



LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 8:1-17

17th Message

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We come with great anticipation to the eight chapter of the Book of Romans this morning. In chapter 7 of Paul's letter we learned of both the beauty and the weakness of the law. There is nothing wrong with God's law. It is good and perfect. The problem lies with us. Paul's passionate conclusion is the cry of every Christian who has ever tried to please God by relying on his own efforts:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:21-24, NASB).

Every believer can identify with that admission. We want to do good, but we end up doing the very thing we do not want to do. We want to please God, but the power to do so is out of our grasp. But we are not left there. Romans 8 presents another experience that is also true of every Christian.

Unlike chapter 7, which is preoccupied with the law, chapter 8 is preoccupied with the Spirit. In chapter 7 the law and its synonyms are mentioned some 31 times, but the Holy Spirit only once. In the first 27 verses of chapter 8, however, the Holy Spirit is mentioned 19 times by name. In these two chapters there is a contrast drawn between the weakness of the law and the power of the Spirit. John Stott put it well: "The Christian life, essentially, is life in the Spirit, that is to say, it is a life that is animated, sustained, directed and enriched by the Holy Spirit."¹

The ministry of the Holy Spirit and his work in the life of the believer is the focus of the opening 17 verses of chapter 8. The Spirit has come to liberate, indwell, sanctify, lead, assure, and finally, resurrect us. The major point that Paul argues in this chapter revolves around the assurance and security of God's children. Notice that the chapter begins with no condemnation, and it ends with no separation.

Romans 8:1-4:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending

His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:1-4)

Once more, Paul begins by using the word "therefore," summing up what he has written thus far. He goes back not only to chapter 7, but to chapters 3, 4, and 5, reminding us of the salvation that is ours through the death and resurrection of Christ. By emphasizing the word *now*, Paul wants us to understand and experience once again the blessings that are ours in Christ.

The first blessing is that we are *eternally secure*. Paul writes, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is nearly a parallel statement to that which he wrote at the beginning of chapter 5, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." John Stott makes the point that the "no condemnation" there is equivalent to justification; in this case, in 8:1, it is simply its negative counterpart. He writes: "Later in the chapter the apostle puts these two ideas together again, arguing that no one can accuse Christians because God has justified us (33), and that nobody can condemn us because Christ was raised and is at God's right hand, interceding for us (34)."²

Do you believe that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? God will not turn us aside; he will not throw us out of his family. If we are born into the family of God by faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has come to dwell within us and he will never, ever leave us, no matter what we do. God will never separate us out of his family or treat us as anything less than sons and daughters

The fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the wayward son, reveals how deeply people matter to God. The stories were a reaction on Jesus' part to the confusion of the Pharisees regarding the true character of God. The third story is the tale of a rebellious boy who foolishly squandered his inheritance, not by making bad investments, but on parties and whores. This son frittered away his father's money in big-time sin. At last, deserted by his friends, and feeling the pangs of hunger even as he is feeding pigs, he comes to his senses and realizes how foolish he has been. Waves of remorse and billows of shame crash in on him. He thinks about going back home, but as what? A hired hand? A son? No! So sure

was he that he had forfeited his right of sonship, so sure was he of his father's condemnation, all he desired was a bunk in the slaves' quarters.

The people listening to Jesus wondered how the story would end. They probably thought the son would return to a stern lecture from his father. But no. The father was outrageously gracious and fiercely committed to his son, so much so that instead of condemnation he greeted him with a celebration, a warm embrace and words of love. Picture the Father as he listens to his son: "Father, I know that I have forfeited my sonship. All I am asking for is a bunk in the servants' quarters." Now picture the father putting his hand over his son's mouth and saying, "Don't talk that way. You are no servant, you are my son, and you will always be my son! Yes, you will be occasionally wayward, periodically foolish, and now that I think of it, stupid once in a while, but I love you, son! And my love can handle your folly." Jesus was saying, "Once a son, always a son." But, even more importantly, he was saying, "Once a father, always a father."

When I pastored our high school students, I made it a point to get to know their parents, too. Periodically, students would tell me about something they had done wrong. They would say, "My parents are going to kill me!" Once a high school boy asked me to call his parents. "My dad is going to disown me!" he said. I told him, "Your dad may be a little disappointed, and, depending on how his day went, he may even be a little angry. But I can tell you, with certainty, he has never even entertained the thought of disowning you. Count on it. He loves you." There is no ultimate condemnation in a healthy father for even the most bizarre behavior by his wayward child. Our heavenly Father has an enormous capacity to forgive and to receive his errant children back into his fellowship. "There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

I want speak for a moment to those of you who are believers but have stumbled. You have done things that you didn't want to do and you are buried under a mountain of discouragement and shame. You have been victimized by the evil one, the Accuser (Rev. 12). He is telling you that you are done, that you should bail out. God's word to you this morning through the apostle Paul, however, is not to buy that condemnation lie. Never allow the evil one to intensify your guilt to the point where you become incapacitated. Take your failures and shortcomings and confess them to your loving Father. Lay them down at the cross. He will forgive and restore you, and even celebrate your homecoming. Don't underestimate his love for you.

The second truth that these verses makes clear is that we are *internally free*: we have been set free from the law of sin and death. Though the law was not sinful in itself, it revealed and provoked sin. Thus, God's holy law, which is good and perfect, brought out both sin and death. So to be free from the law of sin and death through Christ is to no longer be under the law, i.e., we

no longer look to the law for either our justification or sanctification.

Paul explains how the gospel liberates us from the law. God took the initiative to do what the law was powerless to do. The law could neither justify nor sanctify, because it was weakened by the flesh. So what the sin-weakened law could not do, God did. He made provision for both our justification and sanctification. Paul says that God sent his Son to justify us and the Spirit to sanctify us.

Paul explains in five expressions exactly what God did. I am going to leave the first four of these for now, because I want to focus on them when we celebrate the Lord's Table in a few minutes. But because of the work of Christ, his incarnation, his crucifixion, and his atonement, we are free. We have no condemnation because the condemnation we deserve was borne by him.

The apostle writes that the ultimate reason God sent his Son was for our sanctification, our holiness. When God puts his Spirit in our hearts he also writes his law there. That was the great promise of the New Covenant, of which Jeremiah wrote: "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD. "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer 31:33).

We are now infused with the power to live in a manner that is pleasing to God. As the poet stated:

*To run and work the law commands,
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands;
But better news the gospel brings:
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.*

Through the Holy Spirit the virtue and perfection and power of Christ's life is communicated to us. We can love God with all our hearts, and we can love our neighbors as ourselves—which, as one man put it, "is as great a miracle as when the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep and with power materialized a new creation at the spoken word of the Father."³

With that in mind, Paul now goes on to explain why this heartfelt obedience, this sanctification, is possible only to those who walk according to the Spirit. Verses 5-8:

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. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because 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; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8:5-8)

Paul is describing two groups of people: those who are in the flesh and those who are in the Spirit. They each have two mentalities or outlooks (the mind of the flesh and the mind of the Spirit), which lead to two

styles of behavior (walking according to the flesh and walking according to the Spirit), resulting in two spiritual plights (death and life). Remember that “flesh” here is not describing our physical body—the soft tissue that covers our bones. “Flesh” is our fallen, self-centered human nature, that which we are apart from God: depraved, unredeemed, and self centered. By “Spirit,” Paul is not referring to some higher aspect of our humanness that is “spiritual,” but, rather, the personal Holy Spirit himself who not only regenerates us but, as we will discuss in a moment, actually indwells the people of God. These two groups are not two types of Christians (carnal and spiritual). Paul is exposing the difference between a non-Christian’s fleshly life and a Christian’s spiritual life.

The apostle is saying that our mind-set, as Christians or non-Christians, expresses our basic nature. We act in a certain way because that is who we are: the ambitions that drive us, the issues that absorb us, the way we spend our time and money, what we give ourselves to, all of these are determined by who we are, whether we are still “in the flesh,” or are now, by a new birth, “in the Spirit.”

Paul continues (verses 9-13):

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. And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you. So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Rom 8:9-13)

Paul wants his readers to know that the distinguishing mark of a true Christian, the thing that sets him apart from unbelievers, is the Holy Spirit. John Stott writes: “Indwelling sin is the lot of all the children of Adam, but the great privilege of the children of God is possessing the indwelling Spirit to fight and subdue indwelling sin.”⁴

In fact, in these verses Paul writes a great deal about the Holy Spirit’s liberating ministry in the life of the Christian. First, we find here a truth that many Christians are confused about: *If you are a Christian you possess the Holy Spirit.* You don’t have to ask for the Spirit. You don’t have to have a special experience to receive him. If you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, you possess the Holy Spirit. Paul declares in verse 9 that if you do not possess the Spirit you are not a Christian at all.

The second thing we learn is that *the Holy Spirit resides within us*, somewhere in our human spirit. Four

times in this passage Paul says that the Spirit dwells within us. You do not need to go to a special place to get more of the Spirit. There is no more of the Spirit in this building than there is your home, at your place of work or in a restaurant. That is because the Spirit does not reside in buildings; he lives in people. Some people travel to Israel because they think that is where they really “feel” the Spirit and they can draw closer to the Lord. Although the Holy Land it is a wonderful place to visit we are not any closer to the Spirit there than here. Wherever we go, he goes. That is why the New Testament declares that we are God’s temple—because the Holy Spirit makes our bodies a sanctuary.

The third thing we learn here is: *the Holy Spirit is nothing more than the Lord Jesus come to dwell inside us.* Paul calls Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ in us (verse 9); and in verse 10 he says that Christ is in us. When we become Christians, then, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us. And he is nothing more and nothing less than the Lord Jesus himself. In fact, that is the purpose of the Holy Spirit: to indwell us and make the life of Jesus continuing and real. That is what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians as the “treasure within an earthen vessel.” Do you realize that the same Lord Jesus who walked on this earth and did those mighty works, now lives in you and he will never leave you? Even when you sin you cannot drive him out of your life.

We had an old basketball at our house that leaked air. After we played with it a bit we’d have to pump it up again before shooting some more baskets. Many Christians think that, as far as their possessing the Holy Spirit is concerned, they have a slow leak. They imagine they continually have to go to meetings to get pumped up in order to get more of the Spirit. But Jesus says that Christians possess the Spirit and he is with us forever. He will not leave us. He will not leak out. We don’t need to get pumped up. When we came to Christ we received all of the Holy Spirit we will ever receive, nothing more and nothing less. We don’t receive part of him. He is a Person. He does not come in doses. He is not poured into our lives.

The result of having Christ by his Spirit dwelling in us, according to Paul, is life – life for our spirits now and life for our bodies in the end. The Holy Spirit has made us alive! Therefore, says Paul, we are debtors to the Spirit who has given us life. By his power we must put to death anything that threatens this new life. We are under a most solemn obligation to be what we are, to conform our conduct to our character, to do nothing that is inconsistent with the life of the Spirit within us, but, rather, to nourish and foster it.

We can grow only by laying hold of his power within us. We are effective because we keep reaching down and laying hold of the One who resides with us. Did you know that the trolley cars that go up and down the hills of San Francisco do not have motors? They are fitted with a clamp mounted underneath, and when the brakeman pulls back on a lever that is attached to the

clamp, the clamp grabs hold of a moving cable that runs beneath the street and the cable car moves. In ourselves, there is no power resident in us. We are not going to change anything. We can't change our own lives, never mind the world. But there is an endless cable inside: the life of the risen Lord Jesus available to us. When we reach down and clamp onto that life we are able to stand in the face of adversity. That is what empowers us to do whatever we are called to do. That is what gives us the moral courage to make decisions that are tough but which we know are right.

Finally, the Spirit's ministry is one of assurance: it reminds us of our identity. Verses 14-17:

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. (Rom 8:14-17)

What is immediately evident in this paragraph is that God's people are identified as his sons (that includes daughters, of course). That is stated in each of the four verses, and this is attributed to the work of the Spirit. This entire paragraph is concerned with the assurance that the Holy Spirit brings inside each one of us who belongs to Christ. In our new relationship with God the Spirit replaces fear with freedom. The slavery of that old age which led to fear, especially fear of God as a judge, is over. The new age gives us boldness to approach him as our loving Father. The Spirit prompts us in our prayers to call God "Father." "Abba" was the common Aramaic word used by children to address their father in those days. Everyone used this everyday, homely, family word. It is like our word dad or daddy. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner, but Jesus did. He used it in all his prayers which are handed down to us, with one single exception: his cry from the cross. Jesus transformed man's relationship with God into an intimate bond, and he taught his disciples to pray with that same intimacy. That is now the Spirit's ministry in our lives. Paul writes in Galatians, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"

The truth that God is our Abba-Father is one of the most healing doctrines in all of Scripture. It is a truth that we must cultivate for the health of our souls.

As we come to the Table of the Lord now, I want to draw our attention to verse 3 of our text.

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was

through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh (Rom 8:3).

God took the initiative to do what the law (even though it was his own law) could not do.

What God did is given in four expressions:

He sent his Son. Remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus, in John 3: "For the Heavenly Father did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, [He could have done that from afar, without my involvement] but to save the world through him." He sent his only Son, the one with whom he had a close, loving, intimate relationship, to redeem, love, and restore the world. The sending of the Son demonstrates the Father's sacrificial love. God does not function with a spirit of condemnation.

The sending of the Son involved his becoming a human being.

Jesus came "in the likeness of sinful flesh." John Stott writes, "Not in sinful flesh, because the flesh of Jesus was sinless; not in the likeness of flesh, because the flesh of Jesus was real; but *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, because the flesh of Jesus was both sinless and real."⁵

God sent his Son to be a sin offering.

In that body of flesh, one that was without sin, Jesus became sin. As we see in this text, he was an offering for sin. In the mystery of the cross, which we can never comprehend, at that hour of darkness the Lord Jesus gathered up all the sins of the world, all the terrible evil, all the foul injustice, crime and misery from throughout history, and brought it to an end by dying.

God condemned sin in the flesh.

God judged our sin in the sinless humanity of his Son, who bore it in our place. The reason there is no condemnation for us is that the condemnation which we deserve has been fully borne by Jesus.

There is no greater love than this.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 216.
2. Stott, 88.
3. R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) 150.
4. Stott, *Romans*, 255.
5. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 80-81.