

## Introduction

Good morning, Union Church. My name is Kyle, I'm one of the pastors here, and it's a privilege to get to preach the Word of God to you this morning.

Last week, Pastor Ethan began Romans 8 for us by preaching on—and teaching us to memorize—the glorious opening to Romans 8: **“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.”**

It really is a glorious opening to a glorious chapter of the Bible.

I just want to share a quick testimony here.

I have been a Christian for as long as I can remember. My mom grew up in a Christian household, my dad became a Christian when I was a toddler, and they quickly immersed us in the church, taught us the gospel, surrounded me with the glorious blessing of a Christian home. People talk about privilege—about white privilege? That's privilege. The privilege of a Christian home. That's grace. I prayed and asked Jesus to save me when I was six years old after listening to an episode of the Adventures in Odyssey radio program.

And I meant it. I grew up doing all the Christian things. Camps in the summer. Memorizing verses at Awana. Involved in youth group. Going to church, serving in church. All the stuff.

I don't remember the first time I read Romans 8 or heard a sermon from Romans 8. But, I do remember, I think late in high school, hearing John Piper preach a sermon where he started the sermon by reciting Scripture from memory for about 15 minutes—including the entire chapter of Romans 8. And he did so in such a way that it was clear that he hadn't just memorized the words, he knew what they meant, and they were embedded into his soul in such a way that gave him life. Now you can find that recitation on YouTube, people have put music behind it, if you're like me, you can't listen to it without tearing up.[\[1\]](#)

But, back to me in high school. I was a Christian. And I was a “good” kid. I didn't get in trouble. I got good grades. I listened to my parents, mostly. I loved God, I was a leader in my youth group and served my church consistently.

Yet, I was also prideful. I cared far too much about what people thought of me. I was a teenage boy filled with lust. I loved the comforts and pleasures of the world. I had very little self-control.

And when it came time for me to leave my parents house and go to college, suddenly, the world was opened up to me. And my sinful flesh was eager to indulge. I thank God that he limited that indulgent, I'm sure it could have been far worse. But, I withdrew from involvement in my local church, I put myself above everything else, I fed my lust and my pride and my selfishness and my desire to lazily consume. I didn't seek the Lord continuously. I was a Christian, but in name only.

But, the Lord is gracious. And he drew me back, over time. He convicted me of sin, over time. He drew me back to real involvement in his local church, over time. And eventually, he called me to ministry—something I had never wanted. And, one of the biggest sanctifying factors in my life: He sent me a wife who loved God.

So, now, fast forward to about 2017 or so. I'm in my first year of marriage. I'm in my second year of seminary. I'm working as a pastoral intern at my church in addition to a part-time job as Ashley finished her grad school. Life is coming together. It seems like God has put us in the right places, at the right times, we're aimed at something.

But, here's the problem. While a good wife is a great sanctifying force, while learning about God in seminary, and serving God in the church is a great sanctifying force—getting married and going into ministry and serving your church doesn't solve your sin problem.

And as we got out of the honeymoon stages of our first year of marriage and began really acting like ourselves around each other—my sin began to rear it's ugly head in all the old ways. I was prideful, I was selfish, I put my own desires above anybody else, my old cravings for lust and sex filled me up, I was lazy toward any kind of effort that wouldn't contribute to my own vanity.

And I wasn't blind to those things, and I wasn't apathetic to those things, like I was so much in college—I hated them—yet I found myself doing them, being characterized by them, again and again and again. I felt, in a profound and cutting way, like Paul describes in Romans 7: **“I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”**

I thought I was doing everything right. I had left my secular job and entered ministry. I read my Bible and prayed more than ever before. I had married a good, God-loving woman. I was working hard to provide while she finished school. And yet, I saw—and my wife felt the consequences of—my sin more painfully and clearly than maybe ever before.

But, what comes right after Romans 7 is Romans 8.

The most vivid memory I have of Romans 8 in my life is being in our little seminary apartment, in the shower, leaning my head against the wall, weeping, and reciting: **“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.”** In those moments of disappointment, self-doubt—Romans 8 gave me life.

And it has done that, it has lifted me up, sustained me and grown me, and fed me—more times than I could count. I pray it could do the same for you.

But here's the thing. If you haven't tasted *any* of that, which I just described. If you haven't tasted despair and doubt, if you haven't lost the strength to swim in the waters of the Christian life and felt like you were drowning, if you haven't unearthed ugliness within that paralyzes and haunts you—then Romans 8 will simply bore you. It will not be *life* to you if you haven't trembled at death.

But, if you know something about the struggle of the Christian life, if you know something about the *fight* to kill sin and love God and love others—then Romans 8 will be life. It will soothe your soul and call you higher and give you hope and peace and life. So, let's pray now, that God would do that in us over the next 30 minutes or so, and then let's dive into our text.

## Main Point

Now, here is the main point today: **A Christian lives by the Spirit.**

The only way a Christian can change for the better, be more and more holy, the only way a Christian can have hope and endure in a difficult world, the only way a Christian can become a deeper disciple of Jesus, the only way a Christian can be a light in the world and impact their family and neighborhood with the gospel, is to live by the Spirit.

Now, we're going to ask three questions to unpack that:

1. **Why** do we need the Spirit in order to change?
2. **What** does the Spirit do to help us change?
3. **How** do we actively live *into* a Spirit-filled life?

But before we do that, let's ask the Lord to help us, by his Spirit.

### 1. Why do we need the Spirit to change?

Look at verse three with me: **"For God has done what the law could not do."**

Now, what is Paul talking about here? What exactly has God done? Why did we need God to intervene?

Well, we've talked a lot over the last few weeks about how the law—trying and trying to follow God's law and do religious deeds—can not make us right before God. In fact, there's really two things that Paul is alluding to.

One is that the law can't make us right before God *legally*. Because we can't keep it. We can't keep the law, we break it, so the law actually, in some ways, makes things worse for us. It exposes our "wrongness" before God and turns into an opportunity to disobey and dishonor God. Seen through the lens of the law, we will only ever be guilty before God.

But, God has done what the law could not do by making us right before him legally, that is, he "justified" us. He did so by sending Christ in the likeness of sinful flesh, but who never sinned, to take the punishment we deserved and to live a perfectly just, lawful life in our place. Because of

the cross, we are right before God, there is no more condemnation for us—that's what Pastor Ethan talked about last week. No condemnation. When God looks at us, he sees righteousness—the righteousness of his son.

But, there's another thing the law can't do. It can't make us right before God—another way to say that is righteous, holy, godly—*experientially*. It can't make us right before God *legally* and it can't make us right *experientially*. It can't actually change us. It can't transform us into the kind of people who live rightly and glorify God.

Why? Because, Paul says, it is **“weakened by the flesh.”**

Now, Paul isn't talking about our flesh simply as in your physical body, like “the reason you can't change and be a more godly person is that you are too limited by your physical nature.” Like, if you could just throw off this fleshy meat sack and get in tune with your soul, find nirvana, then you could be a godly person! No, that's not what Paul means here.

What Paul means here by flesh is simply the human nature, specifically the reality that every human being is *sinful* by nature. This is what he talked about in Romans 1 and 2 and 3 and 5—that we have inherited a sinful nature from Adam (our great-great-great-great grandfather) and everything we do is corrupted by it.

There is a part of you that loves sin. That worships created things instead of the Creator. That loves yourself above everything else. And that sinful part of every human being infects everything.

Oh, how different the viewpoint of the Bible is from the world. I was just reading something on social media the other day from a local yoga studio that essentially said, the way to happiness and peace is to orient your inner self with your surroundings, with your outer life, to bring them into alignment. And I thought: No! I don't want that! My inner self is horrible! The answer to my problems is not to be “more authentically me.” That would just bring even worse problems to an already messy world.

One of my favorite examples of how the Bible talks about this is actually Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is the one place where even non-Christians and agnostics might go to say: “Yes, Jesus is a great moral teacher.” You got feeding the hungry, the Golden Rule, judge not, lest you be judged. Well, in the same chapter as the Golden Rule, judge not, Matthew 7, Jesus is teaching on prayer, trying to convince his audience to ask God to supply for their needs. And he says, if your child asked you for a fish, would you give him a snake? If she asked you for bread, would you give him a rock? Of course not! So, he says, “if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven?”

Jesus just says, “Yeah, of course, you're evil, but...” He just assumes that! And Paul, here in Romans, has essentially said the same thing. The law can't save you, legally or experientially, because you're evil! In your flesh, you have no desire to please God, you're actually hostile toward him. And even if you wanted to, you wouldn't have the

ability to please him, because there is a latent part of you that will always want to worship anything but God.

So, there is no way you could change on your own, be a morally good and godly person on your own. There's no way to overcome the power of sin within us. And that's what Paul says God did for us. He sent Jesus Christ—in the same human nature we have but without sin—to “condemn sin in the flesh.”

Now, there's two ways you can condemn something. You could condemn something by declaring it to be evil, like “The Michigan senator recently condemned the protests at Columbia.” That is, they declared it bad, evil, guilty.

But there is another way to condemn something. A judge condemns someone when he both declares him guilty *and* sentences him. Like, you have a mobster who intimidates local businesses and facilitates all kinds of crime in a city. You don't merely need someone to get on TV and condemn his actions publicly. You need a judge to declare him guilty AND sentence him to jail. You need someone to overcome that guy's power and influence and lock him up, throw away the key!

And that's the sense that Paul is talking about here. God has not merely condemned sin as evil in Christ, he's overcome the power of sin in the flesh.

See, if you're anything like me, you're going to find that as a Christian, you will be able to condemn your sin by saying “That's wrong! This is bad! I hate this. It's evil!” You'll grieve it in your heart of hearts and you'll tell your closest friends how bad it is.

But you don't have the power to really condemn it. To kill it. To change. Don't you know what that's like? Don't you know what it's like to want to kill it, to see it as evil, but not to have the power in your flesh to lock it away and throw away the key. Some way, some how, that sinful flesh—that inordinate desire for approval, that burning lust for power and control, that impatient anger—it keeps getting free and putting you right back under its thumb.

Only God could step in and condemn sinful flesh for good. That's what Jesus did on the cross. He purchased that reality for eternity with his very own blood. And he sent his Spirit to work it out in space and time.

## **2. What does the Spirit do to help us change?**

How does this happen? We need the Spirit, God cannot leave us on our own, but what does the Spirit actually do to work out this godly transformation in real life, *sanctification*?

Well, there is much we could talk about here, but the key phrase that we see here is that the Spirit *dwells* in us. Look at verse 9.

**“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*.”**

Friends: If you are a Christian, if you have been united to Christ by faith, this is such an enormous comfort for you! This is essentially the glorious first question of the Heidelberg Catechism—a great Reformed document from the 16<sup>th</sup> century that we often cite or use to teach the faith.

**1. Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?**

*A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.*

**[Why do you belong to him?]** *He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.*

**[Why is it a comfort to belong to him?]** *He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.*

**[How do you know you belong to him?]** *Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.*

Don't you see how Paul is saying that here? This is such a great comfort—that the Spirit of Jesus, the very Spirit of God himself—dwells in you. It is proof that Jesus Christ has claimed you for his very own, and Christ has claimed you, he *will* complete the work he began in you, for Jesus Christ does not abandon projects that he begins.

Oh, that is such good news for my heart that sees the unfinished work of holiness in my life. It's so difficult to see, sometimes, the great progress that the Lord has made on my sanctification, when all I see is the work that is still left. But, in all that work, I am not my own, I belong body and soul to Jesus—and I know that because his Spirit has made a permanent home in me—and as C.S. Lewis says, he is not content to leave me as a little unfinished, dingy cottage. He is building a palace.[\[2\]](#)

Now. The question remains, how does this work? Why does the Spirit's dwelling in us actually produce the kind of change that we need? And again, there is much we could discuss here, but I just want to stick to one point today: The Spirit has *expulsive* power. Expulsive power. It expels.

Look at how Paul talks about what dwells in us in Romans 7:17 – **“So now, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”**

So, in the flesh, without God, what lives in Paul? What lives in you? Nothing good! Sin!

Now, that doesn't mean that Paul is worthless, or only worthy of scorn—the image of God still is embedded unto every human being, giving them worth beyond anything we could ever dream—but that's not what Paul is talking about here. He's talking about his capacity as a moral agent. His capacity (as he says in Romans 8) to please God and reflect his character. And on his own, only sin and evil dwells in him.

That is to say, the thing that drives him, that motivates him, that directs and determines his every thought, attitude, and action—is sin. And that sin needs to be evicted.

Last week, I was talking to a couple guys about a problem I've been having with my grill. See, over the course of the last couple of years, occasionally, I've found little tiny mouse pellets around and inside my grill. And this is a problem. It's not sanitary, I've got to clean it up, and cleaning the grill is a huge pain. I hate doing it. But last week, it reached a new level. See, Ashley wanted to make brats for dinner. So, she opened up the grill, and lo and behold, there was a big ball of leaves under the grate on one side. It was a nest. A little field mouse (and it turns out, four babies) had taken up residence in my grill.

Look—so many of you, Christians—are dealing with your sin like you're cleaning up mouse poop. You find some here and there, you try to deal with it. But it keeps coming back again and again, making a huge mess. There's some in crevices and places you can't even see. The problem isn't the poop. The problem is that there's a mouse living in your grill. The problem with you is not the sinful actions that comes out, it is the sinful nature that has taken up residence in your heart, that motivates you, that directs and determines your every thought, attitude, and action. It needs to be evicted!

So, I was telling this story to a couple guys at church, and somebody—I think it was Tom Gould—said, “Well, you know what'll get the mice out? Turn the grill on.”

Now, I didn't do that. But, Tom had a point. Fire and heat have excellent “expulsive” power. The mouse and the flame cannot exist in the same space. And look, the reality is that my grill is going to be filled by something. It's a dry, warm place, and I live with woods and trees and all kinds of animals all around me. If I don't use my grill—regularly filling it with heat and flame—something is going to make its home in there.

Listen, something is going to dwell in you. Your heart makes for an excellent home. Something is going to rule over you, direct you, guide you, master you.

By nature only sin dwells in us, we are directed, guided, motivated, oriented by sin. But when God himself dwells within us, when Jesus Christ the King of Kings and Lord of Lords dwells within us by his Spirit, we no longer are guided and directed and motivated and oriented by sin

and selfishness and evil, but by God himself! A new ruler has come to reign over you—he sits on the throne of your heart and rules—and he has kicked out, banished, dislodged sin from its former place of rule forever. As the Spirit fills you, dwells in you, it expels the previous rot that dwelt in you.

The only way for you to really change is for the sin that dwells in you to be replaced by a new, permanent tenant. And that's what Christ does when he sends his Spirit. He doesn't merely remove the cancer within, leaving a void and vacuum that will be filled again. He replaces it with a living, breathing person—his very own Spirit. And if the Spirit of God fills us, directs us, guides us—well then, we can be godly. If the Spirit of Jesus Christ fills us—only then can we imitate Christ.

### **3. We experience the work of sanctification by living into the Spirit.**

Now, all of that is true. It's reality. If you're a Christian, you know the Spirit, because he lives in you. If you have placed your trust in Christ, his Spirit dwells in you, you belong to him, and he will work out *life* in you.

That's all true.

But like we've said often in this series, what is true about you in reality does not always feel true in experience. And that's because while the Spirit really does dwell in you, if you are Christ's, the sinful nature is not fully expelled out until God resurrects you and glorifies you, making finally and fully perfect.

So, this is not an instantaneous process. It's gradual. The question, then, is, if the Spirit *really, actually* dwells within us and gives us power for change, how do we use it? How do we access it? How do we *feel* like the Spirit is doing this? How can we participate in it?

How can we experience the fullness of the Spirit's sanctifying power? That's the final thing we have to talk about today.

And there's three things, quickly, before we're done.

#### **First, you have to trust in Christ and submit to his lordship, by his Spirit.**

If you're not a Christian, this is the first step you must take. Real change can only come about by placing your faith in the work of Jesus. Only Jesus can make you right before God AND only Jesus can provide the power to change you. Because only Jesus has ever lived the kind of perfect life God requires and the kind of life that, ultimately, he wants us to live into!

The good news, of course, is that Christ did all that intentionally for you—that the sin that dwells in your flesh would be paid for by his blood and overcome by his Spirit. Trust in Christ and submit to him as your Lord and Savior—I'd love to talk more if you have questions about that.



Now, if you're a Christian here today, this is also the first step you must take.

See, in theory, you may have placed your trust in Christ and called him your Lord and Savior. You may have recognized that you need Jesus to pay for your sin, and gladly accepted that gift.

But in practice, you may be glad that Christ is king out there, but not all that interested in him actually dwelling in you, reigning in you. And if that's the kind of heart attitude you have, then change is only ever going to be fleeting, momentary. Not lasting, and rich, and deep.

One of the ways Jesus equips us to change is by having a mindset shift. You have to see yourself as totally directed and ruled and guided not by your own instincts and desires and impulses, but by the will and character of Jesus, who fills your very soul with his Spirit.

Acknowledge his reign, desire his reign over you—that's the first step.

## **2. You have to depend on the Spirit for change.**

This goes back to what we've talked about all through Romans—especially a few weeks ago at the beginning of Romans 7. What you need in order to change is not to hold yourself to an external standard more tightly—you don't need to become a better law-keeper. Your ability to follow the rules will always fail you.

What you need is to go deeper into the gospel. And what is the gospel but the fact that God chooses to do *for us* what we cannot do ourselves.

So, you've got to depend first on the Spirit for change, not first on your own ability to will your way to being a better person.

Now let me give you an example of how that works. Going back to my testimony at the very beginning of this, the turning point for me in fighting my sin and expelling some of the deepest set sins in my heart—particularly lust and pornography—the turning point for me was a very distinct moment. It goes back to what we talked about regarding the Spirit's expulsive power.

I realized that I could not simply hate my sin, but I had to love Jesus. If I didn't love Jesus, if I didn't want Jesus, if I didn't yearn for Jesus, my heart was going to love sin. My heart is a worship factory, a desire factory. If I didn't desire Jesus, I was going to desire sin, no matter how much I told myself sin was bad for me. I needed an expulsive love for Jesus to kill my love for sin.

The problem is that I couldn't just make myself love Jesus. In the moment of wanting selfishness and indulgence, I couldn't just make myself not want sin. Affections of the heart don't work that way. And the biggest shift for me, was realizing that all my efforts to be disciplined, to avoid temptation, all of it—they were useless if I didn't love Jesus in the place of sin. And only the Holy Spirit could cultivate in me a love for Jesus.

So, I started praying. I started depending on the Spirit. Every day, for—I don't know—six months, maybe a year, I began my day asking God: Lord, give me a deep love for Jesus! I know in my head how glorious he is, but I need to feel it! Help me love Jesus more than anything else. Lord, create in me the thing you desire! I did that every day. And, don't get me wrong, I also did things. I avoided temptation, I got more disciplined about reading my Bible, I thought about Jesus more—but it started with a newfound dependence. And one way you can cultivate a heart of dependence is by asking—before you *do* anything to seek the change you want, before you Google strategies or put together a master spreadsheet of goals, or whatever—ask the Spirit to give you a heart that loves Jesus, that loves his character, that wants to live like him. Ask him, and he will not ignore your pleas.

### **Third, finally, set your mind on the things of the Spirit.**

This is what Paul says, right? Those who are of the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. He says something similar in Romans 12:1, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

We are thinking beings. One way you fan the flame of the Spirit is by actively training your mind to dwell on God, on his works, on his Word, on his Son. That's what the things of the Spirit are, after all. The “things of the Spirit” are not some vague “spiritual” things. Going to yoga or getting your palm read is not “setting your mind on things of the Spirit.”

The Spirit is the Spirit of *Christ*. He's the Spirit of *God*. The things of the Spirit are the things of God, of Jesus. The more your mind is attuned to naturally, instinctively think about him, about his work, his holiness, his attributes—the more natural the holy life he calls you to will be.

Now, the most fundamental step to this, is, of course, reading the book that the Spirit wrote. Put your mind on the things of the Spirit—here's a whole book of those things. Read it! Think about it! Think hard about a verse until you really feel like you understand it. Sit in your Bible long enough to get into worship!

But, of course, you can't only do it on your own. You need help. You need people to keep you accountable, to remind you to set your mind on the things of the Spirit. You need people to point you back to the gospel again and again. And one way I'm going to encourage you to do that this summer is by joining one of our book clubs.

Look, each of these books will point you to things of the Spirit. Pick one! Read it! Then talk about it with others, helping them to set their mind on those things, and vice versa.

Now, you might sit there and say: “I'm just really not a reading guy, I don't like to read.” Okay, well, then tell me: How are you going to set your mind on the things of the Spirit this summer. You might not like to read. Get an audio book, and talk about it with somebody. Get an audio Bible. If you don't have a plan for how you're going to set your mind on the things of the Spirit, your mind will drift to things of the flesh. You'll spend all summer thinking about which lake you're going on the weekend, which movie you're going to see next, which accomplishment will best serve your personal gain, fantasy football coming in the fall.

So, how are you going to do it? This is how you fan the flame. If you are in Christ, the Spirit is in you. He's there. Christ has purchased your sanctification, and sent his Spirit to carry it out. If we are going to be deep disciples of Jesus Christ, we must long for, yearn for, and look for the Spirit to do just that.

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[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i867dGtIFo>.

[2] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*