

Living By the Spirit

Romans 8:12-17

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I read an interesting quote in a book while I was on vacation.

Almost every evangelical church (a Bible teaching church like ours) will teach that salvation is by grace. But after somebody accepts grace, then grace is virtually forgotten, and the Christian life becomes some combination of faith and works. Most churches preach grace and live works.¹

It may seem like the apostle Paul is doing much the same thing. He has told us that we are lost in sin and can only be saved by the grace of God. When we become followers of Christ we are forgiven and made new . . . thanks be to God!

However, Paul has followed that up by challenging us to live out our Christian faith. The end of Romans, starting in chapter 12 is filled with exhortations on how a Christian should live. Is Paul preaching grace and living works? I don't think so.

The book of Romans is a logical and systematic argument. I think, because of that, most of us picture Paul like a college Professor. He is teaching but we hear him in a certain monotone that too often can lull us to sleep.

But what if he is not! What is Paul in his logical presentation is (especially in chapter 8) becoming very excited. What if, by the end of the chapter Paul is shouting and speaking with excitement. What if he is exploding with the opportunities and privileges of the Christian faith; the reality of God in us!

¹² Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. ¹³ For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

To follow Paul's argument it is helpful to look at some of the connecting words. This is always a good thing to do with a passage from the Bible. "Therefore" means a conclusion is being drawn. "For" denotes a reason and can mean "because." "But" shows a contrast. If you use this on verse 12-14 here is what you get:

Conclusion: you do not have to do what your old nature urges you to do.

Because: if you live by what that old nature tells you to do – you will die.

¹ Montgomery, Daniel; Jones, Timothy Paul. PROOF: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace (p. 80). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

“But”, as a point of contrast: if through the power of the Holy Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live.

“Because:” all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

Just reading the argument it almost sounds like Paul is saying, “Look, we are saved by God’s grace . . . now make yourself worthy of the grace God has given!” Maybe if this was simply an academic discourse that would be our conclusion. However, if the letter is more pastoral and meant to highlight the message and the glory of the gospel, then Paul is saying something very different.

You Don’t Have to Live a Life of Futility Any More

The life we were living before we came to be followers of Christ was empty. It wears us out, it leaves us bruised and broken, it leads nowhere but to a literal “dead end.” We can stop excusing sin by saying, “This is just the way I am” and change that to: “this is the way I was.” Paul wants us to see that because of the transforming power of God: “we have no obligation to follow our sinful nature and urges.”

We live at a time when we are constantly told to “do what feels right to do.” People say things like, “I have to be true to myself.” That is another way of saying I am going to live by what I think is best for me. I am going to do what I feel like doing. The irony is that what we think is best for us is often not what is best for us.

I hesitate to think of how many marriages have ended because one partner did what “seemed right to them” and they were unfaithful to their spouse. They respond, “It just happened.” But it is the way of sinful mankind. If we don’t get our way in an argument, we react violently or leave the relationship. If we can’t have what we want materially, we pout and withdraw or we borrow ourselves into oblivion rather than learn to be content. Too many relationships have ended because one person could only think about what they wanted (or “needed”) and didn’t care what the other person wanted or needed from the relationship. This is the way of the world.

Paul is announcing that there is a better way and the key to this better way is the Holy Spirit. Paul is excited to tell us that through the power the Holy Spirit gives us we can “put to death the deeds of our sinful nature.” Are we back to “works” once again? No, I don’t think so. This is more like telling a sick person that you may feel your situation is hopeless but there is a life-saving surgery that could prolong your life! This is about hope . . . it is not an added burden or threat.

Paul reminds us that a true believer is led by the Spirit of God. Now will the Holy Spirit provoke us to action? He will. The Holy Spirit will encourage us to take decisive action against our old way of life. But He is not telling us this to make us worthy of God’s love . . . He is telling us this because it is good news! It is the doorway to the life of fellowship with God. It is the key to finding that life that we always hoped was there, but we started to believe it didn’t exist. This is not about “making ourselves worthy,” it is about extricating ourselves from enslavement!

When we see these sins manifesting in our lives, we can now confidently declare that we are dead to those things. These old ways have no power unless we give them power. We are on a new path as the Holy spirit leads us. Our job is to ask for and rely on the Spirit's strength and begin to walk in another direction.

Bible scholar NT Wright summarizes it well,

the remarkable phenomenon at the heart of Christian experience: a new life, a new energy, bubbling up inside us, leading us to praise, urging us to prayer, warning us against complacency or sin, nudging us to acts of love and gentleness, providing fresh glimpses of previously unimagined wisdom and illumination, leading us to places and tasks that might seem crazy but that might just be our true vocation.²

But, you say, this sounds great, but how do I tap into that power of the Holy Spirit? Let me give you some suggestions. First, we have to stop thinking that we are smarter than God! We read the Bible and at times we think, "Well... that was then, this is now." Every time we think we have a better plan than that which is proclaimed by the Bible, we are acting like we are smarter than God. (And we are a fool for thinking that to be the case).

Second, we need to ask for help. We know we are supposed to trust the Holy Spirit working inside of us, but we act like it all depends on us. Paul has said it over and over, without the help of the Holy Spirit we will remain in the bondage of our earthly nature. This is because it is comfortable and therefore tends to be our default response.

For example, let's say you have a problem with anger. We tend to say, "I can overcome this! I will keep working on this." And, for awhile you might do OK, but eventually the dam is going to burst and all that pent up anger is going to come spewing out. Rather than trying to muster all our strength to hold back the angry feelings, we should be bringing our anger to the Lord and asking Him to empower and deliver us so we will gain victory over our anger. The same holds true for our lusts, our materialism, our indifference to others, our poor use of time, our failure in communication, our witness to others, and more.

Third, we need to keep our eyes on the Holy Spirit (speaking metaphorically) rather than fixating on the times we get it wrong. When we stumble we need to recommit ourselves to the Lord and keep working at this. Too often we try really hard, we fail, and we conclude that we are hopeless. Instead, we return to the arms of the Lord and start over.

A marathon runner doesn't just decide one day that they are going to run a marathon. They have to train. Some days they do well, other days they do not. Some days they delight in running, other days they don't want to get out of bed. But here is the thing, they do get out of

² Into The Heart Of Romans P.79

bed and they do keep working at it. Eventually, as their endurance builds they move closer and closer to their goal. But the number one rule is: Don't give up.

The Benefits of Living the New Life of the Spirit

But Paul is not done.

¹⁵ So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father."

¹⁶ For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. ¹⁷ And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

Once again it is good to look at the connecting words.

- "So" is a conclusion: you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves.
- "For" or Because: The Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. The Holy Spirit assures us of our salvation.
- "And since" (a logical implication): we are heirs with Christ of God's glory.
- "But" (here is a warning)

Paul wants us to know that he is not telling us what he is telling us because He wants to scare us. He is not threatening that if we do not shape up we will lose our salvation. I believe the Bible is clear that a true believer will never lose their salvation. We'll talk much more about that in weeks to come.

When we become believers, God lives inside of us in a new way. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in us! That is certainly hard to wrap our heads around but it is what the Bible teaches. Such a concept is like the first day you come into an algebra class and suddenly you are asked to do math with letters. How can God live in us. I don't know. But He does???

Paul indicates that we should sense or feel the Holy Spirit in us. In fact, the Holy Spirit is that voice within you that says "You really are a child of God." This brings a measure of assurance that you belong to Him. We'll have more to say on this at the end of the chapter.

Paul says, we have been adopted as God's own children. Adoption is a wonderful thing it is when people choose to love someone as their very own. At the end of most adoption services a judge says to the new parents, "You have every duty, every privilege, and every responsibility for your child, just as if she sprang from your body." So it is with God. When he adopts us, we have every privilege of a child of God. In adoption, God brings believers into his family and grants us the privileges of a child and an heir.

What is our inheritance? First, it is a loving relationship with God! No mansion over the hilltop, no amount of money or influence can give you even a hint of the glory of this privilege. Second,

we will inherit eternal life. This is not some ethereal cloud-sitting experience. Sometimes we picture Heaven this way. The Bible tells us that there is coming a day when the Lord will make a new Heaven and a new Earth and we will live there. This new earth will be one without sin and that brings glory to God. We will be engaged in productive and satisfying labor. We will know people like we have never known them before. Corruption will be gone, pain and heartache will be no more, we will be at peace with nature. We will be in the world that God intended us to live in.

Paul takes this even further and says the Spirit gives us a new intimacy with God. We now relate to Him as “Abba Father.” This is a term of intimacy, like saying “daddy” or even “dad.” There is that sense of belonging that most people would not understand. We now see Him as one who wants, sees, and leads us to what is best for us. Now our reverence is anchored to love.

This is such a privilege! There are only two people who call me “dad.” There are a few more that call me “Grandpa.” I have a unique and special relationship with these people in my life. And Paul says, that’s the kind of relationship we have with God because we have placed our hope in Christ and He has given His Spirit as a deposit which guarantees our inheritance.

I hope you see that there is no bad news in these verses. Paul is making a glorious declaration: “We are no longer paupers who have been made destitute by sin. Instead, we are joint-heirs with Christ! There is an inheritance waiting for us that far surpasses anything we can imagine in this world. Enter in! Rejoice, give thanks, dance and sing for great is the Lord.”

Paul ends this passage with a downer. Because we are heirs, we will also enter into His suffering. Rick will talk more about this next week. The principle is simple: Jesus said, “A student is not greater than their teacher. If He suffered, we will suffer as well.”

The reality is that we do not fit in this world. And the difference between a follower of Christ and a follower of the sinful nature is becoming much starker. Today there is a good chance that if you affirm the Bible as the Word of God, you will be called a bigot. If you believe Jesus is the only way to be made right with God, expect to be called a narrow mind racist.

Don’t let the idea of suffering cause you to miss the main point. If we are willing to stand with Him, we will share in His glory. That is better incentive than anything this world can offer.

Conclusions

The Gospel of grace is the real deal. We are forgiven and made new through Jesus. That is true the moment we truly believe and will be true until we enter into eternity. We are not here because we are better than others. We are not here because we made a better choice. We are here because the Lord has called us to Himself. This too is a staggering and emotional reality.

Rick made the statement last week that following Christ is not a decision, it is a journey. Paul has in some ways served as a cheerleader for that journey today. He does not speak to us as a parent to a wayward child, he speaks to us a fellow recipient of this grace that transforms lives.

If you are a sports person you are aware that when something good happens fans applaud, when it is really good and dramatic they turn to total strangers and exchange "High Fives" they say, "I can't believe we did it!" (Even though they didn't do anything.) But it is a shared joy.

That's what this text is today. Paul understood the blessing of walking with Christ. He has seen a tremendous transformation in his own life. He has watched with wonder as God used him in ways he could have never imagined and provided for Him in astonishing ways. And now I imagine Paul standing and almost shouting his encouragement to lean into the journey. Paul reminds us that the Christian life is not about the future . . . it is about our life right here and now!

Let me leave you with three challenges. First, Stop dwelling on your failures and live in constant amazement over His grace. We must stop trying to earn grace and instead embrace it. And when we do so we will be filled with humility and wonder. We will stop feeling we have to fix everyone around us and instead will be soft towards those who are hurting, we will not write anyone off because we know the kind of change God can make in any life.

Second, we need to relentlessly rest in Him. We need to hide in His strength rather than working so hard to muster more strength of our own. We need to learn how to turn to Him in prayer FIRST. We need to look to Him for strength to overcome, wisdom as we make choices in life, the right words as we talk to others. All our lives we have been counseled to be self-reliant. Now, because we belong to Him, we need to learn how to be Spirit reliant.

Part of doing this is learning to rest and to wait on His timing. This is not laziness. It is really hard to wait. But we must learn to quiet our souls and listen for His direction and be open to His peace.

Finally, we need to embrace the privilege that is ours in Christ. Paul wants us to stop living beneath our privilege. We should begin and end each day grateful to God for the life that He has given us and for the Spirit who now dwells within us.

As we do so we need to pursue His will and His way even as we share Him with everyone we meet whether they seem religious or not. In fact, we should be more excited to share Him with those who feel so unworthy and so far away from Him. This should excite us because we know what God can do. And we know it is such a privilege to tell people of this life and forgiveness that is available to them.

In fact, if we really get this . . . we should be eager to high five everyone we meet! It is the best news ever!