

Romans: The Promise of Righteousness (part 3 of 6)

Alive, Adopted and Able to Defeat Sin

Romans 8:12-17

Mark Vroegop

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ 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!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ 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. Romans 8:12–17 (ESV)

Two weeks ago we began our journey through Romans 8 as I shared about going up to Arthur's seat in Edinburgh, Scotland. By reaching the summit you are not only able to get a better view of where you have been but also a vision of where you would like to go.

So far in our study we have looked at the beauty of no condemnation: examining the new reality that God has placed us in through the work of Christ. And last week we looked at the Spirit's role in the spiritual life, and we learned how different the flesh is from the Spirit and how central the Holy Spirit is for the lives of believers in Jesus. I hope that you found new "life" in some areas of your life this week.

Now I am suggesting to you that summit views "wow" you with the beauty of what you see and "woo" you to see even more. Our text today is part of that "exploring" vision. If you understand what Paul is saying about "no condemnation" and the Spirit, then there will be specific, tangible steps that we take. In other words, those who are spiritually alive and sovereignly adopted are able to defeat sin.

Let me take you up the summit of Romans 8 for a moment, and I want you to think with me about a sin in your life that you would love to see lessened or eliminated. Imagine your life with less anger, unforgiveness, covetousness, jealousy, lust, sinful words, or worry. Imagine the story of your life sounding like this: "For years I was stuck in the sin of _____, but in early January of 2015, the Lord met me in Romans 8, and now my life is marked by freedom and joy. I have experienced a new level of freedom."

My prayer is that God would use our study of this great chapter and produce those kinds of stories in our midst. Romans 8 was meant to "wow" you and "woo" you.

A Vision of What Is New

Our text today is Romans 8:12-17, and it is a passage that begins to show us a vision of where we could go or how we could live in light of the beauty of what we see at the summit of Romans 8. These verses contain some important truths regarding what is new and true for the follower of Jesus so that there is

a difference in how they live. In other words, the talk about newness is for the purpose of producing obedience. Romans 8:12-17 is here to help believers get a vision of where they could go.

Now there are three aspects of this newness that I want to examine today:

1. New Power (vv. 12-13)

Verses 12-13 begin with words “so then” which indicate that what follows is connected to what we studied last week. Paul is specifically referring to verses 9-11 where we learned about the centrality of the Spirit to the life of the believer. We saw that 1) believers are “in the Spirit” (v. 9a), 2) the Spirit is linked to belonging to Christ (v. 9b), 3) the Spirit brings life even while we live in dead bodies (v. 10), and 4) the same spiritual power that raised Christ will raise up those who are “in Christ” (v. 11). Verses 9-11 were written to “wow” us with the role of the Spirit.

But there are implications or applications of this reality, and that is what Paul focuses on in verses 12-13. The beauty of the Spirit’s role is meant to motivate us in terms of how we live.

Verse 12 makes a statement that is negative: *“we are debtors, not to the flesh to live according to the flesh.”* Paul tells believers what they are not. Because the requirement of the law has been fulfilled (8:4), the debt or obligation to the flesh has been satisfied and paid in full. “No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1) means that there is no longer an obligation to listen to the flesh, to obey the flesh or to live in the flesh. The believer has been delivered from the realm of the flesh by the payment of sin’s debt through Christ, and therefore there has been a miraculous change in how a believer lives.

Now it would seem that there is something missing in verse 12 because you would expect Paul to say something like this: *“we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh, but we are debtors to the Spirit to live according to the Spirit.”* It is true that we have a new life in the Spirit and that this new life is the antithesis to the life in the flesh. But the Bible does not call our relationship with the Spirit as something that is “debt-based.” As we will see in the next point, there is a very significant change in relationship. In other words, we do not relate to the Spirit in the same way that we related to the flesh. More on this in a moment.

The point of verse 12 is to reinforce the categorical or positional change that has taken place between those who are “in Christ” and the flesh so that verse 13 could have its full power. Romans 8:13 is a very important text in the Bible as it relates to the mortification or the killing of sin.

There is a promise this offered in 8:13. Do you see it? The practical promise is that there is a new power available to believer so that he or she can “put to death the deeds of the body.” In other words, there is a practical connection between the presence of the Spirit, one’s eternal destiny (“you will live”) and the mortification of sin.

The new reality and power that is part of being “in the Spirit” is glorious and powerful that killing sin is a central part of what it means to be “in Christ.” Killing sin is not something relegated to the super-spiritual or those who are addicted to something. It is supposed to be a natural extension of who we

are in Christ. The new power by the Spirit is not just something available to you; it is who you are and what you already possess.

This is important for two reasons. First, it is imperative that we really come to terms with the difference in the power of the flesh and the power of the Spirit because we often give the flesh and our former identity too much power. For example, we often act as if there are subtle ways where there are things more ultimate or more powerful than the Spirit. This could include your personality type, your past, former struggles, your upbringing, your environment, the culture around you, or your false thinking in the past. Anytime we say, "I can't obey or change because _____ is who I am," then we are elevating something of the flesh above life in the Spirit. If I excuse my sarcasm or don't fight against it with as much passion because I think that's just my personality or how I grew up, then I am really saying that the ties of the flesh are stronger than the life of the Spirit.¹

The second reason that understanding this power is important is because there is a clear indication that killing sin is central to what it means to be "in the Spirit." Killing sin part of the condition of being "in the Spirit" and it is a characteristic of being "in the Spirit." Obedience is the hallmark of the Spirit's power. The new power of the Spirit creates the venue for putting to death the deeds of the body.

Now what does it practically mean to "put to death" the deeds of the body. For years this was a great mystery to me because the wording sounded so definitive and permanent. And yet that has not been my experience as a Christian or as a pastor.

In 2008 I preached my first sermon series at College Park, and I was greatly helped by what I discovered while studying Colossians 3:5 and Paul's command "to put to death what is earthly in you." Now the Greek word for this in Colossians 3 is different than Romans 8 but they fit together. In Colossians 3 the Greek word is nekroo, and it is used to describe things that are as good as dead. The same word is used in Romans 4:18 in reference to Abraham considering himself as good as dead in regards to his ability to conceive a child. He was alive, but he considered his ability to conceive as good as dead.

In my research on this word I discovered that the Greek word nekroo was used to by physicians to indicate the atrophy that comes to a part of the body through sickness. This was very helpful because atrophy means that some part of your body grows weaker and weak through disuse. When atrophy sets in, a part of your body while still present is no longer functional. So putting something to death might not remove its presence in terms of temptations or struggle, but it does mean that there is a difference power.

I referred to this an "intentional atrophy," choosing to not act upon my fleshly desires while choosing to facilitate the desires of the Spirit. The combination of "atrophy" and "intentional" is important because the word in Romans 8:13 is more definitive. It means to condemn to death (1 Peter 3:18) or to be delivered over to death (Romans 8:36). So the nuance in verse 13 is more about the difference in power between the flesh and the Spirit. Because of being "in Christ" and "in the Spirit" there is a new power that exists in the life of the believer to consider themselves dead to sin.

¹ I'm grateful to Dustin Crowe for these insights.

So to “put to death the deeds of the body” is a decisive cooperation with the Spirit where we live out our position with new power which leads to new practices. In Colossians 3 we weaken the flesh through atrophy, and in Romans 8 we say to the flesh: “You are dead to me!”

Because of the new power of the Spirit we can intentionally eclipse the power of flesh with the power of the Spirit. Now what specifically does that look like? How do we use this new power of the Spirit? Let me use an acronym with the word ECLIPSE to share my strategy with you:

- E** – Expose the lie of sin and temptation. See it for what it really is and call it to account.
- C** – Claim a promise in the Word to counteract the lie.
- L** – Live by faith. You must believe and act upon the promise, even before you feel it to be true.
- I** – Ingest the Word. You need multiple promises and you need to run to the Word to be your weapon against sin.
- P** – Pray for help. We have the Spirit, and we need to cry out for God to deliver us.
- S** – Shun future temptations. Run from tempting situations and circumstances. Be wise!
- E** – Engage others. Ask for prayer, seek counsel, and invite accountability in your life.

All of this is rooted in the fact that there is a new power in the believer because of the presence of the Spirit. A new heart creates powerful new affections.

Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was a remarkable and influential Scottish Pastor in the 1800’s. His most famous sermon was entitled “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.”² The point of the sermon was simply that you cannot destroy love of the world by merely demonstrating its vanity or emptiness. Godliness comes from a new love and a new affection. Here is what he said:

“But what cannot be thus destroyed, may be dispossessed – and one taste may be made to give way to another, and to lose its power entirely as the reigning affection of the mind.”

“...If the heart be without God, the world will then have all the ascendancy. It is God, apprehended by the believer as God in Christ, who alone can dispossess it from this ascendancy. It is when He stands dismantled of the terrors which belong to Him as an offended lawgiver and when we are enabled by faith, which is his own gift, to see His glory in the face of Jesus Christ, and to hear His beseeching voice... It is then that a love paramount to the love of the world, and at length expulsive of it, first arises in the regenerating bosom. It is when released from the spirit of bondage..., and when admitted into the number of God’s children, through the faith that is in Christ Jesus, the spirit of adoption is poured upon us – it is then that the heart, brought under the mastery of one great and predominant affection, is delivered from the tyranny of its former desires and in the only way in which deliverance is possible. And that faith which is revealed to us from heaven, as indispensable to a sinner’s justification in the sight of God, is also the instrument of the greatest of all moral and spiritual achievements on a nature dead to the influence, and beyond the reach of every other application.”

² Read the entire sermon: <https://redeemerchurch.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/expulsive-power-of-a-great-affection.pdf>

In other words, there is an expulsive power of a new affection. There is a new power through the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. New Relationship (vv. 14-16)

The second thing that Paul mentions here is a new relationship that believers have with the Father. This is an important shift. Previously Paul has used terminology that fits the idea of position or realm. But now he uses a family metaphor and specifically the relationship between a father and a son to picture a believer's spiritual relationship.

Verse 14 marks the transition by linking the presence of the Spirit of God with being a son of God. In the same way that "no condemnation" (v. 1) was linked to "walk according to the Spirit" (v. 4) and then to "those who set their minds on the Spirit" (v. 6), so now living in the Spirit and being led by the Spirit are linked to being a son of God.

There really is a progression here toward greater intimacy, more relationship context, and family belonging. The beauty of God's grace is not just that believers are not punished for these sins, but also that they became part of God's family.

The words "son" (v. 14) and "children" (v. 17) were a frequent way for God to refer to his people.³ During the time of the Exodus, God's rationale for delivering his people was because "Israel is my firstborn son." (Ex. 4:22). In the New Testament we become the spiritual sons of God by our inclusion in Christ and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In other words, to be "in Christ" and to be "in the Spirit" is to be in God's family.

Now this idea of being a part of God's family is so beautiful that Paul wants to make it even more evident and poignant. And that is what verses 15-16 are all about. They serve to explain the beauty of being in God's family.

The point in verse 15 is that a believer's relationship with God has radically changed. The verse starts with what is no longer true: there is no longer a spirit of slavery leading you to fall back into fear. What does this mean? The hope here is that the old relationship with God – based upon the Law, failure and impotence – is not coming back. The power of sin and the law have been broken. There is no going back. God forever changed your relationship with him. This is the end result and the relational reality of "no condemnation." You are God's son.

This will help those of who wondered about "no condemnation," and its connection to consequences for sins that we still commit. As God's children we will still fail and grieve God's heart. But there is a family-bonded reservoir of love and grace because you are God's child. Those of you who are parents know what I am talking about. Our children do things that are painful to watch and even have consequences. But that does not alter our fundamental relationship with them. They are and always will be our kids. That is what makes prodigal children so painful. Because no matter how angry or hurt you are, there is still a deep love for them. It is what makes their rebellion truly painful.

³ See Deut 14:1; Isa 43:6; Jer 3:19, 31:9; Hos 1:0.

So it is with God. We have been adopted as sons, and we cry “Abba, Father.” Why would Paul add this adoption language? The reason is because a birth analogy does not have a powerful enough past connected to it. A birth of a baby is beautiful, but it is not as radical as adoption. Every child that is adopted has a different set of genes than their adoptive parents. Biologically they are not connected. Adoption is incredibly beautiful because of the establishment of a parent-child relationship not based upon a natural birth or the will of a child, but because of a parent who loves and welcomes someone else’s child as their child. Adoption makes someone belong to you who, by nature, belonged to someone else.

What’s more, Paul uses a personal title for Father to capture the depth of this relationship. He uses the Aramaic word “Abba” which he then translates with Greek word “Father.” The word “Abba” is the same word that Jesus used in Mark 14:36 when he was praying the Garden before his crucifixion. It is a word of intimacy and close relationship.

The fact that God is no longer our judge but instead our father changes everything about how we understand him and relate to him. Matt Chandler in a sermon on Galatians identifies the difference between how you relate to a judge and how you relate to your Dad.

Now here's why this is really important. Because to see God as the just judge (as good and right) and to hear the gavel fall that declares us spotless and blameless and holy is a relief, but to see God as Dad changes everything.

Let me try to put it in more everyday terms. I don't want to go camping with the judge. I don't want to hang out with the judge. I don't want to have dinner with the judge. I don't want to throw the ball with the judge. I don't want to go see a movie with the judge. I don't want to hang out with the judge. Now I appreciate that he banged the gavel and said I'm not guilty, but I don't know that we're going to be buddies. I just feel like the whole time we'd be at a movie and he'd be like, "That's illegal. Somebody's going to have to pay for that. I cannot believe they used gamma radiation like that." I just feel like it would always be this pointing out of what is right and what is wrong, and that's kind of the picture in my mind. Really, when you think about a judge, you don't go, Man, I'd really like to spend some time with that guy.

But Dad? Man, I want to camp with Dad. I want to go see a movie with Dad. I want to play catch with Dad. I want to go on vacation with Dad. I want to hang out with Dad. I want to hear what Dad has to say. I want Dad to hear what I have to say. I want Dad to be proud of me. I want Dad, right? That changes everything if our mind shifts from the good, right, just judge into Abba, Father. Doesn't that change our perception of God?"

There is a new relationship with God.

However, don’t miss the fact of the centrality of the Spirit here as well. The text specifically says not just that we have been adopted and cry out Abba, Father. It says that we have received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out Abba, Father. So the Spirit has a vital role in this new relationship.

What's more, if you continue to verse 16 you will see that it is the Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. It seems that there is a two witness motif (Deut. 19:15) in play here with the Spirit and our spirit giving evidence that we are God's children.

In other words, there is an internal witness by the Holy Spirit in the heart of each believer confirming that they are indeed God's children. Sometimes this is just the peace that comes over someone after they have received Christ. Sometimes it is the powerful realization of the truth of a song or a scripture or a phrase in a sermon. Sometimes it is the calm assurance that comes in the midst of great suffering.

I can remember the twenty minute drive home from the doctor's office after we found out that our days-to-be-born daughter had died in Sarah's womb. We were on our way home to gather our clothes, tell our kids what happened, and head back to the hospital so Sarah could give birth. As I watched everyone else driving on the highway like it was just a normal day, the words of a hymn came out of me: "When sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot you have taught me to say: It is well, it is well with my soul." I believe it was the Spirit assuring me that even on that day, I still belonged to God.

This new relationship with God as my Father now means that I have a new motivation for obedience, and this is part of the vision for this passage. It means that the impetus or reason for following God's commands is because of who I am and how I am related to God. Obedience now springs from love not from fear, from position not performance, and from grace not debt.

As one of our staff guy's said this week: In Christ you not only get forgiveness but you get a family; you not only are freed from sin as your Master but you receive God as your Father; you not only are removed from bondage but you're made to belong; you not only hear "no condemnation" but you hear "my beloved child."

The beauty of this propels you to see where you could go and fight like you've never fought before.

3. New Promise (vv. 17)

The final aspect of this vision for what is new relates a promise for what is yet to come in our lives. Verse 17 links our relationship to the Father as his children to our inheritance and our future destiny. Those who are children are also heirs.

This is a stunningly gracious thing to say. To be an heir means that what belongs to your Father will belong to you. What is his will be yours. When you add adoption to it, it makes it even more glorious because the children who are heirs were not natural heirs. To be adopted is incredibly kind, but to also be considered an heir is extravagantly gracious.

But the text says more here. Paul does just settle to call us heirs; he goes even deeper. He calls us heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. This not only means that what God has promised to Christ he will also give to us. That is certainly true (see Ephesians 1:11-23). But it also means that our inheritance is not just the blessings of God. To say that we are heirs of God is to say that we are not only going to receive that God has promised, but we will receive God himself. This is the beauty of the gospel. Not only that you are forgiven of your sins, but that you get God.

That is why glorification is mentioned at the end of this text. It says “that we may also be glorified with him.” The promise here is that at the end of days we share in the glory of God himself. Here is how 1 John states this truth:

² Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

The promise and the hope are related to what the future holds for God’s adopted children. The sons of God are going to be glorified. They have “no condemnation” over them. The Spirit dwells in them, assures them and leads them. The Spirit gives them power to put sin to death, and their ultimate inheritance is God and the reflection of his glory. That is their future.

We are alive, adopted and able to defeat sin.

And yet we live right now in a broken world, with imperfect bodies, and the struggle with a world marred by sin. Therefore, there is going to be suffering. It is assumed and part of the reality of what it means to be a child of God. Coming to faith in Jesus does not prevent bad things from happening. It does something better (as we will see next week); it redeems them when compared to what has happened to us in Christ and what our destiny looks like.

Listen, there are many times in life when a believer might be tempted to sin. And times of suffering only intensify the lure of the temptation.

Paul aims to give us a vision here of who we really are so that we can live by the Spirit, put sin to death, and never give up – even when life is really, really hard.

And it is this vision of who you are and how to live that can serve as your beacon of hope when you are walking through the valleys of life.

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil
For you are with me” (Psalm 23:4)*

His Spirit is in you! You are alive, adopted and able to make it!

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