

ROMANS

Part 17: “The Ministry of the Spirit”

Romans 8:12–17

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Sunday, June 5, 2022 (Pentecost Sunday)

Scripture Reading

“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:12–17).

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, as you poured the Holy Spirit upon the ancient church, I pray you would fill us anew with your Spirit and power today. Help us be to led by your Spirit and to live according to your Spirit. May we be empowered by your Holy Spirit to live holy lives and declare your holy gospel. In Jesus Christ's holy name, we pray, AMEN.

Introduction

Today is Pentecost. Once, Pentecost was an ancient Jewish feast that commemorated the first fruits of the harvest. It was for that reason that the small band of Jesus's disciples gathered in Jerusalem, fifty days after Jesus's resurrection, and just ten days after his ascension into heaven [show [1Pentecost \(1597\) by El Greco](#)]. There, God poured out his Holy Spirit upon his people, filling them with spiritual life and power to declare and display the good news of Jesus Christ!

Now, for Christians, Pentecost is a day that commemorates the new spiritual life that is imparted to us through God's Holy Spirit, who dwells in and among the church. Pentecost is a day set aside on the church calendar to celebrate the Holy Spirit's continuing work in and through the people of God.

On Pentecost, we remember God has not abandoned his people. God does not barely tolerate his people at a distance. God has not left his people without comfort and without hope. Rather, God dwells with and empowers his people by his Spirit. God

imparts his unfathomable love to his people by his Spirit. God bears witness to an eternal hope of glory in and through his Spirit.

The coming of the Spirit means that all who believe in Christ have been baptized—literally, immersed—into union with God. We can be filled with and renewed by the Spirit day after day. All that Christ accomplished for us is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, we are now invited to participate in and experience the life of the triune God!

What this new, spiritual life looks like and why this new life is so vitally significant is vividly displayed in our Scripture reading today from Romans chapter 8.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul reminds us that for those who have placed their hope and trust in the resurrection of Jesus, we are no longer bound to our old way of life. We have been liberated into a new way of life that is made possible by “The Ministry of the Spirit,” which is an ongoing, present reality in the life of all Christians.

There are three aspects of the Holy Spirit’s ministry to us that today’s passage uniquely emphasizes: 1.) *The Spirit Empowers the Mortification of Sin*, 2.) *The Spirit Proclaims Our Adoption*, 3.) *The Spirit Promises Our Glorious Inheritance*.

Exposition

1.) The Spirit Empowers the Mortification of Sin

Let's look back at the first verse of our reading today: “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh” (Rom 8:12). Here, I want you to pay careful attention to the word “flesh” (σάρξ). The “flesh” is a key technical term in Paul's vocabulary that is vitally important in Paul's understanding of sin and our relationship with sin.

If you remember, Paul has announced to us that Jesus's death and resurrection have dethroned the power of sin in the life of the believer. Nevertheless, both Scripture and experience show us that Christians can still do sinful things after coming to faith in Christ. Why is this the case?

According to Paul, we can still do sinful things because we are still tempted to live according to “flesh.” Sometimes Paul will use terms like “the flesh,” “the body,” or “the old man” interchangeably. The flesh represents the earthly desires of our earthly bodies. It is the part of us by which we can sin and do sin. It is the part of us that has been corrupted by sin and continues to be seduced and deceived by sin. The flesh is the part of us that has been conditioned to obey the voice of sin. So, for the Christian, yes, the power of sin has been dethroned, but our flesh still exists, endures, and attempts to exert influence on our lives and actions.

However, just because the flesh exists and endures does not mean that it must be obeyed, and its desires do not have to be fed. In fact, Paul begins this passage by

reminding us that we are not debtors to the flesh. It is not our flesh that saves us. Indeed, the flesh is powerless to rescue us and redeem us from the powers of sin and death. We do not owe the flesh anything. Our flesh has no right—no authority—to compel our actions. We do have to live “according to the flesh.”

For Christians, we owe the flesh nothing and we own the Spirit everything. Our allegiance is to the Spirit. It is the Spirit who has given us new life. It is the Spirit who has poured the love of God into our hearts. It is the Spirit that has given to us all the gifts of God. Thus, we are called not to live according to the flesh, which leads us to sin and death, but according to the Spirit, who leads us to life and freedom. As Paul says in the following verse, “*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*” (Rom 8:13).

In the 1600s, there lived a famed English pastor and theologian named John Owen (1616– 1683)[show [2Portrait of John Owen](#)]. Owen wrote volumes of books, and one of his more famous publications is a book based off Romans 8:13, entitled *The Mortification of Sin* [show [3The Mortification of Sin title page](#)]. It is a classic that many Christians still read today.

The word mortification comes from the verb mortify, which is an old and fancy way of saying “to put to death” or “kill.” Owen observed from this verse that to live by the Spirit means to actively participate in mortifying deeds of the flesh. All Christians—even the very best and saint-like among us—are to be actively engaged this work of mortification.

Owen notes that all those who believe in Christ have been delivered from the condemning power of sin. Nevertheless, we are not immune to the influence of sin through the flesh. Thus, we must actively, and intentionally seek to mortify the deeds of the flesh by saying “no” to the flesh’s desires. We must weaken the flesh by not indulging and feeding its desire to obey sin.

As John Owen famously writes, “*Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.*”

The mortification of sin is crucial because the desires of the flesh lead toward death. Nevertheless, while this is a work we are called to participate in, the work of mortification is not a work that we do in our own power. Mortification can happen by no other means than the Spirit. The power to defeat sin is made possible only by the Holy Spirit through whom Christ defeated the power of death.

The same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is the same Holy Spirit that can help us put sin to death in our lives. By the power of this Spirit, what would otherwise be impossible is possible. As John Owen poetically states, “*He can make the dry parched ground of my soul to become a pool and my thirsty barren heart as springs of water. Yes he can make this habitation of dragons this heart which is so full of abominable lusts and fiery temptations to be a place of bounty and fruitfulness unto Himself.*”

Practically, this means we need to actively pursue the Spirit's leadership in our lives. We already know that our flesh will tempt us, and the power of sin will try to deceive us into living outside of who we are called to be in Christ. So, knowing this, I believe it is important for us, who live on this side of Pentecost, to pray that we would hear the voice of the Spirit and pray that we would be empowered to obey the desires of the Spirit.

For that reason, I will often pray what I call “a prayer of dependence” before I begin my work each day. I'll share my prayer with you now so that it may help you as you seek to live according to the Spirit.

“Holy Spirit, I yield to your Lordship. May you rule and reign over every action of my body, every word of my mouth, every thought of my mind, and every motive of my heart. Lead me in all that I do and all that I am. Bear your fruit in my life. May your kingdom come in my life this day and every day. In Christ’s name, I pray. AMEN.”

2.) The Spirit Proclaims Our Adoption

To be led by the flesh is to be led towards death. But where is the Spirit leading us? He is leading us into embracing the truth and experiencing the reality of our adoption.

Let’s go back to our Scripture passage: *“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God”* (Rom 8:14–16).

We often envision ourselves at one of the two opposite extremes of pride.

At one end of pride, we are arrogant and shameless. Here, we look down on others. We believe we can do no wrong and are always right. If we are confronted, we think we have been deeply wronged and victimized. We are uncorrectable, unapproachable, unteachable, and wise in our own eyes. We resent the authority and glory of God because we want to be the center of reality.

At the other end of pride is self-obsessed self-hatred and shame. Here, we constantly compare ourselves to others as a way to outline our failures. We believe we are fatalistically doomed to what is wrong. We can't be confronted because it causes us to tail-spin into self-loathing. We believe ourselves to be unworthy, unlovable, and unredeemable. Yet, this mindset is still a manifestation of pride because our gaze is still fixated on ourselves rather than the God, who is infinitely more powerful than our sin.

But the Holy Spirit of God dispels all notions of pride like the rising sun dispels the darkness of night. The Spirit testifies the truth of our adoption in a way that is beyond experience, emotion, and human strength and willpower. The truth of adoption creates a radical reorientation in the way we see ourselves, the way we see God, and the way we see the miracle of salvation.

Adoption means you have not only been forgiven of sin. You have been granted membership in the family of God. You no longer need to pretend to be something you are not, nor do you need to cower in a sense of unworthiness. You have been given a status of royal nobility that you did not earn, and you cannot earn, but that is irreversibly yours in Christ Jesus.

Adoption means that you are invited to see God, not as a distant deity or harsh slave master. You are called to see God as your loving Father! He loves you more than the most loving parent could ever love their child. He is eager to hear you. He is always near you. He is faithful to provide for you and protect you and care for you.

Adoption also reminds us of the costliness of our salvation. One thing that is very special about our congregation here at Redeemer is that we have many families who have brought children into their family through adoption. There are many moving stories of divine providence and miracles displayed in each of those stories. But despite how different and unique each of those stories are, they all have two things in common. Parents of adopted children will tell you that adoption is costly: it is financially costly, mentally costly, and emotionally costly. But parents of adopted children will also tell you that adoption is worth it!

Your spiritual adoption was more costly than you could ever fathom. By nature, we were all children of wrath. We were dead in our sin. The only way God could purchase us and redeem us was by willingly paying with the most precious currency in all of existence—the very blood of Jesus Christ. The cost of our adoption was great, but the love of God was greater!

Because of the greatness of God's love, we can now call him “Abba! Father!” The term Abba is a word that reflects closeness and intimacy. The closest English equivalent would be “Papa” or “Daddy.” That is the type of love the Holy Spirit leads us to know and experience.

The exact opposite of experiencing a relationship with God that is defined by fatherly love is experiencing a relationship with God that is saturated with fear. And, while it is true that the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom, fear is not the *end* of wisdom.

The fear of the Lord—an awestruck awareness of God’s holiness and glory—is the beginning of knowing God. But the Holy Spirit reveals to us a knowledge of God that is not less than holy fear. But it is something more. It is the knowledge that God has made a way to make his enemies his children.

The great theologian J.I. Packer describes it this way in his book *Knowing God*: “You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one’s holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New

Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.”¹

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but knowing God as your heavenly Father is the beginning of spiritual freedom.

3.) The Spirit Promises Our Glorious Inheritance

We will read the final two verses of our reading together: *“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him”* (Rom 8:16–17).

To become a child is to become an heir. And not only are we heir, but we also are heirs with Christ, and the hope of our future inheritance is greater and more glorious than we could ever comprehend. One of the most profound ways that the Holy Spirit ministers to us is to remind our hearts that even though our present may be filled with great sorrow and suffering, our future is filled with an infinitely greater glory.

In fact, there is an incredibly strong connection between suffering and glory in Scripture, and we will explore much of that connection when we study the following passage in Romans 8 next week.

For now, it is essential to know this truth: If you are a follower of Christ, you are not absolved of experiencing suffering in this life. On this side of eternity, you still live in a sin-fractured world where you will experience suffering. You will likely even suffer because of Christ and for Christ. However, you do not have to suffer alone. Through his Spirit, Christ is near you, and Christ is for you. Even though you walk the valley of the shadow of death, you will not fear. For Christ the Lord is your Good Shepherd, and he is with you.

Knowing this, when trials and temptation inevitably come our way, we are called to seek the Spirit in prayer so that our hearts might rest in the hope of future glory.

Conclusion

Early one morning this week, I was reading from Acts 23. It records one of the darker moments in the life of the Apostle Paul, as he sits in a lonely jail cell.

He had just returned to Judea from one of his missionary journeys. New churches have been planted, and many people have come to worship Jesus. However, some of the more stringent Jews in Jerusalem are scandalized that Paul was bringing people from the Gentile nations into the covenant community of God’s people.

¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 201–202.

So, in self-righteous rage, Paul's fellow Jews tried to murder him and kill him. He had to be taken into protective custody by Roman soldiers to prevent him from being torn into pieces by a mob, leading him to an imprisonment that would siphon years from his life. Now, he finds himself in a place of physical pain, emotional sorrow, and relational isolation. And he finds himself here, not because of his disobedience, but because of his faithfulness to Jesus. However, the book of Acts shares that one night as Paul was in jail, "the Lord stood by him."

You see, although Paul was suffering, he was not suffering alone.

For Christ, too was imprisoned because of false accusations and murderous intent. Yet now, he stands by his people as their advocate and protector.

Christ, too, knew the sting of betrayal and the pain of isolation and abuse. Yet now, he stands by his people and promises to never leave or forsake them.

Christ, too, would know the sting of death. Yet now, he stands by his people, testifying to the hope of resurrection.

Thus, even though Jesus Christ was and is—at this very moment—enthroned in heaven, at the right side of the Father, by his Spirit, he stood by his servant Paul. Paul wasn't just suffering for Christ. He was suffering with Christ. For in life and in death, in joy and in sorrow, Paul saw his life as being in participation with Christ.

By the Spirit, may we too be drawn into participation in the life of Christ.

May we see the call to mortify sin in the power of the Spirit as a call to participate in the death of Christ. May we see the call to embrace the truth of our adoption as a call to participate in the sonship of Christ. And may we see the call to suffer with the hope of glory as a call to participate in the future inheritance of Christ.

And when the night is dark, may the Holy Spirit minister to us by giving eyes to see the Lord who is for us, the Lord who is with us, and the Lord who stands by us.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) *Read Romans 8:12–13. How should we understand the term "flesh" in this passage? How does understanding the "flesh" help us understand our ongoing challenges against sin?*
- 2.) *What does it mean to mortify or put to death the deeds of the body? How can we understand this concept in a practical way?*
- 3.) *Read Romans 8:14–15. What does "adoption" mean, and how does it reorient our understanding of ourselves, God, and the costliness of our redemption?*
- 4.) *Read Romans 8:16–17. What does it mean to be heirs with Christ, and how should this truth encourage us in times of sorrow and suffering?*