

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF GOD BY THE SPIRIT

Romans 8:1-17
Key Verse: 8:14

“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.”

Romans 8 is one of the most beloved passages in the entire Bible. Paul begins by telling us that there is no condemnation and ends by declaring that nothing can separate us from God’s love. This blessed life is only for **“those who are in Christ Jesus.”** In chapter 7 Paul taught that we are released from the law, yet it still has an important function in our lives. The law makes us aware of the power of sin living in us so that we cry out to Jesus for his deliverance. When Jesus rescues us, our anguish turns to victory and we give thanks to God. In chapter 8 Paul explains how this deliverance happens. It comes by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Paul mentions the Spirit 21 times in chapter 8.¹ Paul tells us how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of believers. John Stott, in his introduction to this chapter, commented, “Thus the Christian life is essentially life in the Spirit, that is to say, a life which is animated, sustained, directed and enriched by the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit true Christian discipleship would be...impossible.”² Experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is vital. However, some of us take this lightly, and as a result, we stop growing. Our Christian life seems to be nothing more than duty. This burdens us and robs us of thanksgiving, joy and peace. Yet when we live by the Spirit our lives can be dynamic, powerful and victorious. Let’s learn what it means to live by the Spirit, and how to do so.

First, the Spirit sets us free from the power of sin and death (1-4). In 7:6 Paul taught that now we serve in the new way of the Spirit. In chapter 8, he develops how the Holy Spirit works in us. To begin with, in verse 1, he declares what God has accomplished for us through Christ: **“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus....”** This is really good news that we need to meditate on and accept deeply until our minds, which were imbued with condemnation, are renewed. When we were under the law, it exposed our sins and brought judgment and condemnation. We suffered with a guilty conscience and fear of death. It was unbearable. So many people commit sin at random only to find the burden of condemnation intolerable. This is why they abuse drugs and alcohol and, in some cases, even take their own lives.

¹ {8:2,4,5[2],6,9[3],10,11[2],13,14,15[2],16,23,26[2],27[2]}

² Stott, John, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), p. 216.

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One woman secretly indulged in adultery during a religious festival. It seemed to be enjoyable. But she was caught in the act by the religious police. She was brought before the public to be condemned and stoned to death. According to the law, it is what she deserved as the consequence of her sin. Everyone wanted to condemn her. But they could not because Jesus revealed that they were the same sinners. This is not just an old, old story, but still a reality. We all deserve to be condemned and stoned to death because of our sins. How did Jesus deal with her? Jesus said, **“Neither do I condemn you; go now, and leave your life of sin”** (Jn 8:11). There is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. A crushing burden has been lifted from us and we are now set free. God’s declaration of no condemnation is more than forgiveness; it is a declaration of righteousness that brings full reconciliation. Some people try to forgive without reconciliation. For example, when King David’s son Absalom murdered one of his brothers in revenge, he went into exile. Three years later David allowed him back into the kingdom. David forgave him but did not reconcile with him, saying, **“He must not see my face”** (2Sa 14:24). God did not treat us like that. He not only forgave us but fully reconciled us. Since God declared our righteousness, no one can condemn us. Nor should we condemn ourselves. We should firmly believe there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus.

How did this happen? Verse 2 says, **“...because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.”** It is a power struggle. The power of sin and death is like a tornado; once we are pulled into it we cannot resist it. Only the power of the Spirit is greater. He sets us free from the power of sin and death. Last week I prayed with someone whose mother had just passed away. This is a vulnerable time in which people can regret things said or done, or things not said or done, and fall into condemnation. But this woman was full of hope, joy and thanksgiving. She shared a heart-moving testimony of God’s work in her family. All I could do was listen and agree. The Spirit who gives life has set her free. The Spirit of Christ is more powerful than sin and death.

Verses 3-4 explain this very well: **“For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”** The law tells us that if we obey it, we can be righteous. But we cannot obey it because our flesh is weak and sinful. The law requires that anyone who breaks it must pay the penalty of death. It is merciless. Though the law is holy, righteous and good, it is powerless to save sinners. There was no hope and no way out. But God, in his

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great mercy, provided the way. How? He sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. His Son Jesus took on the weakness of human flesh and became like one of us. He came not only to share our experiences and teach us the truth; he came to die for our sins. He offered himself as a sin offering. As the sinless Son of God, his offering was perfect, once for all, completely effective and eternal. God's righteousness was fully satisfied. Moreover, the righteous requirement of the law was fully met in us. Now anyone who comes to Jesus Christ by faith can be righteous (2Co 5:21). He made us righteous so that we may live according to the Spirit, not the flesh. God has provided everything we need to live a new life. Thanks be to God!

Second, the Spirit gives life (5-11). To enjoy the new life that God has given us we must live according to the Spirit. To explain what this means, Paul contrasts living by the Spirit with living by the flesh (5-8). Here “**flesh**” refers to the fallen, ego-centric human nature,³ or the sin-dominated self.⁴ The “**Spirit**” creates new life in us and dwells with us. Those who live by the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires. On the other hand, those who live by the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires (5). Sometimes we think that we control our own minds. But that is not true. Our minds are not independent; they are either under the control of the flesh or the Spirit. If our minds are controlled by the flesh, we always think about gratifying sinful desires. Some have categorized these into the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth. Sinful desires devour our minds and make us crazy. Ultimately, they lead to death. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law nor can it do so (7). Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God (8).

In contrast, when our minds are controlled by the Spirit we are freed from sinful desires. We can think about how to please God creatively, willingly and joyfully. This leads us to life and peace. The unseen reality is that two worlds exist at the same time: the realm of the flesh and the realm of the Spirit. They are totally different and in conflict with each other (Gal 5:17). Everyone is one realm or the other. At first, it may be hard to tell which realm a person is in. But as time goes by it becomes more and more obvious. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace (6).

³ Cranfield, Charles E.B., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, in *The International Critical Commentaries* (T. and T. Clark; vol. I, 1975), p. 372.

⁴ Ziesler, John, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, in *The Trinity Press International New Testament Commentaries* (SCM and Trinity Press International, 1989), p. 195.

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After describing the two ways of life and their outcomes, Paul speaks words of assurance to the Romans: **“You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you”** (9a). When anyone believes in Jesus, God gives us his Holy Spirit and we are born again. We transfer from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit. The Spirit of God regenerates us and dwells in us all the time. This is what makes a person a genuine Christian. If someone does not have the Spirit of Christ they are not genuine Christians, no matter what they may say about themselves (9b). True Christians are controlled by the Spirit of Christ and follow his guidance rather than their own thoughts and desires. The Spirit gives life to our souls as we live in this world (10). The Spirit animates, strengthens and empowers us to live a dynamic life. One person I know was like a zombie who never expressed anything to anyone. But when the Holy Spirit came upon him, he was changed. On his wedding day, he said, “I do” very boldly.

Not only does the Spirit give life to us at present, but he will give life to our mortal bodies by raising us in the future (11). This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Our bodies are destined to perish because of our sins. We experience aches and pains, sicknesses, handicaps, and aging. However, when we believe in Jesus we can have hope. When Christ comes again, the perishable body will be raised imperishable; the dishonorable body will be raised in glory; the weak body will be raised in power; the natural body will be raised a spiritual body (1Co 15:42-44). How is this be possible? It is by the life-giving Spirit (1Co 15:45). Through the Holy Spirit we have a dynamic life now and a great future hope!

Third, the Spirit leads us to live as God’s children (12-17). In these verses, Paul shares what it means to live by the Spirit. Verse 12 says, **“Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation - but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it.”** Some people think that living under grace means we have no obligation of any kind. If someone says, “We have an obligation,” they immediately respond, “That’s legalistic!” But Paul clearly says that we have an obligation. What is our obligation? It is to live according to the Spirit, not the flesh. If we live according to the flesh, we will die (13a). Living by the Spirit means putting to death the misdeeds of the body; then we will live (13b). In the past, we had no power to put to death our bodily misdeeds. But now, the Holy Spirit enables us to do so. God’s will for us is to be sanctified and become like Jesus (8:29; 1Th 4:3). Paul says, **“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving”** (Eph 5:3-4). The Holy Spirit wants to

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sanctify us and help us grow to be like Jesus. So, we should cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and not grieve him (Eph 4:30).

It is not always easy to put to death the misdeeds of our bodies. Sometimes it requires painful struggle. In verses 14-17, Paul encourages us by sharing the blessings of living by the Spirit. In verse 14 he says, **“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.”** The word “led” implies that the relationship of the Spirit of God to his children is like that of a shepherd to his sheep. The Spirit of God is our Shepherd who protects us, provides for us, guides us, and eventually leads us to his kingdom. All we have to do is follow him. What blessings does the Holy Spirit give those who follow him?

First of all, we can call God “Abba, Father” (15-16). Verse 15 says, **“The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”** In the past, we used to suffer from fear of many kinds: fear of abandonment or rejection, fear of the future, fear of failure, fear of judgment, fear of death, and so on. Though we tried to overcome these fears, we could not do so because we were under the influence of evil spirits. However, now the Holy Spirit leads us, and we have nothing to be afraid of. The Holy Spirit has brought about our adoption to sonship. It is important for us to understand the meaning of “adoption.” In the Greco-Roman culture of Paul’s day, “...an adopted son was a son deliberately chosen by his adoptive father to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate; he was no whit (not in the smallest degree) inferior in status to a son born in the ordinary course of nature, and might well enjoy the father’s affection more fully and reproduce the father’s character more worthily.”⁵ Since we have been adopted as God’s children our relationship now one of father and child, not master and slave. Slaves are afraid of their masters. They are in a constant state of nervousness and anxiety. However, children are free and unafraid of anything, even making mistakes. It is because they know their father loves them unconditionally. Children run to their father’s arms, calling, “Daddy! Daddy!” Just look at Titus Groters. In the same way we can come to God freely and find affection, comfort, and security in his arms. He gives us wisdom, strength, courage, true rest, joy and peace. Though we live in a troubled world, we can always go to our Father for help. What a blessing and privilege we have!

How can we know that we have become children of God? Verse 16 says, **“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”** In the

⁵ Bruce, F.F., *Romans, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1985), p. 167.

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past we could not call God “Father.” We felt a great distance and it seemed awkward and weird. However, since we have received his Spirit we call God “Father” very naturally.

Another privilege we have as God’s children is that we are his heirs (17). Verse 17a says, **“Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...”** Slaves, no matter how excellent they are, cannot inherit their master’s estate. But children, even if they are not perfect, are heirs. If a father is poor, the inheritance might not be worth considering. But if the father is exceedingly wealthy, the inheritance is very valuable. What kind of Father do we have? Our Father is the King of kings. He is the Creator God and the Giver of life. We inherit his kingdom. We inherit his glory, power and privileges. The phrase “co-heirs with Christ” implies that we will enjoy the same glory, power and privileges as Christ does. We will reign with Christ forever (2Ti 2:12)!

There is, however, a condition. Verse 17b says, **“...if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”** When we suffer it is hard to see the glory. Rather, we are sorrowful, lonely, regretful and may shrink back. However, when we suffer with Christ to receive his glory our suffering is very meaningful. When we know this, we can be joyful and thankful like the apostles. When they preached the gospel, the Sanhedrin called them in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (Ac 5:40-41). Christ suffered so much for our sins. He was flogged and nailed to a cross. After his suffering, he entered his glory. Christ set us an example that we should follow in his steps (1Pe 2:21). When we suffer with Christ, we will share his glory.

Our life of faith does not depend on our own willpower or strength. We are led by the Spirit as children of God. He gives us life and peace. We have an obligation to put to death the misdeeds of our bodies. We have the privilege of having fellowship with God, calling him, “Father.” The Holy Spirit is always with us and enables us to live as God’s children. Let’s trust the Holy Spirit and follow the Holy Spirit and live as children of God.