simply because we aren’t designed to carry the burden of coping on our own.

Some of you may think that a good motive excuses a fleshly focus. You understand that you’re not supposed to indulge your flesh, but think it’s just fine to try to improve your flesh, or at least to keep it under control. But if you read Romans 8:6 with care, you’ll notice that the passage

includes no qualifiers. None. Setting our mind on the flesh brings death every time, no matter the quality of our motives. We have no ability to either improve or control our flesh.

The alternative to relying on our own abilities is to rest from our efforts and rely on God's abilities. Relying on Him (setting our mind on the Spirit) means looking to Him to do through us what we can't pull off by ourselves.

### **Focus on the Spirit**

"Spirit" refers to the Holy Spirit, the One who will provide for us. When we set our mind on the Spirit, we look to Him to meet our needs. We won't take that risk unless we trust His eagerness and ability to do so.

We rely on what we think is going to get us through. Better said, we rely on whom we think is going to get us through. Think of the Spirit as a resource intended to replace our dependence on our selves. Can we trust Him? We'll have to decide. Our decision will result either in death or in life and peace.

### **Choosing Death or Choosing Life**

Paul ties two consequences to our mindset, either death or its alternate, life and peace. When Paul refers here to life and death, he isn't talking about the hereafter; he means now. Joy or the blahs, hope or despair, each is shaped by our response to our circumstances and our response to our internal chemistry.

We tend to treat circumstances as if they alone were responsible for our angst or doldrums. At times we blame our physiology. (And it is smart not to cross a woman with PMS.) But we also make a serious error: we ignore the impact of our mindset on how circumstances or physical conditions affect us.

A mind set on the flesh and a mind set on the Spirit yield two very different experiences. I'm not saying that other things don't impinge on us – physiological factors from low blood sugar to neurotransmitter disorders clearly affect us. Pain, whether from a lost job or a slipped disk, impacts us too. Sometimes seriously. But circumstances and physiology are not the whole picture.

We have considerable choice in how this life affects us. Two people facing similar circumstances will have one experience if they go it on their own and quite a different experience if they depend on the Lord. We get so distracted by what comes our way that we forget to notice whether we're setting our minds on ourselves or on the Spirit. And when we ignore our mindset we miss the opportunity to switch from death to life and peace. We miss the opportunity to choose.

Choice. Such a beautiful thing. God has turned us from passive victims into active participants. We choose a focus, and that focus impacts our experience. God has taken us out from under the thumb of our circumstances and allowed us to rely on the power of His Spirit in us.

## **And Yet We Resist**

Before we'll rely on the Spirit, we have to make two tough mental shifts. We must face our own inadequacy, and we must trust that the Spirit will come through for us. The first feels humiliating; the second scares us.

We feel humiliated because we (along with most people) assume that personal strength is a virtue. We shame those who look weak as if they're somehow worth less; we feel personal shame when we ourselves need help. But what if God didn't design us to go it alone? Fish can't fly, and it doesn't give them a complex. You and I don't have the strength to deal with a fallen world – or the fallen spirits behind it – yet we're ashamed of the very inadequacy that God has built into us. We need to get over our complex. We're designed to rely on the God who's bigger than our pressures.

When the Lord says we're not adequate in ourselves to cope with life, He means it. Read 2 Corinthians 3:4-6. In those verses He tells us that our ability to cope comes from Him. When we resist His advice and rely on ourselves, we're balking at how we're designed. Resisting God doesn't work; sin never does. Assuming we're adequate brings deadly results into our lives.

When our kids were little I used to tell them that they were “this big” (holding my hand at the top of their head), Satan was “This Big” (holding my hand up higher), but God was “THIS BIG” (holding my hand way up in the air). We're not stronger than the world's pressures and challenges, but God is. That was my point. Admitting inadequacy is not shameful but smart.

Facing our inadequacy can carry a huge sense of risk. Some of us grew up having to care for the adults around us and rarely experienced someone else caring for us. Adults depended on us; we didn't get to depend on them. They may have trusted us, but we couldn't trust them. Why should we now trust God?

The short answer (one for which I'm very grateful) is that God is different from our parents. He doesn't expect us to care for Him; He promises to care for us. He involves Himself with our sorrows, our fears, and our joys. He also involves Himself with our growth. We don't make ourselves better people – God takes care of that. As we focus on Him He makes us like Himself. (Look at Galatians 3:3 and 1 John 3:4.)

## **Whom Do You Trust?**

Our focus reveals what we trust – our own abilities or God's – and, more deeply, whom we trust. Who fills your awareness, yourself or the Lord? When we trust our own abilities more than we trust God's we focus on the flesh and we die inside. But, and please listen carefully, when we trust the Spirit we focus on Him, and then death turns to life and peace. This is not rocket science; Paul gives only two choices: trusting ourselves or trusting the Spirit. What is your choice?