

IN THE FLESH OR IN THE SPIRIT

Romans 8:5–17

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Romans 8:5–17 (NIV)

“Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

A central concern of Paul’s letter to the Romans is to grapple with the matter of how it is that we become righteous. And righteousness is thought of and taught in two ways. There is an imparted righteousness of God, which we receive as a free gift. It is God’s gift to us whereby we stand as uncondemned persons in God’s presence. There is, in addition to this, a displayed

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righteousness—where what, in fact, God has declared to us in the actuality of our experience comes to pass. The word that is most frequently used for this type of displayed righteousness, or a righteousness which is evident in the eyes of others, is called “sanctification.”

We began looking, especially, at that theme last week when we noted that that statement, “There is no condemnation of those who are in Christ Jesus,” and the verses following that through verse 4, taught us that not only as Christians could we become free from the guilt, or the penalty, of sin, but, as well, Christ designed that we should walk free from the power of sin—it no longer having dominion over us. But through Christ, the indwelling Spirit within us, we have power and authority to live as free sons and daughters of God.

Now in achieving this power over the power of sin, there are certain things implicitly that Romans is rejecting as a means of gaining mastery over the flesh or our sinful nature. I say implicitly because Paul is not advancing these sorts of things in order to become free from the power of sin. He’s talking about something else. You do not become free from the power of sin in the flesh by ignoring it, by saying, “I’ll do what I want. Thank God I’m a Christian, and I’m saved, and I’ve got my asbestos suit on, and it’s all right.” Ignore and just float along.

Nor can we exorcise it. It would be nice if we could cast out the flesh, cast out our angry temper, our critical tongues, lustful spirit, and the like—just cast it out. This would be the logical place in the doctrine of sanctification if that were a means to having more righteousness. In terms of its displaying factor, if exorcism were the way to do it, this is where we’d expect to find it. Simply gather around, lay hands, and cast it out. You cannot cast out the flesh. You can cast out demons, but you don’t cast out the flesh.

Nor does he tells us that what is needed is a second definite experience of grace called sanctification, where in one fell swoop we become so instantly righteous that we never sin again

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in the rest of our Christian experience. Once you've had this experience, you are perfect. This is the place for him to state that if that is what is really happening in gaining power over sin.

Nor is he saying—and Romans 7 is the clincher for this—that if you grit your teeth and hang on and exercise your willpower, you can overcome anything that is pressing against you.

The key to being placed in the Spirit is to have a living relationship. As I indicated last week, Congress cannot pass an act which mandates that a vine produce grapes. By its very nature, the vine produces from itself the grape. So by being linked with the Spirit of Christ, we begin producing those things in our life which indeed give us power over sin. In these verses, verse 5 through 17, we find Paul contrasting the life of the flesh and the life of the Spirit. He gives us some very concrete ways to help us to access where we are at as persons.

Before we look at characteristics of the flesh, we might just take a moment to deal with the definition because there are many ways the term “flesh” can be used in the Bible. Three major ways we look at momentarily.

One way is to simply describe our mortal existence, our humanity. In this sense, it is a positive definition. Christ came according to the flesh. He was a real human being. That's one aspect to the word “flesh.”

But another way in which “flesh” is used is that it describes the sinful element in our nature.

Perhaps most clearly, Galatians 5:19 and following gives us a helpful idea of what is involved in this understanding of “flesh.” The works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. The manifestations, in other words, of life without God. Not something simply sensual or sexual, but that whole of humanity which is turned against God. It is this idea or this aspect of flesh which is being spoken of in Romans 8. It is this sort of flesh which is against God.

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The third way in which “flesh” is used—not in Romans 8, but in 1 Corinthians 3—is to describe believers who begin reverting to pre-Christian behavior and thinking. He tells the Corinthians, “You are behaving like ordinary men. You’re behaving like the flesh if there are divisions among you.”

I. There are ways that you can know if you are living what may be called flesh-oriented life.

Paul articulates them very clearly.

A. The first way that we know if we are living in the flesh is if we have a flesh-oriented thought life. “Those who are in the flesh mind the things of the flesh” (Romans 8:5). Again, I repeat we must not make the mistake of associating the word “flesh” with sensual. So all of a sudden, if we’re examining our minds, we are thinking, “I’m not sensually-oriented in my thought life.

Therefore, this does not pertain to me.” Sensuality is a part of living in the flesh, but it is not the totality of what is meant by the word. Neither must we be guilty of taking the cardinal sorts of things that are easy to attack—money, fun, and fame—to say if you’re making money, having fun, or seeking fame, therefore, out you go! If one is treating these things with the wrong sort of perspective and they’re becoming ends in themselves, it would be wrapped up in the meaning of being in the flesh. But a flesh-oriented thought life is a thought life which is going through our existence without the Father, without the presence of God in it. It is seeking things. It is seeking fun. It is seeking personal fulfillment without ever a care or mindedness toward God.

I think in the Scripture it is most represented in the Prodigal Son who spent the resources of the father without the father being present. That is what is meant by living apart from God. It’s taking the thing which God has given you—your life and your health and your abilities—and spending them and living them apart from God.

I think I can give a concrete human illustration of this within our own family. This past week we had at one time six children in our home between the ages of eight and eleven. That is an

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experience by itself! They were fairly good, but I was home and in the back room reading, and the six kids were in front and all of a sudden George comes trotting into where I was, looking for something. I see him trot through the room. I know his mind is on other things and not on me. All of a sudden I say, “There’s my cute, bright, little son whom I love. Isn’t he the picture of life and love?” And I say to him, “George, would you come over here? I want to hug you and give you a kiss.” Whereupon he promptly drops all he’s doing, comes over, lets me give him a hug and a kiss and then he goes back to his play and everything’s ok. As his father, I’m glad that he’s involved in having fun. I’m not against fun. But what if he tries to live in my house without ever being aware of my affection and attention toward him, and he attempts to spend the life—which he has through his heritage in our family—without me? That becomes an oriented life away from the father.

Inevitably, the flesh-oriented life is not thinking of God, does not want to be embraced by God, and, indeed, does not come to God. So if your life is dominated by your own ideas and your own concerns—without a care for God’s concerns and God’s ideas and God’s perspectives toward you—it’s the first sure indication that you are in the flesh. And if you’re in the flesh, you’re outside God’s salvation. This is the whole impact of what Paul is saying here in Romans 8.

B. Another indication he gives to us for living in the flesh is that death is a characteristic of the flesh-oriented life. He notes that to set the mind on flesh is death. You say, “I don’t understand that, because there are people who have a thought life which is very absent from attention toward God. Yet they’re not dead. What do you mean dead?” We try to come back to the scriptural definition of the word “dead.” That involves, first of all, a spiritual deadness which eventually makes its way into a physical deadness when we pass on. One can be dead in more than simply lying in a coffin. One can be dead while living. That’s the point of the Scripture.

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If, for example, someone were to attend a symphony, if they are tone deaf, they are not going to appreciate the symphony anything like the person who is alive with their ear and is understanding of the music that is being played. They will walk away saying, “Wasn’t that fantastic?” And the other says, “Well, it sounded sort of rag-tag to me. I didn’t really like it all that well.” The reason why they don’t like it is because they’re tone deaf. This quality of deadness is related to this matter of tone deaf.

Have you ever seen within a service—or reading the Scripture or in hearing the Scripture proclaimed—that there are some who are coming alive. They’ll say, “God touched my heart! He was speaking to me in that service.” And another person who is without Christ may walk away and not feel anything and sort of wonder what all these crazy people are doing together and what is touching them. It’s impossible for them to feel God and to relate to God because they’re dead. And in order to come from that position of deadness, there must be the work of the Spirit in their life, whom they invite. Then one becomes alive.

So when something is dead, nothing that happens phases them, and they don’t move. So if one is spiritually dead, one recognizes as Paul said in 1 Corinthians that, “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him. He’s not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Flesh cannot understand the Spirit, for the flesh is dead.”

C. The third thing, which results in a flesh-oriented life, is enmity with God. “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law. Indeed cannot. And those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:7-8).

The reason why the flesh—or sinful human nature, human nature without Jesus Christ—is hostile to God is that human nature insists that it has the right to define what is right and what is wrong, and as well as to define its own understanding of God. Therefore, there is no way to tell the flesh—human nature—apart from God, who God really is.

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The word “God” is very loosely used in our culture, so that if a person says, “I believe in God,” they may mean an entirely different thing than saying, “I believe in the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Often, a person, when they say, “I believe in God,” is really saying, “I believe in my idea of God. And this is what I believe about God...” That idea of God may be in direct contrast to what is being revealed in the Scripture, in the person of Jesus Christ. And if that idea is in contrast of what He reveals of himself then it inevitably is in enmity with them. It is idolatry. It is the making of a god that is a substitute for the God that has really been revealed to us in Christ, our Lord. It is hostile to God. This enmity with God occasions because a person does not accept what Jesus himself is saying, what the apostles are saying. I believe in God. But if a person says, “I believe in God,” but then on the other hand says, “I do not believe that I’m in need of grace. I cannot believe that I’m a sinner. Most of me is good. I do not believe that Christ is my Savior because I don’t believe that my condition was desperate enough to warrant that someone would die for me. That’s sort of primitive to believe that a sacrifice would square matters with God. And I don’t believe, either, in this idea of a future judgment where God divides, in the presence of Jesus Christ, the world into sheep and goats, the right and left, heaven and hell. I don’t accept all of that.” When you come down to it, you really find that what Paul is saying is indeed the truth—that a person who cannot accept these conclusions, who does not accept these conclusions, inevitably is in a state of hostility with God. And where that hostility exists, God cannot be pleased because the condition for pleasing is, first of all, agreement. No wonder the flesh, therefore, cannot submit to God’s laws.

D. A fourth matter that is an indication of a flesh-oriented life is a life of Christlessness.

“Anyone who does not,” Paul says in verse 9, “have the Spirit of Christ, does not belong to Him.” The conclusion, therefore, is clear. The flesh-oriented life does not have Christ. Christ has been crucified in vain. Christ’s death means nothing to the central human nature, apart from God.

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He bled in vain. He was wounded in vain. His travail was for nothing. He was simply, maybe, a glorious human mortal who set an exemplary pattern in His suffering, but He was nothing more than that. His blood is shed to the ground, and it has no more power than any other person's blood that's ever been shed. It means nothing. Therefore, Christ, according to Revelation 3:20, who all along has been standing on the outside of the human heart knocking for entrance, is still left standing there. There is no inviting Him in. There is no dining with Him. There is no supping with Him. No experience with Him. These are the marks of a flesh-oriented life.

I would simply ask you, do they describe you or do they not describe you? Is your thought life never coming to grips with an effort to please God and centering on Him? Are you spiritually dead? Are you at a point of enmity with God? Are you Christless in your life?

I mention these things because, as Christians, these are immensely helpful questions. They are the first kinds of questions we ask in order to gain an assurance of our standing with God if we're born again. Sometimes, as believers, we fail to have the kind of assurance that we should have in respect to our salvation. We sort of have a hope-so. "I hope I'm saved. I've done what I'm supposed to, so I guess I am."

I want to ask you very honestly and forthrightly, as I have just taken these moments to go over a flesh-oriented life. And you've been sitting there. Maybe you're not quite sure, or there are doubts that sometimes arise in your life as to whether or not you're really God's child. You've followed the Scripture. You've confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior, and you've truly believed in your heart, but the devil will come along and say, "You're not too sure about that, are you?" As I have described these qualities and you've sat there, you've been reacting mentally, cognitively, you've been saying, if you're a Christian, as I've gone through each one, "But that does not describe me. Because my thoughts do turn to God. My thoughts do turn to the Spirit of God. I'm not living solely for this world alone. And neither am I dead. I am hearing the Word today. I'm

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alive toward God in this service. And at least—if I'm not a six-foot giant—I'm alive at least enough that I'm a baby. You can't tell me I'm dead because I know that my spirit is responding to what is being said. Neither am I at enmity with God. I confess and I believe I indeed stand in need of God's grace. I believe what Christ did for me on the cross when He saved me. I believe that His blood was not spilled in vain. It was for me." I would say, as you go down this checklist of questions and you find yourself reacting, "No! That's not me!" that is already a tremendous positive test for you that the Spirit of God is coming to you, first of all, on a cognitive level and saying, "You're not in the flesh. You're in the Spirit."

These are the marks of the flesh-oriented life.

II. But there are marks, as well, of the Spirit-oriented life.

We want to look at some of these because these form the primary focus of the chapter today.

As a Pentecostal, which I am, I realize I must judge my theology as a Pentecostal by the Word of God. Sometimes, what we mean by a Spirit-oriented life is not necessarily exactly what the Scriptures are teaching. Because we mean, perhaps, a particular emotional state, and what the Scripture is saying is that there are, first of all, a set of objective definitions as to what constitutes indeed a Spirit-controlled or a Spirit-dominated life.

So we want to look at these characteristics of a person who is in the Spirit, that is in Christ.

A. The first characteristic is that the person who is in the Spirit has a Spirit-oriented thought life.

Very clearly Paul indicates in the last half of verse 5, "Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." We must be careful to exclude certain things. For we have a tendency, as religious people, to substitute religious terminology for scriptural words.

This does not mean that one has a church-oriented thought life. Nor does it mean what is religious. There are many religious people, there are many church-oriented people who do not necessarily have a life which is truly oriented toward Jesus Christ. Religion in itself can be a

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manifestation of flesh or sinful human nature. If you don't believe that, travel around the world's religions, and even certain sectors of Christianity, and you find a deadness and an orthodoxy and a form which is an abomination. It is also spirituality. This being Spirit-thought-life-oriented does not simply mean something mystical, or a person always is in the other world, as the old saying goes, "They're so heavenly minded, they're no earthly good." That's not what is being spoken of here.

I think to get a hold of this, we need to compare what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 2:11:

"What person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of a man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." So the Spirit is the only one who can truly relate to us in our existence, in our relationship to the thoughts of God because He knows God.

What are the criteria by which we know we are moving toward a Spirit-dominated thought life?

You find your thought life turning toward God. This is where the Spirit is heading us. Jesus has said that, "When the Spirit comes, He will testify to you of Me" (John 15). And the Spirit will glorify or make Christ large and important. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of unceasing praise and worship. So to be Spirit-minded is to be coming toward God with praise and worship and adoration. Not every second of your existence. I think it's more like the term Paul uses where he says that we pray unceasingly. The word is used to describe someone who has a hacking cough. It doesn't mean they're coughing all the time. It simply means the cough keeps interrupting their routine. I think we press that word "spiritual" a little bit too hard and say, "If a person isn't every minute of the day praying or doing something religious, they're not really spiritual. If you really want to be spiritual, then extricate yourself from everything that's related to the world. Quit your job. Don't watch TV. Don't drive a car. Separate yourself completely."

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We're in the world, but not of it. And a Spirit-dominated thought life is one that is moving us toward God—adoration, praise, learning, worship. In the Spirit of God, also, we get another key indication that we're having a Spirit-dominated thought life. The Spirit is making us aware of our eternal existence. The Spirit is probing us—indeed, in the words of Jesus, which the Spirit makes alive. “What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?”

(Matthew 16:26). If you've never meditated deeply on that question, if that question has never mattered to you, if you don't really care about your eternal existence or your soul, it's a sure indication that your Spirit-oriented thought life is nonexistent. But if you have struggled with that question and come alive by answering it as Jesus would have, it's evidence that the Spirit has been focusing in on your existence and making you aware of your own destiny.

The Spirit also is concerned about the body of Christ because together the Spirit ministers to us as we form up or we make up the body of Christ. So a Spirit-oriented thought life is one that is heading us in right relationships and attitudes towards other believers.

The Spirit also is concerned for the world. Because the Spirit seeks to be outpoured upon all flesh, touch every human being with the living instrument of the good news of Jesus. So the Spirit-minded Christian is one that is alive to the message of Jesus that His gospel is to come to all the world.

These are some of criteria of the Spirit-oriented thought life.

B. But another characteristic of the spiritual life, life in the Spirit is not only a thought life, which is headed and controlled by the Spirit of God, but it is also a life of love and peace. Paul says this so beautifully “To set the mind on the flesh is death. But to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” Life, here, is a real contrast to death, which is a work of the flesh. Life.

How do you know that there is life? I would use the simple analogy that if you want it find out if a baby is alive or not, you stay in the room with the baby for eight hours or so. You will soon

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find out if the baby is alive. A true mark of aliveness, it seems to me, is hunger and thirst. You can put a bottle in a doll's mouth all you want. You can hold it there night and day, but if it's not alive, it's not going to take anything. But a real baby is something else. And a mark of life in God is this hunger and thirst that develops for us toward the things of God. I would not try to measure. Some people are fatter than other people. I think some's hunger and thirst is greater than others. So I'm not going to try to say, "Eight ounces is enough. If you thirst eight ounces' worth, then that is life." If you thirst at all, if you hunger at all, if you're seeking to grow in God at all, that's a mark of life. "Like newborn babes," Peter says, "long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation, for you have tasted the kindness of the word." The believer has needs within him and is aware of them—real things that reach out for life.

The believer also, in the Spirit, has peace. That's a real contrast to what he has in the flesh.

Notice Paul does some interesting parallels. In verses 5 and 6, he contrasts the results of living according to the flesh and living according to the Spirit. But when he comes to verses 7 and 8, he omits some things, and I'll read it as he might have written it. I think peace is the summary word, which can be used for the things he did not say. For example, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile toward God. Whereas the mind that is set on the Spirit is not at enmity with God. The mind set on the flesh does not submit to God's law. The mind set on the Spirit does. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Whereas those that are in the Spirit please God." All of these positive things are summed up by this word "peace." It means well-being, a state of contentment. It means peace in relationship with God. It means that the old restlessness is gone, and there is a state of satisfaction and settlement in regard to the question of, "Have I settled accounts with God?"

The relationship with self, also, is a relationship of peace. There may be turmoil on occasion—and even continual struggle—but there is a basicness that one no longer is saying with the writer

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of Ecclesiastes, “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.” For one has received an inheritance and possession and a purpose in life, so that the Christian, as he discovers Christ, is no longer living as an aimless, wandering person without purpose and hope in the world. His peace inevitably leads to peace in relationship to others. Peace with God and peace with self spills over. So in the Spirit, we have peace.

C. A third quality of the Spirit life, or the life in the Spirit, is that the Spirit of God dwells in us. “Christ in you,” Paul says. Verse 9: “The Spirit of God really dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him.” Notice, as a technical matter, that the Spirit is called both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. There is no distinction between these. The one Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, may be appropriately referred to as the Spirit of God, or the Spirit of Christ. Because—according to Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of John—the Spirit comes from both the Father and from himself. He says, “I will pray the Father that He send you the Comforter.” Then Jesus says, “I will send Him.” So it is the Spirit which proceeds from the Father and from Christ himself. It is this Spirit of Christ who dwells within us. It means that our human spirit is alive.

And what is true of the human spirit is also someday going to happen to the mortal body. So also our body will be made alive through the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead. Notice what Paul does and does not say in verse 11. “He, through the Spirit, will bring to life from the dead your mortal bodies.” He does not say He will bring to life your flesh. For the flesh is human nature apart from God. But the body, the encasement in which we live, will be brought together and reconstituted and made like Him. The guarantee of this is that our spirit is already alive in God.

There are two illustrations I want to use to describe this process of already being made alive in the Spirit and yet waiting to being made alive in body. In 8:15, Paul indicates that we have the

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Spirit of adoption. The RSV says “Spirit of sonship,” but literally it’s “Spirit of adoption.” Yet in verse 23, he says, “We are waiting for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.” In other words, adoption has two aspects to it. First of all, adoption in the Spirit—then, finally, its full culmination in the adoption of sons, with the redemption of our bodies to complete us. It’s kind of like this. We were a child in an orphanage, and legal papers were signed which gave us parents. There we are in the orphanage, but our spirit has already become alive because we know that the papers have been signed and real parents are there, outside the orphanage. And we have the security in the spirit that we are indeed now sons or daughters of these particular people. We are awaiting for the day of liberation when they show up to claim us.

In a very real sense now, the papers, so to speak—on the Cross, in the Resurrection—have been signed, and we are awaiting the full culmination of that event. We’ve already been seated with Christ in heavenly places. We’ve already seen the end of the game. Therefore, the exhortation comes because we’re alive in the Spirit. Because our body, one day, itself is going to be reclaimed and reconstituted. We’re in this life mortified, put to death. The deeds of the body or the deeds of the flesh, we’re to put to death the human nature. Notice again, not exorcise it, not cast it out, but struggle with it—and through the Spirit, overcome it. It’s not simply a matter of willpower, although willpower is involved.

To me, what is involved in that phrase “mortify the flesh” or “put it to death” is the kind of thing—in the physical dimension—that Jesus said in Mark 3 to the man with the withered hand in the synagogue. Here was a man who had no ability to stretch forth his hand at all. Jesus comes to him and says, “Stretch forth your hand.” In the natural, that’s an impossibility. But Jesus not only gave him the command, He gave him the power. So the man—although he could not—he did, because of Christ’s word, stretch out his hand, and it was healed.

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This is the difference of the Spirit of God contrasted with human willpower, because willpower—no matter how badly it wants to—cannot quite do it completely. But Christ says to us, through the apostle, “Put to death the deeds of the flesh” (Romans 8:13). And He not only tells us to do it, but He gives us the power to do it.”

D. There therefore enters in this fourth quality of the Spirit life. That is, “We know that we are the sons of God.” For the women in the audience, I’d like to remind you that the terms “sons of God” is a generic term like the word “man” or “humanity” or “mankind.” It includes, also, the daughters of God. But because Paul uses the term “adoption,” this had special significance to the Romans to whom he was writing.

How does one know that he is the son of God? First of all, Paul says, those who are the sons of God have been led by the Spirit of God. Again, I’d urge you not to take this phrase in a mystical kind of a way. It does not mean led by the Spirit of God in terms of daily guidance. So, for example, I’m never sure from day to day whether I’m a son of God because I’m not sure if I’m going to completely obey how the Spirit is leading me today. “Should I go to the grocery store now, or go to the garage?” And if I miss that somehow, I’ve missed the leading of the Spirit of God, and therefore I’m not a son of God. It’s not the leading of the Spirit of God in terms of a directional, will-of-God sort of a sense. It’s a more basic sense. The Spirit of God leads us to Jesus Christ. Very clearly, Jesus said to Peter upon his confession, “Flesh and blood hasn’t revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). This is what is meant by being led by the Spirit of God. No one can call Jesus “Lord” except by the Spirit. Where is the first place that the Spirit leads us? Who’s the first person He leads us to? Jesus Christ. It’s not a matter of salvation dependent upon an emotional state, but upon a real acting of where the Spirit has led us. And if the Spirit has led us to Christ, and if you’ve confessed Him with your lips and

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believed him in your heart, you are the sons and daughters of God. That's where the Spirit is leading us.

This leading of the Spirit, however, embraces also the following dynamics of the Spirit's working in our life. Though being led by the Spirit of God is something objective—something real which is independent of our feelings—if we have done what the Scriptures have asked us to do and truly believed, it is independent of our feelings. It is objective reality. Just as I've used the illustration of a person who comes into the room and says, "Since I've began flipping fried eggs on my head, I've had a feeling of peace of through me. And I would recommend if you want peace and subjective reality, you also put a nice cool fried egg on your head and you'll have religious reality." Experience must stand the test of objectivity. That test would fail somewhere along the line. We must not use our subjective feelings to determine objective reality.

The law of gravity is true whether I feel it or not. So it is our being sons of God. We need to be confident and sure of this. If we confess Jesus as the Lord and believe in our hearts the Spirit has led us to this confession, then we are the sons and daughters of God.

But is this all there is to being a son of God—just this intellectual awareness, God spoke His Word, I acted on the Word, and that's settled? It's kind of like a legal document. God signed the papers with Christ on the cross. Then I signed them and made the deed correct. Now the deed's deposited in heaven. Is that all there is? That God—at least that dimension and dynamic is involved—it's as real as a legal paper. God's Word is true. But it's more involved. The Spirit, in bringing us to being sons of God, also, I think, leads us—as Paul indicates here through the following sequence and dynamics in our life.

First of all, there is such a thing as the spirit of bondage unto fear (verse 15). The literal translation should read something like this: "You have not received the spirit of bondage again unto fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption." Underline "again." What is Paul talking

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about? A nebulous undefined spirit of bondage, a spirit of unease? Or is this a possible term, referring to the Spirit himself, to be a contrast with the term “the Spirit of adoption” so there is a multiplicity of the Spirit’s work?

On the one hand, the Spirit may bring us into a state of bondage or fear. Then we pass from that to a Spirit of adoption. I kind of feel this is what Paul has in mind. Because when we truly realize who Christ is and what our sin is, what’s the first reaction which we feel? One about holiness? Can I ever be saved? You look at the apostolic preaching of the gospel message by Peter in Acts 2, and what is his response? “They were cut to the heart.” I submit that this is the spirit of bondage and fear, the spirit that realizes, like Isaiah, “Woe is me, for I am undone!” My sin has made me undone in the presence of God. I’m not prepared to face God. What must I do to be saved? It’s this feeling that salvation is insecure and no one can really appreciate the necessity of Christ until they have at least recognized that on their own they cannot stand in God’s presence. It is the Holy Spirit to come into the life to convict the world and condemn it of sin and judgment and righteousness to come. But we are to move beyond that Spirit of conviction into a Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry “Abba, Father.”

William Barclay commented on what Paul had in mind when he wrote about this Spirit of adoption. To the Romans, “adoption” meant something entirely different than to the Jewish community, and Paul is writing to the Romans. William Barclay writes: “Roman adoption was always rendered more serious and made more difficult by the father’s power over his family. That power was absolute. It was actually the power of absolute disposal and control. In the early days, it had the power of life or death. A father could order the death of his son. In regard to his father, a Roman son never came of age. No matter how old he was, he was still under the father’s power, in the absolute possession, and under the absolute control of his father. Obviously, this made adoption into another family a very difficult and a very serious step. In adoption, a person

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had to pass from one 'absolute power' to another. He had to pass out of the possession and control of one father into the equally absolute possession and control of another. There were two steps to this. The first was known as emancipation. It was carried out by a symbolic scale in which copper and scales were symbolically used. Three times, the symbolism of the sale was carried out. Twice the father symbolically sold his son, and twice he bought him back. The third time he did not buy him back, and thus the absolute power was held to be broken. After the sale, there followed a ceremony called vindication. The adopting father went to the praetor, one of the Roman magistrates, and presented a legal case for the transference of the person to be adopted into his absolute power. When all this was completed, then the adoption was complete. Clearly, this was a serious and impressive step. But it is the consequence of adoption which is most significant for the picture that is in Paul's mind. There were four main consequences. First, the adopted person lost all rights in his old family and gained all rights as a fully legitimate son in his new family. In the most literal sense and in the most binding legal way, he got a new father. It followed that he became an heir to his new father's estate. Even if other sons were afterwards born who were blood relationship, it did not affect his rights. He was a co-heir with them. In law, the old life of the person was completely wiped out. For instance, all debts were canceled. They were wiped out as if they had never been. The adopted person was regarded as a new person entering into a new life in which the past had nothing to do. And fourthly, in the eyes of the law the adoptive person was literally and absolutely the son of his new father. Roman history provides an outstanding case of how literally and completely this was held to be true. The emperor Claudius adopted Nero, who was emperor while Paul wrote this letter. He adopted Nero in order that Nero might succeed him on the throne. They were not in any sense blood relation. Claudius already had a daughter, Octavia. To cement the alliance, Nero wished to marry Octavia. Now Nero and Octavia were in no sense biologically connected. They were in no sense flesh and

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blood relations. And in the eyes of the law, they were brother and sister. And before they could marry, the Roman senate had to pass special legislation to enable Nero to marry a girl who was legally his own sister. Nothing shows better how complete adoption was in Rome and how complete adoption is for those who were in Christ. Because of this adoption which the Spirit of God has brought us into, we cry Abba Father.”

That word “Abba” is only used three times in Scripture—the first time, by Jesus in Gethsemane where He cries out “Abba, Father.” It’s the Aramaic word of addressing the father as “daddy.” It’s the equivalent to “papa” or “daddy.” It’s the familiar use of God. The Spirit of God produces this cry within our heart.

When I’m on the floor wrestling with my son, he has liberties with me and he sees me as none of you ever do. You usually see me with a suit and coat and tie. I think some of the young people of the church may think I was born in a coat and tie. But my son sees me with my coat off and my t-shirt on and my hair all messed up, wrestling with him on the floor. He has liberties with me because he knows me in that unique way. So it is that the world may speak vaguely of our Father, but what is taught by the Spirit is that we may come directly to the Father and say, “Papa! Daddy!” It is a cry. It is not some emotionless sort of estate where we simply list with our lips, but it is gut-level feeling. It is that gut-level recognition we have a Father. “Father! Daddy!” And beyond this, Paul indicates that the Spirit of God himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.

The Spirit bears witness with our spirit. This is experiential. This is more than doctrinal. All that is needed for my salvation is that doctrinal perception that I have done what God has asked. But the Lord wants us to have a relationship with Him, which is more than just that doctrinal “you said it, I did it” kind of a level. He wants us to feel with Him. To enjoy His presence. To be liberated with joy and power and the like. And it is the Spirit himself who is bearing witness with

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our spirit. It is one thing to cry out on our part “Abba, Father.” But it is another thing for the Father to cry out to us our name and reassure us.

If I’m walking down the road with my son and all of a sudden I can pick him up and embrace him and kiss him and then put him back down, our relationship is the same before I did this as when I did it. He is my son. His status hasn’t changed because I picked him up and kissed him. He would be my son whether I did or not. I would be his father whether I did it or not. But what has changed is the enjoyment of our relationship. That changes quite a bit in just that moment. So it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that brings us into an enjoyment of relationship with God that the early Christians were not people who simply had an intellectual knowledge that God had saved them. But they had an experiential knowledge overflowing with the Spirit.

I think this is why when Paul came to Ephesus, the first question he asked to a group of disciples that were gathered there is this: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (Acts 19:2). Did the Spirit bear witness to your heart? Did you have this encounter with the Spirit of God, which brought you to the assurance that you were saved, that filled you with joy and liberating power?

The world will never be moved simply by those of us who, as Christians, have an intellectual knowledge we’ve been redeemed. God wants to fill us with His Spirit so that, as Paul says in Romans 5, “The love of God may be shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which He has given to us.” Shed abroad. That means flooded out.

I don’t know how hungry you are or where you’re at in your spiritual existence, but as you look at your life today can you say you’re flooded out with the love of God and with the Spirit of God? This is the relationship that God has for us. Not simply one where we occupy a pew or take our place on the legal role of the body of Christ, but one where we come into that dynamic

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relationship of fellowship with Him. The Spirit bears witness that we are the children of God. I would submit that not every Christian has this experience. I think you can be a Christian without having this kind of over-bubbling experience, but I sure wouldn't want to be a Christian without it.

The Spirit bears witness that we're the children of God, and if children, then joint heirs with Christ because the heirship comes to them. Then participating with Him in His sufferings. There's a beautiful adoption certificate which I read, which I'll close with. It went something like this: "I hereby declare that I have chosen [then there's a blank for the name] for adoption. With the resources of heaven and earth at My command, I promise to love you, protect you, provide for you, plan for you, claim you, correct you, honor you as My son." Then, in the left-hand corner of the paper, was the Alpha and Omega, God's seal for all eternity. On the right was the signature, "God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit."

Led by the Spirit of God into Christ—and having been led by the Spirit into Christ—we pass from the spirit of fear unto bondage into the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry "Abba, Father." Beyond our cry is the witness of the Spirit himself, who assures us through our encounter with Him that we are the children of God headed for our glorification, our eternal union with Him.

Closing Prayer

Our gracious heavenly Father, as we have looked at the totality of this Word today, we just want to thank You for it. There is something gut level within us which rushes up in the Spirit to embrace You—to cry as a child would upon seeing their father return home, rushing toward the father with outstretched arms—and simply cry out "Daddy!" And there leaps up in our spirit this greeting towards You, this recognition that through Your Son, Jesus Christ, and the witness of His Spirit, we're no longer in the flesh. No longer minding the things of the flesh. No longer dead. No longer at enmity with You. No longer with Christ on the outside of us. But instead,

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there is that which reaches to You with praise and prayer in our hearts and on our lips, which comes before Your throne. And there is life, and there is peace, and there is the witness of Your Spirit within. I just ask, Lord Jesus, that this Word today, which has been proclaimed by Your Spirit, will be used by the Spirit as salt to our lives and also as water—so that the salt may produce the thirst and the water may satisfy the thirst. That all of us together in our experience may be vibrating to that touch of Your hand. The Spirit Himself bears witness to ours. Lord, we seek You with our heart. In Your Name. Amen.