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Romans 8:1-17

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GOD'S EMPOWERING PRESENCE

Happy New Year and Happy New Decade. We've left the past year behind us, and we've left the... Well, what have we left behind us? We had the 70s, 80s, 90s, but then what? Was it the Aughts, the Naughts, the Naught Aughts, or even the Naughty Aughties? Was it the "ohs"? But that never really caught on: we didn't call last year "twenty-oh-nine" like "nineteen-oh-nine." Was it the 2000s? But it's a bit presumptuous to take that title for just the first decade rather than the whole century or the whole millennium. Whatever it was, we have left it behind and moved on into...into what: "two-thousand ten" or "twenty-ten"?

There are lots of things that people want to leave behind as they pass from one year or one decade into the next. Both the past year and the past decade have been trying ones in many ways and on many levels: local, state, national and international. There's much we want to leave behind. On the personal level, also, people want to leave things behind. New Year is the time for making resolutions. This year it's going to be different! This year I'm going to be different! We resolve to leave the past behind and become a new person. How many of you have made resolutions? And how many of these have you already broken less than sixty hours into the new year?

Adrian Plass has a lovely piece about this desire to change, to clean up our lives. He's the British author who penned those playful poems on the album *City of Gold* which we performed here. This is from the sequel, *Road to the City*.

Once I've Cleaned This House Up

Once I've cleaned this house up properly
I honestly think I'll get somewhere
Once I've pulled out every single piece of furniture
and used an abrasive cloth with strong stuff on it,
I think I shall come to grips with the rest of my life.
Once I've put everything into separate piles,
each containing
the same sort of thing (if you know what I mean)
I think I'll manage
Once I've written a list that includes absolutely everything,
I think the whole business will seem very much clearer.
Once I've had time to work slowly
from one item to another,
I'm sure things will change.
Once I've eaten sensibly for a week and a half,
Once I've sorted out the things that are my fault,
Once I've sorted out the things that are not my fault,
Once I've spent a little more time reading useful books,
Being with people I like, going to pottery classes,
getting out into the air,
Making bread, drinking less, drinking more,
Going to the theatre, adopting a third-world child,
Eating free range eggs and writing long letters,
Once I've pulled every single piece of the furniture right out

And cleaned the house up properly,
Once I've become somebody else...I honestly think I'll get somewhere.¹

How do we change so as to become better people? This is the topic I want to address on this, the first Sunday of the year, so as to give us a vision for the year. I did a similar thing last year when we looked at what it means to be a church. The idea for this particular topic came to me last July when I was preaching through the story of Cain and Abel. The second of those sermons was "Battling the Demon of Sin (Gen 4:6-9)." Cain was angry that the Lord had favored Abel and his offering and not himself and his offering. The Lord warned him that sin was at the door with ravenous desire. Cain refused the call to do what was right, refused the call to master sin. Instead of keeping the door shut in sin's face he opened it wide, allowing sin mastery over himself. Much of that sermon was devoted to answering two questions: how does God get sin back out the door, and how does he enable people to keep sin outside the door? These are the twin issues of salvation and sanctification: salvation to get sin out of the house, and sanctification to enable his people, once saved, to keep sin out.

I showed that for Israel in the Old Testament sanctification was through the Torah, the law which God gave his people to show them what is right. But in the New Testament, under the new covenant, the Torah no longer applies. Instead God pours his Spirit into his people not just to show what is right but to actually enable his people to do what is right. My remarks generated such feedback that I revisited the topic the next week. At the time I felt that what was really needed was a whole sermon about life in the Spirit, based on Romans 8, a passage to which I had made brief reference. There was no space in the preaching schedule to do so then, but I knew that this first Sunday of 2010 would give me the opportunity to do so. So, today's message has been in mind for the past five months.

How do we deal with the problem of sin? Or, better, how does God deal with the problem of sin in us? Today I'm interested not so much in how God saves us from past sin, but in how he changes us so that we are less prone to current sin, so that we are actually able to choose to do what is right.

In the Old Testament, God gave his people Israel his Law, the Torah, to show them how to live lives pleasing to him, how to be holy as he is holy. When Moses, at the end of his life, reminded Israel of the Law just before they entered the Promised Land, he said,

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live," (Deut 30:19 ESV)

and again,

"it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess." (Deut 32:47)

Keeping Torah, God's law, would bring life. But in Romans 7 Paul describes at length what life was actually like for him living under this law. As a Pharisee trained at the feet of one of the leading rabbis of the day, he had tried his best to keep Torah, tried his best to do what was right. But he found he couldn't. The Law kept showing him how sinful he was: "if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin" (7:7). And so, "The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me" (7:10).

Years ago when I lived near Geneva, I got a parking ticket. Returning to my car after a church prayer meeting I found a ticket on my windshield. This wasn't a simple ticket: it was a small document, itemizing a large number of possible offenses, a hundred or so, with my particular offense checked. I read through this list in amazement: I found that I had broken all sorts of laws. I found, for example, that it was an offense to be out in public without a minimum of 20 francs on your person. Fortunately the authorities were unaware of all my infractions save one, and I was unaware of that infraction until I found a ticket on my car. But ignorance of the law is no excuse: I was still guilty. How could one live a single day in Switzerland without breaking a law? Here in California more laws went into effect on the first of the year, further increasing our opportunity for law-breaking, whether intentional or not.

The Law was God's gracious gift to Israel, but it never dealt with the underlying problem: how to actually change people's hearts so they could keep the law and master sin. Paul continued, "I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out" (7:18). I confess he was a better man than me: I had no desire to keep all those Swiss laws; I continued to go around with less than 20 francs in my pocket. At the end of the chapter an exasperated Paul concludes,

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom 7:21-24)

Then he closes the chapter with the answer:

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (7:25)

This is the context for chapter 8.

God has done it! (8:1-4)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom 8:1-4)

God has done what the law could not do. The law, by which Paul means Torah, couldn't do it because it had to work with the flesh, with humans in the likeness of Adam infected with sin. God sent his own Son in this same likeness, in the likeness of Adam, submitting him to the age of Adam. But he also sent him "for sin," that is, to be a sin offering, a sacrifice that would atone for sin. The only way Jesus could be a valid sin offering was to live in the likeness of Adam, of sinful flesh, but without succumbing to the flesh, to sin. Through this sacrificial death of Christ God has passed judgment

upon sin and opened the way to a new way of living: in Christ not in Adam, according to the Spirit not according to the flesh. At that point Torah had run its course; Israel's law was done. Hindered by the flesh it brought death; only when empowered by the Spirit could it bring life.

Hitherto in Romans Paul has mentioned the Spirit very rarely. Chapter 7 has been all about life under law. The word "law" occurs 21 times, the word Spirit only once (7:6). But now everything changes: the word Spirit is used 17 times in 8:1-17. We've been set free, but it's not a freedom to do whatever we want. We have been set free *from* something but also *for* something else. We have been set free *from* walking according to the flesh so that we might be free *to* walk according to the Spirit. Paul elaborates on this in the next four verses.

Life according to the Spirit (8:5-8)

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (8:5-8)

There are two ways of living life: according to the flesh and according to the Spirit. In these verses Paul goes back and forth between these two. The flesh is our human nature in a sinful, fallen state—what Paul elsewhere calls "the old man," "in Adam." This was true even of Paul: even when he tried his hardest to keep the law he was acting according to the flesh. Unfortunately, what comes naturally when we're in the flesh produces death not life. Paul itemized some of this behavior for the Galatian Christians:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. (Gal 5:19-21)

This is by no means an exhaustive list. It's easy to add others: pride, greed, impatience. But Paul immediately says there's another way of living life: according to the Spirit. He itemizes some of the characteristics of this life:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Gal 5:22-23)

Neither is this an exhaustive list; we might add compassion, humility, forgiveness (Col 3:12-13).

Life according to the flesh or according to the Spirit is closely correlated with what we set our minds on. Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, and this mindset is death. Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit, and this mindset is life and peace, by which Paul means *shalom*, wholeness. Mindset: Paul uses the verb once and the noun three times. Both words mean more than simply what we think about, or even what we're preoccupied with. They incorporate our whole worldview: how we see the world working. What is your worldview? How do you see the world functioning? Not the political system or the financial system, not cosmology or biosystems. But the way in which life works at the deepest level. Your worldview shapes your mindset which in turn shapes your behavior. Put the other way, your conduct flows out of your mindset, which in turn flows out of

your worldview. There are only two ways in which people can see the world working: according to the flesh and according to the Spirit.

For Christians, those who are “in Christ,” our worldview should incorporate the things of the Spirit. It makes a whole world of difference when your outlook on life incorporates the Spirit. What are the things of the Spirit? Unfortunately many people think that these things are primarily speaking in tongues and giving prophecies. Others react against this preoccupation by ignoring the Spirit, focusing instead on God as Father and Son. What are the things of the Spirit? It's this desire of God to transform us so that we produce not the works of the flesh but the fruit of the Spirit.

But how do we live according to the Spirit? How do we set our minds on the things of the Spirit? We ourselves can't do it. Three times now Paul has said that the flesh, the old way, can't do what needs to be done. The law was unable because it was weakened by the flesh (8:3). The mindset of the flesh not only does not submit to God's standard, it is unable to do so (8:7). And those in the flesh are unable to please God (8:8). So how do we get out of the flesh so we can be in the Spirit? Paul tells us in the next three verses.

The Spirit in Us (8:9-11)

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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 dwells in you. (8:9-11)

There's only one way we can live according to the Spirit and that's to have the Spirit dwelling within us. In the Old Testament God dwelt *among* his people in the tabernacle and the temple, but he didn't dwell *in* his people. Occasionally he sent his Spirit upon *some* of his people so they could accomplish particular tasks, but he didn't send his Spirit into *all* his people. But now that has changed. When we come to Christ God puts his Spirit in us. The Spirit is God's presence in us. The Spirit in us enables us to do what needs to be done: to live according to the Spirit not according to the flesh. Putting these two ideas together, the Spirit is God's enabling presence in us.²

These three verses are trinitarian through and through. The Spirit is called both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. As our Scripture reading (John 14:15-21) showed, the sending of the Spirit was a joint effort between the Father and the Son: the Son petitioned the Father to send a “Paraclete,” translated variously as advocate, counselor or helper. The Spirit in us is God's restored presence among his people, and is Christ's presence among those whom he has called to follow him. Neither Father nor Son leaves us alone. The Spirit in us is God himself as both presence and helper, enabling us to do what the flesh cannot do, even when guided by the law.

The Spirit which God puts inside us is the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. This is very important: the same Spirit that was at work in Christ is at work in us. What God, through his Spirit, did to Jesus Christ, he wants to do to us: take us from death to life. If he transformed Jesus' dead body into a life-filled spiritual body, he can certainly transform us. We have been transformed, we are being transformed and we will be transformed. In all three cases our pattern is Christ. Through the Spirit we have passed from death to life when we follow Christ. Through the Spirit we are being conformed

to God's likeness in Christ. And through the Spirit we will be glorified and receive the same sort of resurrection bodies as Christ.

We are God's Children (8:12-17)

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (8:12-17)

So then, says Paul, and his conclusion here is more emphatic than English can render it. We are no longer beholden to the flesh, to live life in the old way. We were held captive by this old way of life, and at the end of that captivity lies only death. God, through Christ and through his Spirit, has set us free to live a new way. But we have a role to play as well. Paul calls us to put to death the deeds of the body, to mortify the flesh. But Paul has just shown us that the flesh puts us to death. How can we put the flesh to death? Only by the Spirit: we can mortify the deeds of the old nature only by the Spirit at work within us.

The presence of God's Spirit in us brings us into a new relationship with God. Through his Spirit God adopts us as his own children and his Spirit assures us that we are his children. He will lavish on us all the care which a good father lavishes on his son. Unfortunately many of us have skewed images of how a father treats a son, so we need to rehabilitate our image of what a good father looks like. Being children of God means that Christ is our elder brother. And just as Christ, as Son, is in the image of his Father, so we will become conformed to that same image. Being children of God means that we are all siblings, called to be a family together. His Spirit works in each of us as we are living in community. He doesn't just call me to a life of love, patience and so on on my own, but to a life of love and patience when I'm in relationship with the rest of God's people. That's rather more difficult.

How do you view your life as a Christian? Do you see the Christian life as one of rules and regulations? Are you afraid that God is waiting to whack you with a two-by-four as soon as you step out of line?

Or are you at the other end of the spectrum, thinking it doesn't matter too much how you live your life in the present? There are several variations on this. Perhaps you see Christianity as simply a ticket to heaven? Now that you have the ticket in hand you can get back to the business of living life. Or perhaps you think that what you do with your body doesn't really matter because it's the soul that is saved. This was a real problem in the first century in churches such as Corinth. It's less of a problem today. Or is it? There are many who think that since God is love he should affirm us in our behavior. We don't need to change. Surely God can't disapprove of what we do if he is love. This seems to be the view of those pushing homosexuality within the church, even within the clergy.

Perhaps you think that the Christian life is all about getting material blessing from the Lord in this life: health, wealth and prosperity.

Living a life of rules. Focusing on life in the here-and-now because we have a ticket to the future in our pocket. Presuming on God's approval for our unchanged lifestyles. Preoccupation with material blessing. Paul would characterize all these as life in the flesh with minds set on the things of the flesh.

This is not the life God calls us to. It's not the life he has saved us for. He has saved us so that we might be transformed, made into new people. He puts his own Spirit in us so that we no longer live in the old way but are enabled to live according to the Spirit with our minds set on the things of the Spirit. Through his Spirit he has put his enabling presence in us. He has done, is doing, and will do what the law cannot do: make us new people, transforming us from the inside so that we become like Christ, who, as Son, is the true image of the Father.

So as we embark on a new year, a new decade, may God's Spirit continue to work in us individually and corporately, so that together we walk according to the Spirit, and together we are conformed into the likeness of Christ. We cannot do it, but God has put his enabling presence in us to do what we cannot do.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)

1. Adrian Plass, "Once I've Cleaned This House Up," *Road to the City* (2001), track 3.

2. My title is taken from Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994).

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