

XVI. Life in the Spirit

April 26/27/28, 2016

Romans 8:1-13

Aim: To rejoice that there is no condemnation for those in Jesus Christ, who gives us His Spirit to assist us in our sanctification.

Many interpreters extol chapter 8 as the greatest passage within what so many consider to be the greatest book in Scripture. While the varied riches of God's Word makes any such comparisons precarious, Romans 8 deserves to be put in the front rank for its rich and comprehensive portrayal of what it means to be a Christian. Prominent in this description is the work of the Holy Spirit. The word *pneuma* occurs 21 times in Romans 8, and all but two (those in vv. 15a and 16b) refer to the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, despite the prominence of the Holy Spirit, Romans 8 is not really *about* the Spirit. Paul's focus is not so much on the Spirit as such, but on what the Spirit *does*. And perhaps this is the best way to learn about the Spirit. For, as important as it may be to define the nature of the Holy Spirit and His relation to Christ and the Father, the Spirit is best known in His ministry on behalf of Christians. It is those blessings and privileges conferred on believers by the Spirit that are the theme of this chapter. If we were to sum up these blessings in a single word, that word would be *assurance*. From 'no condemnation' at the beginning (v. 1) to 'no separation' at the end (v. 39), Paul passes in review those gifts and graces that together assure the Christian that his relationship with God is secure and settled.

As we enter into our study of Romans 8, we should keep in mind that it is the conclusion of Paul's teaching on sanctification, which began at 5:1. Throughout our study of Romans, and especially in chapters 6 and 7, we have seen that the law is not enough to save us, and it is not enough to sustain us after we have been saved. Both before and after we become Christians we need to power of Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. In chapter 8, Paul introduces us to the Holy Spirit specifically as the agent of Christ's power in our lives. This eighth chapter, which deals so specifically with the Holy Spirit, is also the one that makes very plain that we're not perfect yet. The day of final redemption is still in the future, but that does not change the fact that we are called, through faith, in the present life, to draw upon the present reality of the power of the crucified, risen, victorious Christ.

The theme of chapter 8 is the work of the Holy Spirit. Until this point, there have only been two mentions of the Spirit in Romans. The first was a passing reference to 'the Spirit of Holiness' (1:4), and the other described the Holy Spirit as pouring out the love of God within our hearts (5:5). Now chapter 8 mentions the Holy Spirit twenty times! Second Corinthians 3:17 says, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.' Romans 8 is the chapter of *liberation through God's Spirit*.

The chapter contains no sharp breaks, but four major sections emerge. 1) In vv. 1-13, the key word is *life*. 'The Spirit of life' (v. 2) confers life in both the present – through liberating the believer from both the penalty (justification) and power (sanctification of sin – and in the future – by raising the 'mortal body' from the dead. 2) The Spirit is also the 'Spirit of adoption,' conferring on us the status of God's own dearly loved children and making us aware of that status at the same time (vv. 14-17). 3) In the last verse of the second section, Paul makes the transition into the theme of hope, which dominates that last part of Romans 7. To be a child means to be his heir (v. 17) – and an heir must wait for the full realization of what has been promised. So believers in this age of warfare between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of

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Satan suffer and groan – but their groans are not the despairing cries of the hopeless. Rather, they are the impatient yearnings of those who have been saved in hope and hunger for that ‘glory’ which has been promised to them (vv. 18-30). 4) Paul celebrates this comforting expectation in vv. 31-39, a hymn of triumph that caps off and applies the exposition of Christian privileges given in vv. 1-30, as well as bringing to a conclusion the exposition of chapters 5-8 generally.

How does this portrait of the new life and hope of the believer relate to what has come before in Romans? The ‘therefore’ at the beginning of the chapter indicates that Paul is drawing a conclusion. The language of ‘no condemnation’ (v. 1) forges a link with Romans 5:12-21: the word ‘condemnation’ occurs only here and in 5:16 and 18 in the NT, and ‘in Christ Jesus’ succinctly summarizes the relationship of believers to Christ that is developed in that great paragraph. We are justified, then, in thinking that 8:1-17 restates and elaborates 5:12-21. Since the second part of Romans 8 is closely related to 5:1-11, the result is a ‘ring composition’ in which 8:18-39 picks up 5:1-11, as 8:1-17 does 5:12-21. There are other connections between Romans 8 and the rest of the epistle that must not be overlooked. A connection with what has immediately preceded at the end of Romans 7 is unlikely. But, in keeping with Paul’s habit in Romans of touching on topics that are to be developed later, the reference to ‘newness of Spirit’ in 7:6b anticipates and prepares for the concentrated focus on the Spirit in chapter 8. Further, we cannot ignore the way in which 8:2-4 sketches the solution to the dilemma of *egō* in 7:7-25. Like a snowball rolling downhill, Romans 8 picks up many of the earlier themes of the letter as it reiterates and expands on the assurance of eschatological life that the believer has in Christ.

In this first paragraph of Romans 8, Paul reasserts the triumphant conclusion of 5:12-21: that for those who are ‘in Christ’ eternal life replaces the condemnation and death that were the lot of everybody in Adam. But this reassertion of the believer’s assurance of life takes a new form, being modeled from the material with which Paul has been working in chapters 6-7. The Spirit now plays the dominant role. And the ‘powers’ against which the Spirit is ranged in these verses are those ‘authorities’ of the old age that have been portrayed in the two previous chapters. The Spirit battles against and conquers the hostility and power of the flesh (vv. 5b-9; cp. 7:5, 14, 18, 25), rescues the believer from captivity to sin and death, both ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical’ (v. 2), and, accomplishing what the law itself could not do (v.3a); cp. 7:7-25), enables the law, for the first time, to be ‘fulfilled.’ Thus, Paul weaves together various threads from chapters 6-7 in a new argument for the assurance of eternal life that the believer may have in Christ.

A. Freedom from Sin (Romans 8:1-4)

1. The Conclusion of ‘No Condemnation’ (8:1)

¹*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

The combination ‘therefore, now’ is an emphatic one, marking what follows as a significant conclusion. These verses pick up various themes from chapters 6-7 to restate the assuring message of 5:12-21 that Christ has secured eternal life for all who belong to Him. The ‘now’ alludes to the new era of salvation history inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection (see also 3:21; 5:9; 6:19, 22; 7:6). But the judicial flavor of the word ‘condemnation’ strongly suggests that Paul is here thinking only of the believer’s deliverance from the penalty that sin exacts. Like ‘death,’ a parallel term, ‘condemnation’ designates the state of ‘lostness,’ of estrangement from God that, apart from Christ, every person will experience for eternity. Those

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‘in Christ Jesus’ are removed from this state – and removed forever from it, as the emphatic ‘no’ indicates.

By simple definition, ‘therefore’ introduces a result, consequence, or conclusion based on what has been established previously. It seems unlikely that Paul is referring to the immediately preceding text. He has just finished lamenting the continued problem of sin in a believer’s life, including his own. It is surely not on the basis of *that* truth that he confidently declares that believers are no longer under divine ‘condemnation.’ It seems probable that ‘therefore’ marks a consequent conclusion from the entire first seven chapters, which focus primarily on justification by faith alone, made possible solely on the basis of and by the power of God’s grace. For those who place their trust in Christ and in what He has done on their behalf ‘there is therefore now no condemnation.’ The Greek word *katakrima* (‘condemnation’) appears only in the book of Romans, here and in 5:16, 18. Although it relates to the sentencing for a crime, its primary focus is not so much on the verdict as on the penalty that the verdict demands. As Paul has already declared, the penalty, or condemnation, for sin is death (6:23). But Paul here announces the marvelous good news that for Christians there will be ‘no condemnation,’ neither sentencing nor punishment for the sins that believers have committed or will ever commit. *Ouketi* (‘no’) is an emphatic negative adverb of time and carries the idea of complete cessation. Having been qualified by God the Father, we will never, under any circumstance, be subject to divine condemnation. How blessed to be placed beyond the reach of condemnation.

Chapter 8 is linked inseparably to what has just been articulated. It begins with the word *therefore*, which signifies a conclusion from what has come before. When Paul uses ‘therefore now,’ he is referring not just to the last section but to everything he has laid out up to this point. He calls attention to everything he has set forth about the redemption that is ours in Jesus Christ and concludes that there is no condemnation. He does not mean that God will never judge the world but rather that there is an end of condemnation specifically and particularly to a designated group. If we are Christians, not only is there no condemnation for the sins we have committed, but also we have moved beyond condemnation for whatever we are going to do tomorrow or the day after tomorrow or the day after that. This is one of the most beautiful texts in Scripture for the assurance of salvation. The threat of condemnation is removed forever if we are in Christ Jesus. It is unthinkable that after what God did to His Son on the cross that He will visit more wrath upon His Son.

This is an arresting statement. But it is even more gripping when we understand that the term ‘condemnation’ carries the idea of penal servitude. F. F. Bruce paraphrases it this way: ‘There is no reason why those who are in Christ Jesus should go on doing penal servitude as though they had never been pardoned and liberated from the prison house of sin. In this way Paul introduces the grand theme of Romans 8: the work of the Holy Spirit in effecting our liberation.

If we have accepted Christ as our Savior, we will never have to face the prospect of eternal condemnation. This first verse of chapter 8 should remind us of the first verse of chapter 5, with which Paul introduced this section on sanctification: ‘Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ He is really saying the same thing here in 8:1, and he will return to this great theme in verses 18-39: eternal life is forever. Eternal life is eternal. If we have taken Jesus as our Savior, our condemnation is past forever.

The divine condemnation from which believers are exonerated is without exception or qualification. It is bestowed on ‘those who are in Christ Jesus,’ in other words, on every true

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Christian. The key to every aspect of salvation is in the simple but infinitely profound phrase ‘in Christ Jesus.’ A Christian is a person who is ‘in Christ Jesus.’ Being a Christian is not simply being outwardly identified with Christ but being *part* of Christ, not simply of being united with Him but united *in* Him.

2. The Ground of ‘No Condemnation (8:2)

²*For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*

The ‘for’ indicates that this verse is the ground of the ‘no condemnation in Christ’ announced in v. 1. A liberation has taken place through the Holy Spirit, and this liberation is the basis on which the person ‘in Christ’ is forever saved from condemnation.

In describing this liberation, Paul uses the word *nomos* to characterize both ‘sides’ of the situation. *Nomos* might refer to the Mosaic law or it might have a figurative meaning, such as ‘binding authority’ or ‘power.’ The first occurrence of *nomos* cannot refer to the Mosaic law. The immediate context (7:21-25) points rather to *nomos* meaning ‘power’ or ‘binding authority,’ with the following genitive specifying that authority of power. Paul always uses *nomos* with this meaning in contexts where he has been talking about the Mosaic law. This suggests an intentional play on the word, as Paul implicitly contrasts the law of Moses with a different ‘law,’ in this case the ‘law’ of the Spirit who confers life. The actor in the situation is then, the Spirit Himself. It is God’s Spirit, coming to the believer with power and authority, who brings liberation from the powers of the old age and from the condemnation that is the lot of all who are imprisoned by those powers.

More difficult to decide is whether the second *nomos* in the verse designates the Mosaic law or whether it, too, means ‘binding authority’ or ‘power.’ In 7:23 there is the occurrence of the almost identical phrase, ‘the *nomos* of sin,’ where, because it is called ‘the other law,’ in distinction from the Mosaic law (v. 22), it must mean the ‘authority’ or ‘power’ of sin. That these similar phrases mean the same thing is suggested also by the material relationship between 7:23 and 8:2; we can hardly miss the fact that the ‘liberation’ of 8:2 is the answer to the imprisonment of 7:23. We might, then, paraphrase this second phrase, ‘the binding authority of sin that leads to death.’ The real contrast in the verse is then between the Spirit on the one hand and sin and death on the other. As sin and death are those powers that rule the old age (cp. chapters 6-7), so the Spirit and the eschatological life conferred by the Spirit are those powers that rule the new age.

Here again is a confusing use of the term *law*. Sometimes in the epistle Paul uses the term *law* to mean principle; other times he uses the term to refer to the moral standards by which God judges us. Here, the first instance of the word *law* refers to principle and the second instance refers to moral standards. The principle of life in Jesus Christ is what makes us free from the principle of sin and death. When we are not in Christ, we operate by the principle of sin. Outside of Christ, sin defines our existence, and the natural consequence of that sin is death.

Paul does not here use the term ‘law’ in reference to the Mosaic law or to other divine commandments or requirements. He uses it rather in the sense of a principle of operation, as he has done earlier in the letter (3:27; cp. Gal. 6:2). Those who believe in Jesus Christ are delivered from the condemnation of a lower divine law, as it were, by submitting themselves to a higher divine law. The lower law is the divine principle in regard to sin, the penalty for which is death, and the higher law is ‘the law of the Spirit,’ which bestows ‘life in Christ Jesus.’ But it should

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not be concluded that the ‘law’ Paul is speaking of in this passage has no relationship to obedience. Obedience to God cannot save a person, but true salvation will always produce true obedience—never perfect in this life, but nonetheless genuine and always present to some extent. Release from the law’s bondage and condemnation does not mean release from the law’s requirements and standards. The higher law of the Spirit produces obedience to the lower law of duties.

Verse 2 introduces the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing liberation. Here ‘law’ carries the idea of principle: ‘You were under the old principle of sin and death, but that has been transcended by the new principle of life in Christ—and so you are free.’ The old principle showed us our sin, stirred up our sin so that we sinned even more, and then brought us to condemnation. But the new principle liberates us. Death has been replaced with life. Here Paul gives the Holy Spirit one of His more magnificent titles: ‘the Spirit of life.’ This ‘Spirit of life’ administers the work of God the Father, thus securing our liberation.

But what is the nature of the liberation Paul depicts here? ‘No condemnation’ is the banner triumphantly flying over all those who are ‘in Christ’ (v. 1) only because ‘in Christ’ we have been set free by the Spirit from that realm, ruled by sin, in which condemnation (= death) is one’s ineluctable fate. Verse 2, we might say, is speaking directly about neither justification nor sanctification but about that ‘realm transfer’ that is the presupposition of both. As such, it significantly advances the discussion of chapters 5-7 by introducing the Spirit as a key agent of liberation from the old realm of sin and death.

3. The Basis of ‘No Condemnation (8:3)

The Spirit’s liberating work takes place only within the situation created by Christ. Verse 3 spells this out, showing that the Spirit can liberate the believer from sin and death only because in Christ and His cross God has already ‘condemned’ sin. Believers are no longer ‘condemned’ (v. 1) because in Christ sin has been ‘condemned.’

a) *What the Law Could Not Do (8:3a)*

³*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.*

In verse 3, Paul switches us meaning of the word *law*. Paul is speaking of the impotency of the moral law, its failure, as a certain place and point. The law does not save because it cannot save, which is what Paul has been laboring throughout the letter. The law is impotent. Not only does the law not save us, but it cannot. It does not have the power. Paul is not being critical of the law. This weakness is not the law’s fault. The law cannot redeem us because it is incapable of redeeming those in the flesh. People in the flesh are incapable of obeying the law, so when they look to the law as a means of salvation, they exercise futility and reach for an impossible dream.

Nomos is now clearly the Mosaic law, and the clause succinctly states the most important point Paul makes about the law in the epistle – that it has proved incapable of rescuing people from the domain of sin and death (cp. 3:19, 28; 4:12-15; 7:7-25). But the law should not be criticized for this; Paul reminds us that the law has failed only because ‘it was weakened by the flesh.’ Nor should we think of the flesh as frustrating the intentions of the law, for the law was never given as a means to secure righteousness. ‘Flesh,’ as in 7:5, is not the flesh of our bodies, or the bodies themselves, but the ‘this-worldly’ orientation that all people share. It is this power that the law cannot break. ‘What the law could not do’ is not to condemn sin, but to break sin’s power – or, to put it positively, to secure eschatological life.

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‘The Law’ can provoke sin in men and condemn them for it, but it cannot save them from its penalty. Although it is ‘holy and righteous and good,’ (7:12), the Law could not save men from sin because it was ‘weak...through the flesh.’ The sinful corruption of the flesh made the Law powerless to save men. The law cannot make men righteous but can only expose their unrighteousness and condemn them for it. The law cannot make men perfect but can only reveal their great imperfection.

The law is good (7:14), but there is something it cannot do. It cannot save me. Why? Because it ‘was weak through the flesh.’ The law is all right in itself, but it is weak through the flesh, that is, through my flesh and your flesh. We can’t keep the law. We couldn’t keep the law, but Christ did.

b) *What God Did Do (8:3bc)*

(1) How Jesus Came (8:3b)

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh...

‘But what the law could not do... God did’ (8:3a). There in a nutshell is the gospel. What our morality can never achieve, God can achieve. What our behavior and performance are incapable of attaining, God can attain for us. That is the gospel. We cannot; He can. It is that simple. God did it by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin. What the law could not do, God could do, and He did it by sending His Son. Paul does not say that God did it by sending His Son in the *sarx*, in the condition of corruption, as a sinner to replace us. Notice how careful Paul is to say that God ‘sent His own Son in the *likeness* of sinful flesh,’ not in the *identity* of sinful flesh. Jesus Christ is like us, the author of Hebrews tells us, in all respects except one—He is without sin. In the incarnation all that is proper to humanity was given to the human nature of our Redeemer except for sin. Jesus was born without original sin. Jesus was born as Adam was before the fall. Jesus was not in bondage to corrupt nature. Christ came in the flesh as a human being, and He condemned the sin that binds us by taking it upon Himself.

It is God Himself who has done what the law could not do, and He has done it through the sending of ‘His own son.’ ‘In the form of sinful flesh’ emphasizes the full participation of the Son in the human condition. Like the phrases ‘born from a woman, born under the law’ in Gal. 4:4, it shows that the Son possesses the necessary requirement to act as our substitute. But why does Paul say that Christ came in ‘the *homoioōma* of sinful flesh’? Certainly, in light of ‘in the flesh’ later in this very verse, Paul cannot mean that Christ had only the ‘appearance’ of flesh. Moreover, the word *homoioōma* here probably has the nuance of ‘form’ rather than ‘likeness’ or ‘copy.’ In other words, the word does not suggest superficial or outward similarity, but inward and real participation or ‘expression.’ Paul uses *homoioōma* here for a reason: to introduce a note of distinction. The use of the term implies some kind of reservation about identifying Christ with ‘*sinful* flesh.’ Paul is walking a fine line here. On the one hand, he wants to insist that Christ fully entered into the human condition, became ‘in-fleshed’ (*in-carnis*), and, as such, exposed Himself to the power of sin (cp. 6:8-10). On the other hand, he must avoid suggesting that Christ so participated in this realm that He became imprisoned ‘in the flesh’ (cp. the negative use of this phrase in 7:5) and 8:8, 9) and became, thus, so subject to sin that He could be personally guilty of it.

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Since our flesh was inadequate, God sent Christ in ‘the likeness of sinful flesh.’ Paul was very careful about his words here. He did not say Christ came ‘in sinful flesh’ because that would imply sin was in Him. Nor did he say, ‘likeness of flesh’ because that might imply Christ only seemed to be in the flesh. He said, ‘the likeness of sinful flesh’ because Christ took on man’s flesh without becoming a sinner.

In His incarnation Jesus was completely a man, fully incarnated. But he was only ‘in the likeness of,’ in the outward appearance of, ‘sinful flesh.’ Although Paul does not here specifically mention Jesus’ sinlessness, his phrasing carefully guards that profound truth.

What was ‘impossible’ (*adunaton*) for Law to do in humans, however, God actually *did* for them in a man, the man Christ Jesus. God condemned their Sin in the person of His Son. Paul’s words in v. 3, which originally may have been a creed or confession, are among his most important statements about God, His *own* Son, and the Spirit. First, we learn that God is *Father* since it was His ‘very own’ Son whom He sent. Second, God *sent* His Son into the world (cp. Gal. 4:4), echoing Jesus’ own words (e.g., Jn. 5:23; cp. 1 Jn. 4:14). Third, the Son of God was truly a man though without sins, as in the words ‘in the *likeness* of sinful flesh.’ Adam’s rescuer from Sin and its penalty (condemnation) and power (Death) must be qualified in two respects: He must be genuinely human (like Adam) and He must be sinless (unlike Adam).

(2) What Jesus Did (8:3c)

...and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh...

Sacrificial allusions are probably also present in the next phrase, ‘concerning sin.’ The phrase so frequently means ‘sin offering’ in the LXX that it is likely to mean that here too: God sent His own Son’ to be a sin offering.’ This brings us to the end of the subordinate material and, finally, to the (grammatical) main clause: God, in sending His Son, ‘condemned sin in the flesh.’ ‘In the flesh’ naturally implies the humanity of Christ, but it also alludes to that sphere of human weakness into which Christ entered to accomplish His work. The flesh that made the law ineffective in dealing with sin was conquered from within.

Jesus’ teaching, miracles, and sinless life were of great importance in His earthly ministry. But His supreme purpose in coming to earth was to be ‘an offering for sin.’ Without the sacrifice of Himself for the sins of the world, everything else Jesus did would have left men in their sins, still separated from God. The only hope men have for salvation from their sin is in their trust in the ‘offering for sin’ that Christ Himself made at Calvary. And when He became that offering, He took upon Himself the penalty of death for the sins of all mankind.

Christ became a sin offering as He took our sin without sinning. Thus His flesh remained strong and unfallen. As a result ‘he condemned sin in the flesh.’ That is, He conquered sin.

Fourth, the mission God sent His Son to accomplish was ‘in regard to sin.’ Specifically, God ‘condemned Sin,’ that is, the Sin of Adam, in the flesh of the sinless Son of God.

Here Paul is describing the cross, the work of Christ in expiation. When Christ went to the cross in our place, sin was condemned. The cup that he wrestled with at Gethsemane was filled with the wrath of God—wrath that was directed against sin—and Jesus drank it. He accepted to Himself the imputation of *m* sin and your sin.

Jesus Christ ‘condemned sin in the flesh.’ Whereas sin once condemned the believer, now Christ his Savior condemns sin, delivering the believer from sin’s power and penalty. The law

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condemns sin in the sense of exposing it for what it really is and in the sense of declaring its penalty of death. But the law is unable to condemn sin in the sense of delivering a sinner from his sinfulness or in the sense of overpowering sin and consigning it to its ultimate destruction. Only the Lord Jesus Christ was able to do that.

But what does Paul mean when he says that God ‘*condemned* sin in the flesh’? What Paul must mean is a judicial action that was accomplished through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and that had as its object that ‘the just requirement of the law be fulfilled’ in Christians (v. 4a). The condemnation of sin consists in God’s executing His judgment on sin in the atoning death of His Son. As our substitute, Christ ‘was made sin for us’ (2 Cor. 5:21) and suffered the wrath of God, the judgment of God upon that sin (cp. *hilastērion* in 3:25; Gal. 3:13). In His doing so, of course, we may say that sin’s power was broken, in the sense that Paul pictures sin as a power that holds people in its clutches and brings condemnation to them. The condemnation that our sins deserve has been poured out on Christ, our sin-bearer; that is why ‘there is no now condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (v.1).

4. The Effect of ‘No Condemnation’ (8:4)

(1) Fulfilling the Law (8:4a)

...⁴*in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us...*

Verse 4 states the purpose for which God has condemned sin in the flesh: ‘that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.’ But what is this ‘just’ or ‘righteous requirement’? We must give the phrase its simplest and broadest meaning: the summary of what the law demands of God’s people. Through God’s breaking of the power of sin (v. 3), the ‘right requirement’ of the law is accomplished by those who ‘walk according to the Spirit.’ To quote Augustine’s famous formulation, ‘Law was given that grace might be sought, grace was given that the law might be fulfilled.’

The believer’s freedom from sin results in his present as well as in his ultimate sanctification. The true Christian has both the desire and the divinely-imparted ability to live righteously while he is still on earth. Because God sent His own Son to redeem mankind by providing the only sacrifice that can condemn and remove their sin (v. 3), ‘the requirement of the Law’ is able to ‘be fulfilled in us,’ that is, in believers Paul is obviously not speaking here of the justifying work of salvation but of its sanctifying work, its being lived out in the believer’s earthly life. God does not free men from their sin in order for them to do as they please but to do as He pleases. God does not redeem men in order that they may continue sinning but ‘in order that’ they may begin to live righteously by having ‘the requirement of the Law...fulfilled in them.’ The spiritual Christian knows that God’s law is holy, righteous, and good (7:12) and that he has been saved in order to have that divine holiness, righteousness, and goodness ‘fulfilled’ in him. And that is his desire. He has holy longings.

We are saved in order to go to heaven, but we are also saved in order to keep the law, something we could not have done previously and something we cannot do even now in our own strength—but something *we* can do through the power of Christ and with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God saved us so that we can one day be with Him forever in heaven. But He also saved us *in order* that ‘we may walk in newness of life’ (6:4), *in order* that ‘we should bring forth fruit unto God’ (7:4), and *in order* that ‘the righteous demands of the law might be fulfilled in us’

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(8:4). We can do all these things, not in our own power, but through Christ and through His indwelling Spirit.

But we must still pin down the nature of this ‘fulfillment. As we have seen, ‘what the law could not do’ is to free people from ‘the law of sin and death’ – to procure righteousness and life. It could not do this because ‘the flesh’ prevented people from obeying its precepts (see 8:7 and 7:14-25). The removal of this barrier consists not in the actions of believers, for our obedience always falls short of that perfect obedience required by the law. If, then, the ability of the law is to be overcome without an arbitrary cancellation of the law, it can happen only through a perfect obedience of the law’s demands. This, of course, is exactly what Jesus Christ has done. As our substitute, He satisfied the righteous requirement of the law, living a life of perfect submission to God. In laying upon Him the condemnation due all of us (v. 3b; cp. v. 1), God also made it possible for the righteous obedience that Christ had earned to be transferred to us. Verses 3-4 then fit into a pattern in Paul’s presentation of the work of Christ that has been called an ‘interchange’ – Christ becomes what we are so that we might become what Christ is. In this sense, then, we may interpret ‘the righteous requirement of the law’ to be the demand of the law for perfect obedience, or for righteousness. And the law’s just demand is fulfilled in Christians not through their own acts of obedience, but through their incorporation into Christ. He fulfilled the law; and, in Him, believers also fulfill the law – perfectly, so that they may be pronounced ‘righteous,’ free from ‘condemnation’ (v. 1).

(2) Walking According to the Spirit (8:4b)

...who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The reference to Christian behavior in this phrase shows that Paul does not separate the ‘fulfillment of the law’ from the lifestyle of Christians. But, this does not mean that Christian behavior is how the law is fulfilled – a conclusion that is incompatible with the rest of Romans. Rather, Christian behavior is the necessary mark of those in whom this fulfillment takes place. God not only provides in Christ the full completion of the law’s demands for the believer, but He also sends the Spirit into the hearts of believers to empower a new obedience to His demands. Christians now are directed by the Spirit and not by the flesh. Flesh and Spirit stand over against each other not as parts of a person (an anthropological dualism), nor even as impulses or powers within a person, but as the powers, or dominating features, of the two ‘realms’ of salvation history. ‘To walk according to the flesh,’ then, is to have one’s life determined and directed by the values of ‘this world,’ of the world in rebellion against God. It is a lifestyle that is purely ‘human’ in its orientation. To ‘walk according to the Spirit,’ on the other hand, is to live under the control, and according to the values, of the ‘new age,’ created and dominated by God’s Spirit as His eschatological gift.

To live ‘according to the flesh’ is to live the way Adam did, in rebellion against God. That powerful instinct continues to indwell believers and to pull them away from God and back to live the way they used to live. But this way to live is not an option for those who belong to Christ. There is only one way now, that is, ‘according to the Spirit.’ The Christian life is an ethical life, positive not merely negative, full-orbed not minimal, generous not miserly, glad not grudging. Yet the doing of good in these ‘just requirements of the Law’ is not to gain the approval of God. God condemned our Sin in the dying body of His Son to set us free from Law-keeping. Yet, having done that God directs us to live by the Law of love to and for others, strengthened by the

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Spirit of God. So, far from being irrelevant, the commandments point the way to the areas of behavior where loving behavior will be fulfilled.

The Holy Spirit creates a new humanity that is characterized by walking ‘according to the Spirit.’ This new humanity, through its union with Christ, whose flesh never sinned, is infused with the power to live in a way that is pleasing to God. Everything the Law required is now realized in the lives of those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit.

The phrase in v. 4b is not an admonition but a statement of fact that applies to all believers. As Paul explains several verses later, no person who belongs to Christ is without the indwelling Holy Spirit (v. 9). Being indwelt by the Spirit is not a mark of special maturity or spirituality but the mark of every true Christian, without exception. In its figurative sense, *peripateō* (‘to walk’) refers to an habitual way or bent of life, to a life-style. Paul asserts that a true believer—whether young or old, immature or mature, well taught or poorly taught—does ‘not walk according to the flesh.’ Just as categorically he declares that a true believer *does* walk ‘according to the Spirit.’ There are no exceptions. Because every true believer is indwelt by the Spirit, every true believer will produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

This latter half of verse 4 emphasizes that sanctification involves a conscious involvement on our part. Salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit are once-for-all things (vv. 1-4a). But if salvation is going to have any reality in my everyday life, I must think also about walking according to the Spirit (v. 4b). We must have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But having the indwelling of the Holy Spirit does not then make it automatic. There is a conscious side to sanctification. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That is wonderful. But now the call is to walk according to the Spirit.

Fifth, we find an understated but real affirmation of God’s triune character and activity in the words of vv. 3-4. *God* (the Father) sent His *own Son* that we might walk according to the *Spirit*. God sends; the Son is sent; the Spirit of God/of Christ imparts the Spirit of sonship strengthening believers for holiness.

The principle of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the principle of sin and death. Thus when we yield to the power of the Holy Spirit, we are liberated. We no longer have to sin. Through the Holy Spirit the virtue and perfection and power of Christ’s life is communicated to us. We actually do the Law of God from the heart. We love Him with all our hearts, and we love our neighbors as ourselves. This is as great a miracle as when the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep and with power materialized a new creation at the spoken word of the Father. The Holy Spirit liberates us through Christ!

B. Freedom from the Flesh (Romans 8:5-9)

Paul’s purpose in pursuing a series of contrasts between flesh and Spirit is not ‘paraenetic’: that is, he is not warning Christians about two different possibilities they face in order to encourage them to live according to the Spirit. ‘Being in the flesh’ (v. 8) is *not* possible for the believer; and when we add to this the lack of any imperatives and the general, third person language of the paragraph, we are warranted in concluding that Paul’s interest here is descriptive rather than hortatory. In some sense, then, it is fair to say that Paul is contrasting two groups of people: the converted and the unconverted. Paul’s main purpose is to highlight the radical difference between the flesh and the Spirit as a means of showing why only those who ‘walk/think/are’ after the Spirit can have eschatological life. This is the connection between vv. 1-4 and vv. 5-8.

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Note that Paul is not primarily contrasting defeated ('carnal' or 'fleshly') Christians with victorious ('spiritual') Christians in vv. 5-17. He is not engaging in 'higher life' or 'victory' teaching. Rather, he is contrasting the believer's former way of life when he was an unbeliever (which he calls 'flesh') with his present way of life as a believer (which he calls 'Spirit'). Nonetheless, the power of Sin (the 'flesh') continues, dragging the believer down from God and back towards the 'old' (pre-Christian) life.

1. The Flesh vs. the Spirit (8:5-6)

a) *Where Your Mindset Is (8:5)*

⁵*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*

As in verses 2 and 3, the conjunction 'for' in verse 5 carries the meaning of 'because.' The point is that a believer does not behave according to the flesh because his new heart and mind are no longer centered on the things of the flesh and ruled by sin. In God's eyes, there are only two kinds of people in the world, those who do not belong to Him and those who do. Put another way, there are only 'those who are according to the flesh' and 'those who are according to the Spirit.' In this context, the phrase 'according to' refers to basic spiritual nature. The Greek could be translated literally as 'those *being* according to,' indicating a person's fundamental essence, bent, or disposition. Those who are according to the flesh are the unsaved, the unforgiven, the unredeemed, the unregenerate. Those who are according to the Spirit are the saved, the forgiven, the redeemed, the regenerated children of God.

In vv. 5-6, Paul uses a logical progression to contrast the ends to which the flesh and the Spirit lead. In this progression, Paul uses the language of 'thinking' as the 'middle term' to connect existence determined by flesh or Spirit ('those who are according to flesh/Spirit') with the contrasting destinies of death on the one hand and life and peace on the other. Both words, 'think' in verse 5 and 'mind' in v. 6, come from the same Greek root, a root that connotes not a purely mental process but, more broadly, the general direction of the will, encompassing 'all the faculties of the soul – reason, understanding, and affections.

Paul continues to set forth the contrast between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit, between the old man and the new man, giving us more characteristics of each state. The unregenerate person is described by a mind-set. If we question whether we are in the kingdom of God, the first place to look is our mind-set. What is the focus of our life? What do we think about all the time? Where is our treasure? Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, 'but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.'

Phroneō, the verb behind 'set their minds,' refers to the basic orientation, bent, and thought patterns of the mind, rather than to the mind or intellect itself (Greek *nous*). It includes a person's affections as well as his reasoning. The basic disposition of the unredeemed is to 'indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires' (2 Pe. 2:10). 'The things of the flesh' include false philosophies and religions, which invariably appeal, whether overtly or subtly, to the flesh through self-interest and self-effort. 'But those who are according to the Spirit,' Paul says, set their mind on 'the things of the Spirit.' In other words, those who belong to God are concerned about godly things. As Jonathan Edwards liked to say, they have 'holy affections,' deep longings after God and sanctification. Despite their many spiritual failures, their basic orientation and innermost concerns have to do with 'the things of the Spirit.'

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b) What Your Mindset Is (8:6)

⁶*For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*

The ‘mind’ of the flesh/Spirit, the attitude characterized and determined by the flesh/Spirit, is simply the substantival equivalent of thinking ‘the things of the flesh/Spirit’ (v. 5b). The accent falls on what results from these contrasting mind-sets. Those who have the mind-set of the flesh, who, we might say, have a strictly ‘this-worldly’ attitude, experience death. As throughout Romans 5-8, this is death in its broadest aspect, certainly including eschatological condemnation (see vv. 1-4), but not confined to that. ‘Death’ reigns in this life over all those who are outside Christ (cp. 5:12, 15, 21). Likewise, ‘life’ and ‘peace’ denote that state of freedom from ‘the law of sin and death’ that begins for the believer in this life, albeit in less than its final and definitive form. The words do not denote a subjective state of mind (e.g., ‘peace of mind and heart’) but the objective reality of the salvation into which the believer, who has ‘the mind of the Spirit,’ has entered.

Phonēma (‘the mind’) is the noun form of the verb in verse 5, and, like the verb, refers to the content or thought patterns of the mind rather than to the mind itself. It is significant that Paul does not say that ‘the mind set on the flesh’ *leads* to death, but that it is death. The unsaved person is already dead spiritually. The apostle is stating a spiritual equation, not a spiritual consequence. The consequence involved in this relationship is the reverse: that is, because unredeemed men are already spiritual dead, their minds are inevitably ‘set on the flesh.’

If we set our minds on the things of this world, there is an inescapable consequence, which is death. We would do anything in our power to escape death, but it is the only possible consequence if our mind is fixed on the things of this world. To be carnally minded, Paul said, is death.

‘But the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.’ Again Paul states an equation, not a consequence. ‘The mind set on the Spirit,’ that is on the things of God, equates ‘life and peace,’ which equates being a Christian. ‘The mind set on the Spirit’ is synonymous with Christian, a person who has been born again, given spiritual life by God’s grace working through his faith. ‘The mind set on the Spirit’ is also synonymous with spiritual ‘peace,’ that is, peace with God. The unsaved person, no matter how much he may claim to honor, worship, and love God, is God’s enemy (cp. 5:10). The obvious corollary of that truth is that it is impossible to have ‘a mind set on the Spirit,’ which includes having spiritual ‘life and peace,’ and yet remain dead to the things of God. A professing Christian who has no sensitivity to the things of God, no ‘holy affections,’ does not belong to God.

2. The Mindset of the Flesh (8:7-8)

a) Cannot Submit to God (8:7)

⁷*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.*

Verses 7-8 explain why the mind-set of the flesh must lead to death. As shorthand for the principle and power of the godless world, ‘flesh’ and the mind-set characteristic of it are necessarily hostile to God and all His purposes. No neutrality is possible; without the Spirit’s mind-set, found only through union with Christ (see vv. 9-10), people can only order their lives in a way that is hostile to God and that will incur His wrath.

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The ‘law of God’ remains a standard by which the conduct of unbelievers can be measured and condemned. Believers are no longer ‘under the law’ (6:14-15), subject to its binding authority (7:4); but unbelievers are subject still to this power of the ‘old age.’

No matter how self-sacrificing, moral, and sincere the life of an unredeemed person may be, his religious efforts are selfish because he cannot truly serve God, because his ‘mind’ is ‘set on the flesh.’ Paul again (cp. v. 6) uses the term *phronēma* (‘the mind’), which refers to the content, the thought patterns, the basic inclination and orientation of a person. This inclination or bent, of the flesh is even more deep-seated and significant than actual disobedience, which is simply the outward manifestation of the inner, fleshly compulsions of an unregenerate person. Every unredeemed person, whether religious or atheistic, whether outwardly moral or outwardly wicked, ‘is hostile toward God.’ An unsaved person cannot live a godly and righteous life because he has no godly and righteous nature or resources. He therefore *cannot* have genuine love for God or for the things of God. His sinful, fleshly mind ‘does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so.’

Why do we hate God by nature? Why, in our original state of corruption, do we have a fleshly mind-set? Why do we have what Paul earlier called debased minds (1:28)? The reason is God’s law. We are at war with God because we do not want to be subject to the law of God. Every time we want to do our will, express our appetites, and live out our preferences, we run right into the wall of God. We are at enmity with God because our carnal mind is not subject to the law of God. The carnal mind is not subject to the law of God because it cannot be. Paul has made this point repeatedly, reminding us of our natural state of moral inability. Original sin has such a powerful grip on our soul and will that in our flesh we are simply not able to do the things of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and the flesh profits nothing. It profits nothing because it cannot profit anything.

b) Cannot Please God (8:8)

⁸*Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

The second part of v. 7 and v. 8 explain this hostility to God. The ‘mind-set produced by the flesh’ does not, and cannot, submit to God’s law. Those ‘in the flesh’ – the ‘natural’ person apart from Christ – cannot please God.

Even an unbeliever whose life seems to be a model of good works is not capable of doing anything truly good, because he is not motivated or empowered by God and because his works are produced by the flesh for self-centered reasons and can never be to God’s glory. It clearly follows, then, that if the fleshly mind does not and cannot subject itself to the law of God, ‘those who are in the flesh cannot please God.’

They cannot obey the law of God nor do the will of God, and the worst verdict is that they cannot do anything to please God. Those who are not Christians can do nothing to please God. So long as we are in the flesh, the only response we will have from God is a response of His displeasure, which is a euphemism for wrath. For those who do not walk according to the Spirit, those who are not in Christ Jesus, there is nothing but condemnation. That is the only possible consequence for a life defined by a mind-set of the flesh, one in which the mind is at war with God and with His law and does not want to be ruled by Him.

Paul’s assessment of persons apart from Christ may justly be summed up in the theological categories of ‘total depravity’ and ‘total inability.’ ‘Total depravity’ does not mean that all

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people are as evil as they possibly could be – that all people commit every possible sin – nor does it deny that there is knowledge of the good within each person. What is meant rather is that every person apart from Christ is thoroughly in the grip of the power of sin and that this power extends to all the person's faculties. Thus Paul has enunciated clearly by accusing all non-Christians of having a 'mind-set,' a total life-direction, that is innately hostile to God (v. 7). All people, by nature derived from Adam, are incurably 'bent' toward their own good rather than the good of others or of God. Verse 8 plain shows that no person can rescue himself for this condition. As long as that person is 'in the flesh' – and only the Spirit can rescue us from this envelopment in the flesh – he or she is 'totally unable' to please God.

3. The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit (8:9)

a) *Indwelt by the Spirit (8:9a)*

⁹*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*

Paul signals a change in direction with the adversative 'but.' From the situation of those apart from Christ, Paul turns his attention to the Roman Christians, whom he now begins to address directly. The contrast between being 'in the flesh' and 'in the Spirit' is a contrast between belonging to the old age of sin and death and belonging to the new age of righteousness and life. So characteristic of these respective 'ages' or 'realms' are flesh and Spirit that the person belong to one or the other can be said to be 'in' them. In this sense, then, no Christian can be 'in the flesh'; and all Christians are, by definition, 'in the Spirit.' Verse 9 makes absolute clear that: 1) to be a Christian is to be indwelt by God's Spirit; and 2) to be indwelt by God's Spirit means to be 'in the Spirit' and *not* 'in the flesh.' Paul's language is 'positional': he is depicting the believer's status in Christ, secured for him or her at conversion.

After describing the spiritual characteristics and incapacities of those who are in the flesh, Paul again addresses those who 'are not in the flesh but in the Spirit.' A test of saving faith is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. 'You can be certain of your salvation,' Paul is saying, 'if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.' *Oikeō* ('dwells') has the idea of being in one's own home. In a marvelous and incomprehensible way, the very Spirit of God makes His home in the life of every person who trusts in Jesus Christ.

Paul does not say that we are in the Spirit if we have the victorious Christian life. We are in the Spirit if one condition is met—the Spirit of God dwells in us. This is where an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is so vitally necessary to a biblical understanding of what Christianity is all about. We cannot be Christians unless the Holy Spirit regenerates us and changes our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. The Spirit enters and indwells every person whom He regenerates, and everyone He indwells He gives the guarantee of future redemption. He seals the redeemed against the day of judgment. When we are born of the Spirit, we are signed, sealed, and delivered. We still fight with ongoing sin, but if the Spirit is in us, we are not in the flesh. We are in the Spirit, in Christ, and these blessed promises apply to us.

As believers we have 'the Spirit of Christ'—that is, the indwelling Holy Spirit. The clear implication of Paul's use of the phrase 'the Spirit of Christ' is that through the Spirit we experience something of Jesus' disposition—His kindness, His gentle care, His love in our lives. As we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, we are filled with the ethos of Jesus, and life becomes more and more to us what it was and is to Him.

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b) Not Indwelt by the Spirit (8:9b)

Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

As 1 Cor. 3:16 shows, Paul believes that every Christian is indwelt by the Spirit of God. Indeed, this is just what Paul affirms in the last part of verse 9, where he denies that the person who does not have the ‘Spirit of Christ’ can make any claim to being a Christian at all. In other words, for Paul, possession of the Spirit goes hand-in-hand with being a Christian. However much we may need to grow in our relationship to the Spirit; however much we may be graciously given fresh and invigorating experiences of God’s Spirit, from the moment of conversion on, the Holy Spirit is a settled resident within.

The opposite of the reality in v. 9a is also true. The person who gives no evidence of the presence, power, and fruit of God’s spirit in his life has no legitimate claim to Christ as Savior and Lord. The person who demonstrates no desire for the things of God and has no inclination to avoid sin or passion to please God is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit and thus does not belong to Christ.

Our safety in the kingdom of God is not determined by our church membership or whatever good deeds we have managed to perform. Rather, our safety consists of being in Christ and Christ in us. We can offer all our labors to God and belong to a church and have perfect Sunday school attendance but if the Spirit of Christ does not dwell in us, we do not belong to Him (cp. Mt. 7:22-23). That is why Paul reminds us that if we do not have the Spirit of Christ, then we do not belong to Christ.

C. Freedom from Death (Romans 8:10-11)

1. The Spirit Is Life (8:10)

¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

Paul now contrasts the situation he has just described in v. 9b at the same time as he resumes the main thread of his teaching from v. 9a. Significantly, Paul now speaks of ‘Christ’ being in the Roman Christians, whereas in v. 9 it was ‘the Spirit of God’ who was said to be dwelling in believers. What this means is not that Christ and the Spirit are equated or interchangeable, but that Christ and the Spirit are so closely related in communicating to believers the benefits of salvation that Paul can move from one to the other almost unconsciously. Again, it is clear that the believer who by faith has come to be joined with Christ (see 6:1-11) has not only Christ but also the Spirit resident within. The indwelling Spirit and the indwelling Christ are distinguishable by inseparable.

Paul spells out the benefits secured for the believer by the indwelling Christ in two parallel clauses: ‘the body is dead because of sin’; and ‘the Spirit is life because of righteousness.’ In the first clause, the deadness of the ‘body’ (*soma*) is a negative condition, the state of condemnation – a condition that has come about ‘because of sin.’ And the ‘body’ is probably the physical body specifically, its deadness consisting in the penalty of physical death that must still be experienced by the believer. In the second clause, many English versions translate *pneuma* in an anthropological sense: ‘your spirit is alive because of righteousness.’ However, it is better to understand *pneuma* as a reference to the Holy Spirit. *Pneuma* consistently refers to the Holy Spirit in Romans 8, and it certainly does so in v. 11, which explains v. 10b. Moreover,

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identifying *pneuma* as the Holy Spirit makes better sense of the other words in the clause. Paul is teaching that the believer, although still bound to an earthly, mortal body, has residing within him or her the Spirit, the power of new spiritual life, which conveys both that ‘life,’ in the sense of deliverance from condemnation enjoyed now and the future resurrection life that will bring transformation to the body itself. All this takes place ‘because of righteousness,’ this ‘righteousness’ being that ‘imputed righteousness’ which leads to life (see 5:21).

2. The Spirit Gives Live (8:11)

¹¹If 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.

Paul caps off his rehearsal of the life given in and by the Spirit with an affirmation of the Spirit’s instrumentality in securing bodily transformation. Appropriate to this point, the Spirit is now designated as ‘the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead.’ The reference of course, is to God the Father (see Col. 2:12; Rom. 6:4), but the focus is on the Spirit. Since reference to resurrection is so plain in the first part of the sentence, ‘will make alive’ must also refer to future bodily transformation – through resurrection for dead believers – rather than, for instance, to spiritual vivification in justification, or to the ‘mortification’ of sin in the Christian life. The cause-and-effect relationship between Christ’s resurrection and the believer’s, made so plain in Romans 6:5 (cp. 8:17), lies behind Paul’s affirmation that God will give life to ‘our mortal bodies’ just as He raised Christ from the dead. And in keeping with Paul’s focus throughout this part of Romans 8, it is the Spirit who is the instrument by whom God raises the body of the Christian. The Spirit’s life-giving power is not circumscribed by the mortality of the body but overcomes and transforms that mortality into the immortality of eternal life in a resurrected body.

D. Freedom to Live (Romans 8:12-13)

1. To Live According to the Flesh (8:12-13a)

a) *No Obligation (8:12)*

¹²So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

In vv. 5-11 Paul has delineated the contrary natures and tendencies of the two great powers of salvation history: flesh and Spirit. He has put the Roman Christians – and, by implication, all Christians – on the side of the Spirit, and has drawn out the consequences of that relationship: life, in the full theological sense of the word, life that will transcend and overcome physical death itself. Now, with the emphatic inferential ‘now, therefore,’ Paul shows that there are consequences of this new relationship for the day-to-day life of the believer. Specifically, Paul claims, ‘we’ – Christians generally – have no more ‘obligation’ to the flesh, ‘to live according to it,’ to follow its dictates or obey its will. Flesh refers not only to our physical, or ‘animal’ appetites (e.g., for food, or drink, or sex); or does it refer even to a ‘nature’ within us. ‘Flesh’ sums up what we often call ‘the world’: all that is characteristic of this life in its rebellion against God. It is to this ‘power’ of the old age that we are no longer ‘obliged’ to render obedience.

In verses 5-11, Paul has been reminding us that salvation is an absolute think. We were born again, once for all. We have received and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, once for all. This being so we are now to understand that we are debtors ‘not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.’

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We should feel no obligation to live according to the flesh. We should build our lives on a different foundation: on the basis of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Before the apostle gives the admonition in the present text, he refers affectionately to his readers as ‘brethren,’ identifying them as fellow Christians, those to whom God promises victory over the flesh. Paul then proceeds to set forth God’s pattern for victory over the flesh. As God’s children indwelt by His Spirit, we have no ‘obligation...to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.’ ‘The flesh’ is the ugly complex of human sinful desires that includes the ungodly motives, affections, principles, purposes, words, and actions that sin generates through our bodies. ‘To live according to the flesh’ is to be ruled and controlled by that evil complex. Because of Christ’s saving work on our behalf, the sinful flesh no longer reigns over us, to debilitate us and drag us back into the pit of depravity into which we were all born. For that reason we are no longer ruled by the flesh to live by its sinful ways.

We do not owe the old man anything. We are not under any obligation to fulfill the lusts of our fallen nature. We are debtors to the Spirit.

b) Results in Death (8:13a)

¹³*For if you live according to the flesh you will die...*

Paul abandons the syntactical structure he has used in v. 12 – Paul planned to continue his sentence with something like ‘but [we are debtors] to the Spirit, to live according to the Spirit – in order to warn his readers (note the shift to second plural – ‘you’) that if they continue to live by the dictates of the flesh they will certainly die. This death is not, of course, physical death, for it would hardly make sense to make physical death, the fate of *all* who do not live until the Lord’s return – believers and unbelievers alike – the penalty only for those who live according to the flesh. What is meant is death in its fullest theological sense: eternal separation from God as the penalty for sin. We must not eviscerate this warning; Paul clearly affirms that his readers will be damned if they continue to follow the dictates of the flesh. The believer’s once-for-all death to the law of sin does not free him from the necessity of mortifying sin in his members; it makes it *necessary* and *possible* for him to do so.

Those who ‘are living according to the flesh...must die.’ The apostle is not warning genuine believers that they may lose their salvation and be condemned to death if they fall back into some of the ways of the flesh. He has already given the absolute assurance that ‘there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (8:1). He is rather saying that a person whose life is characterized by the things of the flesh is not a true Christian and is spiritually dead, no matter what his religious affiliations or activities may be. If he does not come to Christ in true faith, he must die the second death under God’s final judgment.

On this point Calvinists and Arminians are agreed. The difference lies elsewhere. The Arminian believes that a regenerate believer may, indeed, fall back into a ‘fleshly’ lifestyle so that the threat of this verse becomes real. But the Calvinist believes that the truly regenerate believer, while often committing ‘fleshly’ acts, will be infallibly prevented from living a fleshly lifestyle by the Spirit within. I believe that the strength of the assurances Paul has given to justified believers throughout these chapters, along with the finality of justification itself, favors the ‘Calvinist’ interpretation. But such an interpretation in no way mitigates the seriousness of the warning that Paul gives here. Paul insists that what God has done for us in Christ is the sole and final grounds for our eternal life at the same time as he insists on the indispensability of holy living as the precondition for attaining that life.

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2. To Live According to the Spirit (8:13b)

...but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

In the same way as ‘die’ signifies ‘theological’ death, so the life promised to those who ‘put to death the practices of the body’ in the second sentence of verse 13 denotes spiritual life (as in vv. 10 and 11). Paul’s use of the phrase ‘the practices of the body’ to depict sin is unusual; it may be best to find the pejorative connotation in an implicit carryover from flesh at the beginning of the verse: ‘deeds worked out through the body under the influence of the flesh.’ While the Christian is made responsible for this ‘mortification’ of sins he or she accomplishes this only ‘through the Spirit.’ Holiness of life, then, is achieved neither by our own unaided effort – the error of ‘moralism’ or ‘legalism’ – nor by the Spirit apart from our participation – as some who insist that the key to holy living is ‘surrender’ or ‘let go and let God’ would have it – but by our constant living out the ‘life’ placed within us by the Spirit who has taken up residence within. We face here another finely nuanced balance that must not be tipped too far in one direction or the other. Human activity in the process of sanctification is clearly necessary; but that activity is never apart from, nor finally distinct from, the activity of God’s Spirit.

The Christian’s obligation is no longer to the flesh but to the Spirit. We have the resources of the Spirit of Christ within us to resist and put ‘to death the deeds of the body,’ which result from ‘living according to the flesh.’ Putting ‘to death the deeds of the body’ is a characteristic of God’s children. If a professing Christian habitually lives in sin and shows no concern for repentance, forgiveness, worship, or fellowship with other believers, he proves that he claims the name of Christ in vain. The pattern of a true believer’s life will show that he not only professes Christ but that he lives his life by Christ’s Spirit and is habitually putting to death the sinful and ungodly deeds of the body. Consequently, he will live, that is, possess and persevere to the fullness of eternal life given him in Christ.

Paul realizes that though we all have the privilege of victorious Christian living through the Holy Spirit, we will not automatically follow God’s will. Therefore he exhorts us to live ‘by the Spirit.’ Day by day we are constantly solicited to follow the flesh, and that is why Paul encourages us to constantly be putting to death the deeds of the body. The freedom of the Spirit brings obligation—the obligation of liberation.

Paul is not suggesting the ‘Let go and let God’ philosophy that is promoted by groups and leaders who advocate a so-called deeper life, in which one progressively rises to higher and higher levels of spirituality until sin and even temptation are virtually absent. That is not the kind of spiritual life Paul promises or that he personally experienced, as he testifies so movingly in Romans 7. As long as a believer is in his earthly body, he will be subject to the perils of the flesh and will need to keep putting its sins to death. Only in heaven will his need for practical sanctification end. Until then, all believers are admonished to put sin to death and to live in and for their new Sovereign, the Lord Jesus Christ (cp. 6:3-11). Paul’s main point in v. 13 is that, by the power of the Spirit who dwells in them, Christians are able successfully to resist and destroy sin in their lives.

For next time: Read Romans 8:14-27.