

To find out what good manners are all about, we need look no further than a woman who's one of the world's leading authorities in the field: a woman calls herself "Miss Manners." Her real name is Judith Martin. She's a correspondent for *The Washington Post*. Her syndicated column, "Ask Miss Manners," appears in newspapers all over the country.

Miss Manners is wise and funny, and nearly always right. Like the time somebody in the midst of a messy divorce wrote to her and asked, "Dear Miss Manners: Does joint custody mean I always have to be polite to someone I can't stand?"

Her reply: "Gentle Reader" (she always calls her correspondents "Gentle Readers"): "Yes, But think of the benefits. You will set an unparalleled example of civilized behavior to your children and impress your admirers as one to be trusted even under adversity." A wise woman, Miss Manners.

She was even wiser when someone wrote to her and asked, "Dear Miss Manners: What is the proper way to eat potatoes chips?" "Gentle Reader: With a knife and fork. A fruit knife and an oyster fork, to be specific. Good heavens, what is the world coming to? Miss Manners does not mind explaining the finer points of gracious living, but she feels that anyone without the sense to pick up a potato chip and stuff it in their face should probably not be running around loose on the streets."

One of the wisest things Miss Manners ever wrote was a little observation on the nature of etiquette itself. Etiquette, she observed, is little more than applied kindness. Nearly all the rules of etiquette –even questions like which fork to jab into your salad, and how to introduce a newcomer to a roomful of strangers, are designed for one purpose: to show consideration toward others, to make them feel comfortable.

Although he didn't write a syndicated advice column like "Miss Manners," whenever we read Paul's letters in the New Testament it is fairly apparent that often times he is providing his readers with plenty of advice. He instructs them on matters involving spiritual gifts, issues concerning sexual immorality, problems regarding Gentiles and circumcision, and throughout his recommendations he keeps his audience informed about what it means to have faith in Jesus Christ. In our Second Lesson he provides us with some of his advice, as he attempts to answer two questions! What does it mean to live according to the flesh? Or more importantly, what does it mean to live according to the Spirit? These are two questions, out of a whole host of questions that I believe we as Christians struggle to find answers to, as we seek to live out our lives for God on a daily basis. Now, we may not always phrase our questions in those exact words. They may be more along the lines of what does it mean to sin, to how can we live our lives in a more spiritual way devoted to God?

Whenever people I don't know find out that I am a Lutheran pastor I have been thoroughly amazed by different reactions that I have encountered. Two of the most common reactions seem to be either, one in which they declare to me that they don't really have much faith in God, and therefore don't feel a need to go to church often, or ever. The other reaction is one in which they do believe in God, and therefore confess to me that they need to be better about going to church more, reading their bibles more, and that they need to try harder at devoting their lives to God.

At the beginning of Romans 8, just a few verses before today's second lesson, Paul writes, "there is **therefore** now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," almost as if he is drawing a conclusion from something he had said earlier in his letter to the Romans. Previously he had written about Christians being set free from the condemnation produced by Adam, because they have been

joined to Jesus Christ. In Adam we were condemned. In Christ, there is no condemnation. Keep in mind that this does not mean, that we do not make mistakes or experience failures, or even that we never sin.” As Christians we do fail, we do make mistakes, and we do sin. Throughout the Bible we come across believers that are far from perfect. Abraham lied about his wife; David committed adultery; Peter tried to kill a man with his sword. To be sure, they suffered consequences because of their sins, but they did not suffer condemnation.

Although God’s law may try to condemn us, or at the very least reveal our sins to us, as believers we have a new relationship to the Law through Christ, and therefore we cannot be condemned. We have been made free from the law of sin and death through Christ’s death on the cross. “We are no longer debtors to the law that condemns us rather we are debtors to Christ, not to live according to the flesh, but to live by the Spirit! Why? Because Christ has suffered and died for us. God sent his Son to save us, to do what the Law could not do. Jesus did not come “in sinful flesh,” for that would have made him a sinner. He came as man without sin, in the likeness of sinful flesh, and took our sins with him when he was crucified on the cross.

Paul claims in his letter today that we are not to live according to the flesh, for if we live according to the flesh what will happen? We will die! But...if we put to death the deeds of the body, and live by the Spirit, we will live. In other words, we are called to righteous living, not under the law, but through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to walk in obedience to God’s will! You may recall last week that we learned about the early Christians being given the power of God’s Spirit on Pentecost and that each of us has been given that same gift when we were baptized. In fact the gift of the Spirit that God has given us helps us to see God as Abba, or as Father, and helps us to

understand that we are children of God. As Paul explains, we are joint heirs with Christ.

This leads us now to the two central issues or questions that come to mind after reading Paul's words today. What does it mean for us to live our lives according to the flesh? What does it mean for us to live our lives according to the Spirit?

To have our minds set on the flesh is to have our minds set on what our sinful nature desires. When doing this we generally have no regard for God. Carnal pleasure, worldly profit and honor, these are just a few things of the flesh that people might focus on. It can be rather easy to get so caught up in the desires of the flesh that we begin to focus more on what we want. We may lose sight of what it is that God desires of us or for us.

There is a part of me, even now, that looks back to when I graduated from Seminary and had to decide where in the US I wanted to serve as a Pastor. Of course, I wanted to be near my friends and family so badly that at times I felt like I was putting them first, rather than stopping to think about what it was that God wanted. In the world in which we live, this can be an extremely easy thing to do. We need only look at some of the idols within our own lives to discover that it can be rather easy to live our lives according to the flesh. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther declares, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.

According to Paul those who have their minds set on the Spirit, desire what God's Spirit desires. The favor of God, the welfare of the soul, the concerns of eternity, these are a few examples of the things of the Spirit that people might set their minds toward. As I was thinking about what this all means I began to wonder if I could mention a specific illustration that demonstrates what living a life according to the Spirit really means.

Let me share with you a story my dad once told me, about a man named Tom. He appeared to have it all together! He was a sales executive in his thirties, worked with AT&T, traveled internationally, and could telecommute from home whenever he wanted. He had a beautiful wife and two great boys, ages 7 and 9. He was physically fit and coached his son's soccer team. He and his wife joined a Lutheran church in the Boise area where there was a dynamic young pastor. There they met a number of other young couples who they became good friends with, attended a couple's Bible Study, were active in the congregation and excitedly invited other friends to worship.

Then Tom's world was turned upside down. He was hiking with his boys at a Christian camp near Boise. He felt excruciating pain in his back and legs and shoulders, so much so that he couldn't walk any farther and sent his oldest son for help. By the time rescue workers arrived he was paralyzed and unable to move. Eventually he was air lifted to Phoenix where some of the top neurosurgeons in the country worked on him. An aneurism had erupted in his back and they discovered a tumor on the spinal column that had to be removed. The outlook for his survival was good, but the future still looked bleak. Doctors said with therapy he might regain the use of his upper body, arms and hands. But it was likely he might never walk again.

Tom's wife, Tammy, had been one of my dad's confirmation students years and years ago when we lived in Oregon. Apparently, he reconnected with them at St. Joseph's hospital and was able to visit with her and her husband, talking with them about how devastating this trauma was in their lives. And yet, what struck my dad after he visited with them was how strong their faith was in spite of the tragedy that had taken place. They found comfort in knowing they were surrounded by the love and prayers of their church friends and family. And each day as Tom got stronger and began his therapy, they began to celebrate little

victories. First, he was able to get full use of his left arm and hand. Then he was able to lift his right arm and begin to move ever so slightly the fingers on his right hand. Each day gave them new hope.

Tom told my dad one day through his tears that he didn't blame God for this. And he wasn't about to give up or feel sorry for himself. Tom said he believed that with God's help he would continue to improve, and that somehow God would use this tragedy for good. And in spite of his handicap, or perhaps because of it, Tom thought he would be able to witness more powerfully about the love and goodness of God. My father reminded him of the verse in Romans: "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." And Tom said he believed that with all his heart, demonstrating that he was a man whose faith led him to live by the Spirit.

Perhaps it would do all of us some good to say at times, 'God, I don't know why you want me to face these challenges or carry this burden. But, if you want me to carry it, I will.' And believe in the truth of St. Paul's words: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

So what difference does it make for us today whether a person is mindful of the flesh or of the Spirit? It is through living in the Spirit, that we are able to work toward putting God first and foremost in our lives. Realistically we may not be 100% successful at doing this, because even when we try to do this we are far from perfect.

So why should we bother to try to live our lives according to the Spirit? As Paul mentions it is through the Spirit that we are able to know and belong to Christ. As Christians when we are living "in the Spirit" our understanding of a world where sin and death reign, is transformed to a world where grace and righteousness reign. And Thanks to be God for that, Amen!