

# I. Introduction

[Greeting & niceties]

If you have a bible, I'd love for you to turn to Romans 8 and get your eyes on verses 12-17. If you're new to Union Church one of the things we're fiercely committed to is being a bible saturated people. We believe this book is the place where God most clearly shows us who he is. And since we want to know Him we are serious about loving the scriptures, studying the scriptures, placing ourselves beneath the authority of the scriptures, and letting the scriptures shape us as a people. So for the past few months we've been walking through the book of Romans and for the past couple of weeks we've been in Romans 8, which is one of my favorite parts of the whole Bible.

One of the reasons Romans 8 is so beautiful is that it is a concentrated dose of everything that is real and really available to us in the Christian life. So often I live in the struggle of Romans 7: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep doing... wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death." And the good news is that Jesus saves us and He is with us in the struggle every day. But it's kind of like being given a brand new truck and using it for everyday things like going to the grocery store & dropping your kids off at school. That's all well and good... and then someone says, "Hey give me those keys. Let me show you what you can really do with this..." And they take you and your truck into the truck commercial. You can drive this thing through the mountains of Colorado with your tent in the back, crashing through riverbeds, and camping out under the stars. All because you have this truck. That's kind of what is happening in Romans 8. If you're a Christian, you have the gospel and it carries you through the everyday streets of life, but then Paul is like, "Oh, you've got the gospel? Lemme show you what this thing can do!" And he takes you to the mountain peaks of the gospel.

One of the mountain peaks of Romans 8 is that we are being given a picture of life in the Spirit. Throughout the chapter the apostle Paul is teaching about the implications of life in the Spirit, walking according to the Spirit, living *by* the Spirit... and he often contrasts life in the Spirit with life in the flesh. Now, we've said that when it talks about the flesh, the Bible isn't teaching that our bodies are bad or that true spirituality means leaving our bodies behind. God made your body and he made you to have a body. In the bible "the flesh" is shorthand for our natural, sinful, against-God-state apart from God's intervention to save us. So that's "the flesh" in a nutshell, but what about the other side of the coin? What about life in the Spirit? In verses 12-17 and, I think, we can intuitively understand that there are deep implications connected to living by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit sits at the center of today's text:

...all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup> 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!" <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

So in order to appreciate the implications of life in the Spirit, we can't leapfrog over an important question: What does the bible mean when it talks about the Holy Spirit and "living by the Spirit"?

I don't want to skip over that question, so today we're going to spend a fair amount of time laying groundwork before we get to the meat of what Paul is teaching in this passage. We're going to lay groundwork by looking at the person of the Holy Spirit and His ministry to God's people so that we can appreciate the work of the Spirit that's on display in our passage today, which is the ministry of assurance & confidence in salvation. And before we get any further, I need to pray. Would you pray with me?

*Father, even as we consider your word and the ministry of the Spirit and our life in the Spirit, I pray that you would send your Holy Spirit to shine a floodlight on the reality and beauty of Christ. And let the glory of Christ press us toward humility, and gratitude, and worship, and obedience. Lord, you must increase and we must decrease. Make it so. Amen.*

## II. Groundwork: the Holy Spirit

Alright. There can be so much confusion around the Holy Spirit, even in the church. So I want to lay some groundwork by doing some theology together. *Who is the Holy Spirit?* The Holy Spirit is God. All Christians everywhere believe in the triune God: one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father, Son, and Spirit are all co-eternal. That means each person of the trinity has always existed. The Father, Son, and Spirit are co-equal. That means there's no hierarchy within the trinity.

Now, whenever we talk about the doctrine of the trinity I always want to acknowledge that a God who exists eternally as one God in three persons is hard to understand. In fact it's impossible to truly wrap our minds around. It's like trying to fit an ocean inside a thimble. You can't fit an ocean into a thimble. But you can take the water in your thimble and put it under a microscope, and analyze the minerals and microorganisms floating around in the water and conclude that an ocean exists. And it's the same with the triune God. All throughout the Bible we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit at work and the Christian church has, in unity over the centuries, put the scriptures under a microscope and seen one God existing eternally in three persons. In fact if you ever meet anyone who claims to be a Christian, but doesn't believe in the trinity it means they aren't Christians.

So the Holy Spirit is God, the third person of the trinity. Not an impersonal force or an ethereal, abstract energy. He is a "he," not an "it"! Did you notice how our text for today says in verse 16, "the Spirit *himself* bears witness with our spirit..." He is not impersonal, but personal. When you enter into a relationship with God the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son, you are also in relationship with God the Holy Spirit. Now, what does God the Holy Spirit *do* in that relationship? How does he act? Well there are hundreds of ways to describe the work of the Holy Spirit, but the main thing the Holy Spirit does is he makes Jesus Christ more real to you. In John 14 Jesus calls the Spirit the Helper who will help us remember and learn the teachings of Christ. In John 16 Jesus says,

<sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

“The Holy Spirit delights above all else in serving as a spotlight... to focus our thoughts and meditation on the beauty of Christ and all that God is for us in and through him.”<sup>1</sup>

Without the work of the Spirit, you might have Jesus in your life, but he’s a dull and dim Jesus. Here’s what I mean: more and more in our culture we’re becoming so far “post-christian” that it’s almost “pre-christian.” Meaning that in many places there isn’t even a religious memory of Christianity and therefore, Jesus is totally unknown. But I don’t think that’s the case here in our region. Most people in our community have some kind of Christian memory. They had a grandmother that brought them to Sunday school, or they grew up in the catholic church. So Jesus isn’t yet unknown, but he sits all dusty and unnoticed on the shelf in our consciousness. I heard a quote this week that I think describes the typical approach to God in our community:

“I would like 3 dollars worth of God please. Not enough to disturb me. Not so much of him that will change how I live. Not so much of him that I have to love a person of another color. Or pick beats with immigrants. Or change the way in which I use my body. I want happiness, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not the new birth. Just a pound of the eternal in a brown paper bag please. I would like to buy 3 dollars worth of God.”<sup>2</sup>

You see the typical person wants God to be one small, maybe-useful idea on the sidelines of their life. But to be a Christian means that the Holy Spirit made Jesus Christ not merely a nice idea on the sidelines of your life, but instead made him the most weighty, important thing in your life. And when that happens in you, that’s when you move from being a person with some religious instincts to being a christian transformed by the Spirit of Christ.

The Holy Spirit makes Jesus more real and important to us in many ways. He reveals Christ in the scriptures, he does the work of regeneration when he brings our hearts from death to life so that we can come alive to Christ, he works in us helping us to become more and more like Christ... but today we’ve laid this bit of foundation so that we can see more clearly a particular work of the Spirit that’s in Romans 8:12-17. And that particular work is the ministry of assurance. The Holy Spirit assures us that we belong to Christ and are children of God.

### **III. The Text: The Spirit’s Ministry of Assurance**

Alright. Let’s look at Romans 8 now. We’ve already highlighted verse 16, but let’s read it again because it ties together all the things we’re about to talk about. “<sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

Now some of you hear that verse and think, “Must be nice! I wish the Spirit would tell me I’m a child of God. But when I try to apply a verse like this and search my inner being for assurance of my salvation, all I find is anxious questions.” I think every Christian in our church will have struggled with that feeling at one time or another. I did this week! We all go through highs or lows in which we wonder if we are children of God. And verse 16 is here to help us in the struggle for assurance. Because this verse tells us that if you belong to Christ and have the Holy Spirit, he is bearing witness to you. Like a witness of the stand in a courtroom, he is testifying that you are a child of God. And so the question I want to ask is, how does he do that?

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<sup>1</sup>Sam Storms, New City Catechism Devotional

<sup>2</sup> Source unknown, quoted by Tim Keller in, [“The Power of the Holy Spirit”](#)

And here's the answer from the text that I want to unpack: **The Holy Spirit testifies that "You belong to Christ!" by causing you to hate your sin, to cry to your heavenly Father, and to hope in your inheritance.**

**First, You Belong to Jesus Because You Hate Your Sin.** Look at verse 12-14.

<sup>12</sup> So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Verse 12 & 13 are summarizing everything that Pastor Kyle talked about last week: If you're a Christian the Holy Spirit lives in you, which means you are no longer obligated to do what your old sinful nature urges you to do. If the Spirit lives in you, you will act according to new obligations - obligations of joy and gratitude to Christ that will change your desires and push you into dependence on God.

Here's another way to say it: the heart of a Christian is a heart that is not content to sit in the sins of their life. Some of you struggle with assurance of your salvation because you have a wrong theology of sanctification. You hear a phrase like, "Christ defeated sin" and you skip over the reality that we live in an already-not-yet world that still groans for Christ's return to make all things new and since you skip over that you assume that since sin isn't fully absent from your life, that Christ must not be present at all. I say in a sermon, "make war on your sin" and you put it through a filter and hear, "conquer your sin." You read Paul saying, "put to death the deeds of the body" and you despair because it seems like you cut the head off of one sin and two more pop up. But listen friends, the foundational evidence of the Holy Spirit in your life is not whether or not you struggle with sin in your life. That will be a battle you fight until the grave or until Christ returns. The fundamental evidence of the Spirit in you is whether you hate your sin. Have you gone from welcoming sin in and loving it and embracing it to being discontent with its presence in your life?

Friends, that discontent is the beginning of putting sin to death. That is the leading of the Holy Spirit. And verse 14 says that "all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." If you have a posture of discontent and hostility toward your sin, even if the battle is not yet won, that is the Spirit testifying, "Mine! You belong to Christ!"

**The next way the Holy Spirit testifies that you belong to Jesus is by causing you to cry out to the Father.**

<sup>15</sup> 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!"

Paul says in Romans 6 that once you were slaves to sin. But now, if you are in Christ, the Spirit that you have received is not the spirit of a slave who comes cringing to his master. The Spirit we receive in Christ is the Spirit of adoption as sons. And as sons of God, we cry out Abba! Father!

Now, it could be that you've heard someone say the word "Abba" means "daddy." That isn't actually accurate. It just means "my father." It's not a baby-talk word. Adults would have used "Abba" in Jesus' day to refer to their own fathers. But that little correction doesn't diminish the magnitude of what we are being taught here. Jewish culture revered God so highly that they would not say or write his name and if they prayed they might use the word "adonai" which means "Lord," or "master." But Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven" and Paul is saying that in Christ the Holy Spirit gives us familiarity and confidence like a child to their father as we approach the Holy, almighty God of the universe!

And not only do we have the status of adopted children, but the Holy Spirit gives us the posture of adopted children. Because the verse doesn't say, "by whom we become children who think of God as Father." It says, "by whom we cry." A cry is a response to fear, or overwhelm, or need. By the Holy Spirit we cry out. When we cry out, our heart is leaping up and reaching out, "Father I need you! Father, I am helpless without you. Father, I love you! Father, I'm an orphan all alone if I don't have you."

So not only does the Holy Spirit testify that you belong to Jesus by changing your heart toward your sin, the Spirit testifies that you belong to Jesus by sparking in us a deep sense of need and dependence and a child-like instinct to cry out to our Heavenly Father!

**Finally, the Holy Spirit testifies that you belong to Christ when he causes you to hope in your inheritance.**

If you're a woman, you might be a bit uncomfortable being told that you've received the Spirit of adoption "as sons." Why doesn't it say "sons and daughters"? It's because in Jesus' day and in Paul's day, only one child received the inheritance: the son. And usually the firstborn son. So Paul is saying something specific. He is not only saying that in Christ God has adopted you and become your familiar Father. He's saying that you have been identified with the firstborn Son. You have been united with Christ. Everything that was yours - all your sin, all your guilt, all the debt you owed to God, and punishment you deserved for sin Christ took to the cross and you have received everything that is his. You are the heir of the inheritance with Christ. So just like I, as a man, have to get my head around being the Bride of Christ, you as a woman, can get your head around being adopted sons of God.

This is why Paul says, <sup>16</sup> "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..." He means for us to expect an inheritance with Christ because we are adopted sons in Christ. Our hope and expectation that we will receive an inheritance with Christ is a mark of our belonging to him.

Now there are many ways the NT speaks about the inheritance we receive in Christ. We inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9), we inherit glorious riches in Christ (Eph 1), we inherit the promises of God (Heb 6). But here Paul says we are "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."

Here, the inheritance we're meant to see is being glorified with Christ. But the path to being glorified with Christ leads through suffering with him.

Friends, the mountain peaks of everything that is real and really available to you in Christ do not exclude suffering. I feel like we sound this note so often in our sermons, but it is because so much of the current we're swimming in forms us to believe the lie that we should have the good life right now, with every comfort given and every desire met. But Jesus doesn't call us to a life free from disappointment, and unfulfilled desires, and discomfort, and pain, and emotional anguish, and deep loss. The promise of Christianity is not ease or comfort or wealth or power. In fact, Jesus invites us to take up our cross - the symbol of suffering and humiliation and death - and follow him.

Paul's line here at the end of our passage, "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." is not a conditional statement for receiving our inheritance in Christ. It is an acknowledgement that the promise of every Christian life includes being crucified with Christ, dying to our flesh with him, putting our sin to death as he was put to death on the cross, enduring the painful tension of life in this sinful world while we wait for resurrection.

And the great hope of our faith is that we suffer while we wait, but on the other side of suffering with Christ comes glory with Christ. And friends, the glory of our inheritance is that we get the kingdom of God - all this crooked creation brought into alignment under his rule. We get the riches of God - all the glories of Creation ours in his kingdom. We get the promises of God - every sad thing made untrue and every wound redeemed. God's people, living in God's place. And friends, the thing that makes everything else pale in comparison is that in our inheritance, we get God. The dwelling place of God will be with man. No more separation. No more seeing in a mirror dimly. Life with him face to face. And from that place of ultimate rightness and wholeness will flow a river of glorious blessing forevermore.

John Newton wrote in the eighteenth century. He said, "suppose a man was going to New York to take possession of a large estate..." Let's say it's worth more than largest fortune on earth. "...and his carriage should break down a mile before he got to the city..." This is where we are in our walk toward our inheritance. "...which obliged him to walk the rest of the way; what a fool we should think him if we saw him wringing his hands and blubbering out during the remaining mile. 'My carriage is broken! My carriage is broken!'" For he is on his way to a vast inheritance. Why should a broken carriage trouble him!

Now, some of us have truly suffered. We don't make light of our suffering. It's real. It's not to be swept under the rug. But as we weep, we can also hope. That is what it means to suffer with Christ as a Christian. We can weep and say to ourselves, "Just one more mile. Then all these afflictions will be light and momentary. Just one more mile and I'll see the masterpiece he's been forging for my good. Just one more mile then glory, face to face with him. Just one more mile and every tear shall be wiped away."

## **IV. Conclusion**

So friends, as you walk through this life afflicted with Sin that you hate, as you are surrounded by so many things that make you feel weak and helpless and all you can do is cry out to your Father in heaven, as you - with tears - rest your hope on your inheritance, my prayer for you is that you would experience all these - not as fruitless, burdensome, meaningless hardships - but as shouts from the Holy Spirit, saying "Mine! He's mine! She's mine! Adopted Son of the Father! Co-heir with Christ!" The Spirit is saying, "I'm here! I've witnessed it! It's real! This is not in vain!" You belong to Christ. You Are a child of God.

And if you hear in all of this an assurance and security that you have not yet known, but feel drawn toward... it's possible that God the Holy Spirit is waking your heart even now to come to Christ, receive him as the one who paid for your sin on the cross, receive him knowing that to follow him means to die with him, and to have the promise of resurrection inheritance with him. Receive him and receive the Spirit who will testify to your Spirit, "You belong to Christ."