

ABBA Father (Spirit of Adoption)

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Romans 8 Series

Romans 8:9-17

[Intro:]

My friends, I am excited to get to share with you this morning on this powerful text from Romans 8. Before I jump into the Scripture I want to reflect for just a moment on the celebration we shared here at Asbury just yesterday, as we honored the life and legacy of Pastor Bill Mason. I can't add much to that wonderful tribute to Bill, but I will say, that as a relative newcomer to Asbury, I am so thankful to be serving in a church that the Holy Spirit built. I am so thankful to be serving in a place that is not built on one person's gifts, abilities, or opinions, but was built by simply preaching the Word of God, caring for God's people, and letting the Holy Spirit do the heavy lifting. And as we move forward into the next season of ministry, as the world wrestles with Covid-19 and as our nation wrestles with an uncertain future, I want to urge us to continue to let the Holy Spirit do the heavy lifting. As I preach this text today I am a little overwhelmed because there is so MUCH I want to say about it, but the heart of it all is that **the Holy Spirit of God is given to us as a GIFT that makes us completely new**. So, as we turn to the Word of God this morning I want to invite the Holy Spirit to enliven the reading of Scripture, and wake us up to the message the Father has for us today. I encourage you now to open your Bibles, or read with me on the screen, or simply listen and soak it in. Romans chapter 8: vs 9-17:

ESV:

"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.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. [Thanks be to God.]

Amen.

Have you ever felt stuck? Have you ever felt powerless? Have you ever felt like your own worst enemy? Have you ever felt incapable of helping yourself? Have you ever been addicted? Have you ever kept

getting the same broken result even after trying so hard to do something different? Well, if you have, then you know something of what Paul meant when he referred to “a spirit of slavery” in verse 15.

Chapter 8 of Romans is an exercise in contrasts. Before and after. Death and life. Flesh and spirit. Slavery and sonship. So this text launches right off with a **contrast** from what comes before. Pastor Tom started us off so well last week with a reminder of the importance of context. That if we really want to get what the Spirit is saying to the Church in a particular passage of Scripture we have got to know what comes before and after, especially before.

So, I want to back up briefly and remind you of the **contrast** given in chapter 8:6-8. We are taught: *“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”*

[Draw on the Board here: “the flesh” and “the Spirit”]

So there is the flesh, and the Spirit, and we can set our mind on one or the other. The ‘flesh’ is used as a technical term in Romans and elsewhere to mean, not simply the literal, physical flesh, which is God’s good gift, but the *sinful* flesh, which is the fallen corruption of our human nature that draws us away to all sorts of sinful things against God’s will. [For a good listing of the “works of the flesh” see Galatians 5, which includes things that are literally fleshly, like drunkenness and sexual immorality; things that are relational, like slander and sowing discord among friends; and things that are spiritual, like idol worship and sorcery. So it’s about our sinful nature and desires that affect every part of our life.]

Setting the mind on the flesh, that is, thinking about whatever we happen to want or hunger for at the moment regardless of its goodness, is said to lead to death. (Spiritual death, and often physical death as well.)

On the other hand, setting the mind on the Spirit, that is, thinking about all those things that make God happy, thinking about this things that also in the long term will make us happy, that is, loving God, loving others, serving God, serving others, giving thanks, seeking God’s direction, all of the good stuff – setting our mind there is said to lead to life. Abundant life, eternal life, and complete peace.

It’s like we have two roads in front of us, two paths, two ways. Two places to set our minds, and two different and opposite results.

And I’ve got some good news and some bad news for you this morning about these two roads. And then some more good news. So we’ll start with the first good news.

The good news is that you have free will. You can control which path you take. You can control where you set your mind any given day, any given hour, any given minute. In that way you can choose whether you walk the path of life, or the path of death. [Choose wisely.] Your actions and your thoughts are under your control.

But then there's the bad news. The bad news is that without Jesus, that doesn't actually work.

Without Jesus, you can't actually choose life over the long haul, because you do not have the Spirit of God. Although it's true what I said that you can control your actions and thoughts in a given minute, a given hour, maybe even a given day, the nature of our fallen humanity is that **eventually, sin catches up to us**. Eventually, as a human being, you are going to set your mind on your own selfish and sinful desires, and you are going to act on those desires, and you are going to hurt people, and you are going to mess up the life that God created you to live. As it says in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All of us are sunk in sin. All of us need a Savior. Before we meet Jesus, in our "natural" state, even though we have some free will, and can sometimes do good things, in the big picture we are still governed by our sinful flesh and we **cannot** please God. We can't do it. We're stuck. We're in bondage.

[Write the word 'Natural' on the board, beginning a list to finish later.]

This is why free will is such a controversial topic in Christianity (and in other religions and philosophies as well). The Bible seems to teach free will sometimes, and other times not. And our experience tells us we have free will, we think, but then, sometimes, not so much.

This bad news is reflected in that great chapter which comes before Romans 8, that is Romans 7, as Pastor Tom mentioned last week. In Romans 7 Paul speaks as a person who is awakened to sin, who knows their need for God, who desires to follow God, yet still is unable to find victory. The harsh language of chapter 7 includes the words:

"I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." Or in another version, "I can will what is good, but I cannot do it." He has the desire to please God but not the ability. Victory is not just hard, but impossible. Romans 7 is a picture of an awakened mind, a mind that understands right from wrong and believes in God, struggling with a flesh that still will not surrender. It's a struggle between mind and flesh, and the mind is losing.

[And I need to add to the list here. The theological term for this person who is fighting and losing is a person Under Law. They have been awakened, but have not yet received new and abundant life.]

So are you ready for the good news yet? Here's the good news, from chapter 8 verse 9:

"YOU, however, are NOT in the flesh but in the Spirit!" That's good news, right! You, the audience Paul is writing to, are NOT "in the flesh." Not in the theological sense. Literally, of course, you are "in the flesh," that is, you have flesh, you are living in this fleshly tent, this earthen vessel. But spiritually, **you live a different kind of life**. You are "in the Spirit." You are free to please God. You are empowered to live right. IF – he follows up – IF, in fact, the Spirit of God dwells in you. The Holy Spirit is also called the Spirit of Christ. So when we belong to Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and we live our lives in concert with the Holy Spirit.

So we have this big contrast going in Romans 8 today between flesh and spirit, and WE, the Church, the audience of this letter, are said to be on the Spirit side! That means we have life. Praise God!

Let me tell you friends, if you have ever read Romans 7 and thought it looks awfully familiar, I get it. I've been there. You've been there. We've all been there. But I'm here to tell you, it gets better. It gets a LOT better. I said Romans 7 was a struggle between mind and flesh, and the mind is losing. It's losing because something is missing. And what's missing is the Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God does more than just awaken your mind, He regenerates you, He gives you new life. He makes you a new creation in Christ. **When the Spirit comes in, it's not just you versus your flesh anymore. When the Spirit comes in, you can win.**

But I want to be very clear. I don't want to understate the newness of the LIFE that we have. You've got to know, friends, that **the life we get from the Spirit is not just theoretical, and it's not just the future, and it's not just in our minds. Rather, this life is real, this life is now, and this life works its way from our spirits through our minds, into our bodies, our actions, and our relationships.** That's why verses 10 and 11 say that though your body is as good as dead because of sin, once the Spirit of Christ is 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." That is, your bodies are part of this. Your actual, physical, embodied life in this world is going to be changed, just as Jesus rose from the dead with a new physical life. You are going to be a new person who lives a new life.

And so while "the flesh" starts off as a term for all things sinful, once you have the Spirit, God's new life grows within you so that your literal flesh, your body, is going to be doing good things, not bad things.

Can we fall back into Romans 7? Sure, we can, but we are not intended to live there. In Christ, we live in Romans 8. [*cam*] We live on the right side of that contrast on the board, with our minds set on the Spirit.

One of the things I love about this passage is it features every member of the Trinity. There is a movement of LIFE here which comes from the Holy Spirit, and depends on the work of the Son Jesus Christ, and this life leads to... you know what it leads to? An abundant and joyful and intimate relationship with the Father, whom we cry out to in confidence and love. Abba! Father!

OK, now I'm going to change course a little bit and tell you a story. This story, it's the best story there is. I'm serious. Of all stories, this is the best one. There is no better story. It goes like this:

"There was a man who had two sons." (Have you heard this one? It was in our Sermon Journal this week.) There was a man who had two sons, and one day, the younger of those sons got up and thought, "you know, I've had enough of this life, working with Dad on the farm; I think I will just ask for my share of the family property, and go have myself a good time." So, he asked his Dad for his inheritance, who knows how many years early, perhaps decades before his Father would have passed on.

And his Dad said, "alright, son, as you wish," and divided up the family property. And so the Father went and counted up everything his family owned: all the land, all the livestock, all the equipment, all the money; and then did what he had to do to come up with a full *third* of it in liquid cash, that is, bags of silver or gold, for this young man to take and go spend as he wished. A full third is what the younger of two sons would theoretically inherit. But imagine what kind of hardship that would be on the family

livelihood! Selling property to their neighbors, and depleting their savings. But this Father went along with it. I don't know why. Jesus doesn't tell us why. Maybe there was some deep wisdom in giving the son that free will. It certainly wasn't required by law. The Father could have said "no way," and could have punished him for his impertinence and the insult to his family and his Father. But he gave him exactly what he asked for, and wished him well.

And then – do you know what happens next? – the young son takes a journey to a far country, and Jesus says he "squandered his property in reckless living." Other translations of that word say "dissolute living," or "dissipation." In other words – he had his mind set on the flesh. You know, of all those sins listed in Galatians, we can imagine he engaged in most of them. He was spending his family's wealth and his own health on the fleeting pleasures of the moment. Until a famine came and he ran out of funds.

And then he has to go work in the field again. Except not his father's field, a stranger's field. A stranger who couldn't even give his servants enough to eat. Our young man was jealous of the very pigs he was feeding. And it was there in that field with those dirty pigs that he hit rock bottom, to borrow a term from addiction recovery. He hit rock bottom, and then, in theological language, he was "awakened." You see, he had a bit of a light bulb moment. He realized: "I'm dying here. But my Dad, he feeds his servants better than this. And he's probably still doing OK. And I don't need him to take me back as a son. I don't need to talk to my brother or my mother; I just need a clean place to lay my head and some food for my belly. I bet he will give me that if I beg."

And so he takes another journey, a journey home, to go and beg. And you might know how the story ends. And it's the best story ever. But before we get to that great ending I want you to imagine the young son while he is on his journey back. He has had an awakening. He is on the road to salvation. But he isn't there yet. Our young man at that point had what John Wesley called "the faith of a servant," or what Paul might call "a spirit of bondage." He was content to be a servant. He was lucky to escape outright slavery. He had no hope to be anything but a hired hand at best, and figured his earlier losses were irreversible. But he wanted to live. He had pretty low expectations for what his life would be, but he did want to live. And so he went.

And the rest of the story... is that the Father didn't just take him back, but he ran to him, took him in his arms, and said "my son has come home again." He stopped him in the middle of his speech, gave him his ring and his robe, killed the fatted calf, and threw the biggest party the family had ever seen. All symbols of total and complete acceptance and restoration.

I told you this is the best story, right? This is our story. We are the prodigal son, the prodigal daughter. Our God is the Prodigal Father.

And to bring this all home I want to highlight one more thing the Father said at the end: "This son of mine was dead and is **alive** again!"

He was dead, and is alive again! At that moment, the son was fully restored. At that moment he became alive, because he was given a spirit of adoption. **Because of the Father's grace, the son was given a**

spirit of adoption, not a spirit of bondage. He could now have “the faith of a son,” not just the faith of a servant. And he belonged, not on the outskirts, but right in the home.

[And the final theological word to put here is Under Grace, a person who has received new life in Christ.]

And so friends, the same is true of us that became true of the Prodigal Son. If we’ve come home, if we’ve begged the Father for mercy, if we have believed Jesus when He tells this story, if we have trusted that all our debts have been paid by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, if we have believed the good news of the Resurrection, that God is making all things new in Jesus Christ; if we’ve come home, then we are accepted! We are sons and daughters, full heirs of the Heavenly Father. We don’t have to settle for scraps. We don’t have to stay separated from the family, no matter what we may have done in the past or at any point along the way. We can be fully restored. We can please God. Because God loves us. The Father loves us. More than we can possibly imagine.

Friends, this is a good story, I’m sure you agree. But you may not be entirely sure where you stand today in your relationship with God.

And so I want to look one more time at this list and encourage you to use it for sort of a self-diagnosis. Each person on that list has a different relationship with God, and a different relationship with sin.

The natural person neither fears nor loves God. They are quite indifferent to God. And they have no problem with sin. They chase after it and spend what they have on their selfish desires. Just like the Prodigal when he was on his way out. If this is you today, then this would be a great day to wake up.

The person under law fears God. The person under law realizes they have a problem. And they fight sin. They’re tired of it and wish it would go away. They are awakened but have not arrived. They’re like the Prodigal who has hit rock bottom and is on his way home.

And finally the person under grace loves God. Fear has given way to love. And they both fight and conquer sin. Because the Holy Spirit is more powerful than human sin. The person under grace has true free will, and they are free in every way to love and follow God. If this is you today, then this is a great day to give thanks!

And so, friends, as you look at this list you may not be sure where you stand. Sometimes these states can be mixed. Sometimes we can get a glimpse ahead, and sometimes we can slide back. But it is all grace. If perhaps you feel stuck in this middle space, just know that your Father is waiting for you, and He’s actually been right there with you the whole time, even when you walked away. That’s why the old hymn says, “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.” It was God’s saving love that made you aware of your need, and God’s saving love is ready to make you new when you fully trust in Him. So if you feel stuck here, just start walking home. Walk home and trust that the Father will receive you with joy. He is waiting and watching.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.