

Grounded: Obligated to the Spirit

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Romans & Lent Series

Romans 8:12-17

Rev. Richard deLange

¹² Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ 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.

Congregation,

“Old habits die hard.” Have you heard that saying before? Sometimes people use that line to justify their ongoing battle with eating too much, drinking too much, sleeping too much or watching too much TV. You can use it for any number of bad habits that you wish you didn’t have anymore. It’s true. When we’ve done something for a long time, it’s hard to quit. I’ve seen people almost hate themselves for not being able to quit something. It’s probably true too for people who know they spend too many hours on video games or social media. It could even be true of people who are doing good things but maybe just too much of it. You could, for example, really love reading books but you spend so much time doing that that you neglect other important duties and relationships. It’s a good thing to do but it’s become a bad habit.

In the book of Romans, Paul teaches us as God’s people that we should be living in freedom. He says, for example, in v.15, that the Holy Spirit does not make us slaves to things like fear. And that fear he’s talking about is the fear of **not** doing well enough; not living up to certain standards as given in the law which leads to an unhealthy fear of God. But we could add all kinds of fears we have as well. Maybe fear of the consequence of all our bad habits.

God doesn’t want us living in slavery to fear or anything else that isn’t good for us. Jesus has redeemed us to live differently—with freedom that comes from his grace. And that grace is intended to change how we deal with ourselves and with others.

Living Out of No Condemnation

Here we are in Romans 8 talking about living by the Spirit. But don’t forget where this marvellous chapter begins. Right at the opening, Paul declares,

Rom 8:1 "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!"

That's such good news. That's the gospel. That's our comfort, our joy, our treasure.

Yet as much as we have been given that as a free gift from God, paid in full by Jesus, it's hard for us to accept that for ourselves and then to show that same grace to others. It strikes me strange that we Christians often condemn ourselves repeatedly and we also feel the need to be condemning others, as if that's our job as followers of Jesus. We are inwardly kind of like one of those corner preachers who stand on a box and shout at people that they are all going to hell.

How does this fit? We have received Christ's redemption—our justification from sin. We've come under Christ and get to live in the peace and comfort that *there is no condemnation* for us. Should our response be that of very clearly condemning others? Jesus says to us, "No condemnation." But we don't accept that for ourselves and then we even go and condemn others. It's like we've forgotten what grace looks like.

You see, before we get into living by the Spirit, maybe we need to just reflect on what Jesus has done for us. Think about how he treated people who were stuck in their sin.

How did Jesus treat the Samaritan woman at the well? This woman had been married several times and was now "living in sin", as we sometimes call it. She was so estranged from others that she came to the well at the time of day when no one else would normally be there. Given her previous experience with religious people, she fully expected Jesus, just like others of her day, to condemn her. But he didn't. He extended grace and love.

Similarly, think about how Jesus, according to John 8, treated a woman caught in adultery? He came to her defence while she was being condemned by all the religious police. He said to them, "If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to pick up a stone and throw it at her." Then after they had all gone away, she looked up at Jesus—probably with trepidation—only to hear him say, "Neither do I condemn you!" Only after she felt accepted rather than condemned did he invite her to leave her life of sin.

The life of the Spirit that Paul teaches us about here flows from the promise of no condemnation. Everything for us as Christians flows from that comfort. If we don't understand this for ourselves, we will live with fear in our own hearts and we won't treat others as Jesus did.

Living by the Spirit

So now think about what it means to live by the Holy Spirit. In short, Paul says that the Spirit brings life to us. Listen again:

Rom 8:12 Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh,

you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

The English translations here can be a little confusing in the way that we understand the word “if”. *If* can sound like a condition. *If* you are a good girl, I will give you a treat. But that’s not the meaning here. The sense is more like “when you are a good girl then you live a certain way.” So, Paul is saying, since you have the Holy Spirit in you, you can live God’s way, you no longer have to give in to the pull of your sinful nature, the flesh. That is to say, “If you are living by the Spirit then you’ll be putting the flesh to death and moving more and more into God’s kind of life for you.” This is the life that Jesus has won for us by his resurrection.

Think about it. The Paul who said in Romans 7 that he still finds himself doing things he doesn’t want to do and unable to do the good he wants to do is now saying that we have the Holy Spirit living in us to help us stop our sinning and to do the right things instead. Now that the Holy Spirit lives in us because of Jesus’ grace earned for us, we have the obligation to live by the Spirit. But, again, not an obligation as in “You have to do this or you’ll die.” Paul is talking about a faith-filled response. Because Jesus has saved you securely, taken away your condemnation and filled you with the Holy Spirit who is the power of God, you have the resources needed to live a new life God’s way. In that sense, you are obligated to use what God has freely given and earned for you. You have the opportunity and the responsibility to tap into the power of the Holy Spirit. So stop trying to fight sin in your own strength and trying to do good in your own effort. You have the Holy Spirit in you now!

Living as a Child of Abba

Friends, Paul writes that living by the Spirit also means living in the comfort of being a child of Abba. If you’re living a life free from condemnation and empowered by the Holy Spirit, then you’ve got to be living in the comfort of being God’s child. Jesus called his Father Abba, which means Daddy in the Aramaic language that he spoke.

Think about it. When it comes to Abba versus Father, any man can be a father. You can have a one-night stand which results in your becoming a father to a child who you seldom ever see and don’t really know and love. You can also be a father who is truly present in the family but is only there to as the breadwinner. And maybe he’s there to correct the kids when Mom can’t handle it anymore. He might get out of his Lazyboy chair long enough to scream at the kids to be quiet or to go outside and play. He’s performing some basic functions in the home but not really building a positive relationship with his children.

To be a daddy is different. That’s a whole new level of fatherhood. That’s the father who kids run up to for hugs and kisses. This is the man they love and trust. They can go to him with their tears and know he’ll hold them until the pain lessens. This is the man they run to when they are afraid and know he’ll protect them and help them navigate the fear. This is the man who laughs with them and

cries with them, who walks and talks with them, who celebrates their smallest and largest accomplishments.

Jesus called his Father in heaven *Abba*, Daddy, a title filled with respect but mostly filled with love. It's a love that existed from eternity between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's a love based on relationship and oneness. And that, of course, involves perfect love. Because of Jesus' work in removing our condemnation, and the Spirit's work in drawing us closer to God, assuring us that we're his beloved children, Paul says we get to call God in heaven our *Abba*, just like Jesus did. In fact, the Holy Spirit helps us to feel loved by the Father and to know deep down in our hearts—not just our heads—that we are children who belong to this *Abba*. In other words, Spirit-filled people know we can run to *Abba* and feel his love.

I've said it other times already, but in those months, three years ago, when our daughter Rachel was so ill, we felt the love of *Abba* so intensely. In the time of suffering and uncertainty, the love of the Father overwhelmed us. That's a blessing of the Holy Spirit. To this day, it reminds me over and over again to not take my relationship with God for granted. To keep reading the Bible and praying, to keep walking in step with the Spirit in order to keep building that relationship with *Abba* that is mine through Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Living into the Life of the Spirit

When we live in the security that our sins are covered, when we live knowing that we have a secure and loving relationship with God, our *Abba*, and when we live knowing that Holy Spirit is in us to help us be all that God has in mind for us, then we're in a good place to more and more live the life the Holy Spirit wants us to enjoy.

Paul calls God's people in Rome, and you and me still today, to put the old sinful nature to death. Going back to v.13 again, he writes,

Rom 8:13 For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Again, remember, when we get our power for life from the Holy Spirit, we'll say "no" to sin more often and "yes" to God's life for us.

A number of Christian thinkers use the analogy of dancing to talk about living by the Spirit. I think that's helpful. You see, when it comes to dancing, there are a few important things to remember.

First, you have to trust your partner. Dancing never works well when you're not secure with the person leading you. And that's all the more true when it comes to us dancing with the Holy Spirit. We know that he knows all the moves. He's a star dancer! We can therefore trust him to help us learn how to move through life in the way that will most certainly lead to blessing. The way that will most avoid the sins we don't really want to do anymore but somehow still find attractive. As we pray and follow his lead, he'll help us avoid the pitfalls of sin's temptations.

Martin Luther once told his friend Philip Melanchthon, “Why don’t you go out and sin some more so you have something about which to repent!” Was Luther encouraging his friend to sin? No. Not at all. But he knew that Melanchthon was a bit of a perfectionist—so much so, that in dance terms, he was not following the leader. He was not enjoying the dance because he was so focused on doing it right in his own power. In other words, we have to stop thinking about how we are going to do it right and instead trust the Holy Spirit is there to help us dance into God’s way of life for us. Stay close to the Spirit and let his lead!

A second thing about dancing is that you can’t look at your feet. Paul says the Spirit wants us to live without fear. In other places he tells us that the Spirit gives us freedom. Paul point is that we can’t dance if we’re only thinking about failure all the time, looking at our feet to see if we’re doing it right. Instead, we have to live in the security of Christ’s finished work in us and the Spirit’s abundant power and the Father’s love. They are all on our side. So, relax and enjoy the dance. Stop worrying about what you’re not doing it right and, instead, focus on your dance partner who won’t let you down. Just look into his eyes and rest in his moves.

I think back to all the fun I used to have with our kids when they were little. When the music was cranked up and the dance was underway, they didn’t even have their feet on the ground! They were most often in my arms and going in whichever direction I would take them. They were just enjoying the dance, a dance grounded in their confidence in their loving daddy.

To be honest, I didn’t usually have a plan. It was just random craziness. But the Holy Spirit does have all the perfect moves and the perfect way to get us to learn how to walk more closely with Abba and also to enjoy it.

So, finally, you have to stop believing that your dancing has some self-serving purpose. Don’t think about the benefits you hope to achieve by dancing. Like, “Hey, if I dance an hour a day, I’ll loose 10 pounds a month.” Stop trying to measure success and just enjoy it.

Here’s the error we make: If we strive for a greater walk with the Spirit so that we can be a better vessel of service for the Lord, we’ve got to rethink that. Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad that you want to be a better servant for the Lord. But don’t think that God can’t make the changes in this world that he has in mind without your help. You see how deceptive our hearts and minds can be, even when it comes to spiritual things? God can take care of everything himself. Everything! He doesn’t need you and me to do anything. BUT... But, he wants us to come along for the ride and to enjoy life with him. In the process, we’ll learn how to really dance, which will make a difference in our own life and also in how we treat others.

When I was a kid, my dad would take me along on service calls. He was on call 24-7. If a farmer called during supper, Dad would take off immediately to help that farmer get his equipment working so the cows could be milked without too much delay. Many times, I’d go with my dad. Now, don’t think that I was much help. I probably thought I was a lot more helpful than I really was. My dad certainly didn’t

need me around. He took me along because he loved having me with him and I loved going along. It was about the relationship, not the productivity.

In that time together, though, I did learn things that still help me today. I learned how to fix certain things. I learned how my Dad treated customers and enjoyed them. I probably learned a lot more than I realized but not because I was focused on learning. I was just enjoying my time with my dad. The learning happened as I enjoyed the relationship.

Similarly, we need to stop thinking we've got to do certain things to gain God's approval or to show our gratitude. Just listen to the Spirit, follow his lead and the actions will flow from your relationship with him. Life will more and more displace the old ways of doing things.

So when Paul says we have an obligation to live by the Spirit, he clearly wants us to remember that our human striving—in the flesh—won't accomplish that. Rather, he's inviting us to deepen our relationship with our Triune God. Rest in the condemnation-free grace of Jesus. Know the loving acceptance of Abba. And let the Spirit lead the dance of your life.

Amen.

Let's join our musicians in singing *King of Kings*.

By His blood and in His Name

In His freedom I am free

A good reminder to let Jesus be king of our lives so that we can enjoy the freedom he gives and the power of the Holy Spirit who helps us live it out.