

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview

Lesson Eight

A Spirit-Controlled Life

Focal Text

Romans 8:1-17

Background

Romans 8:1-17

Main Idea

Surrendering to the Holy Spirit provides life, peace, and affirmation of our adoption by God.

Question to Explore

What are the characteristics and benefits of living a Spirit-controlled life?

Quick Read

Our sinful nature and the Holy Spirit vie for control of our lives. Surrendering to the Spirit produces life and freedom.

Introduction

Cathedrals are both beautiful and inspiring to me. Several years ago I traveled to Rome and stepped inside St. Peter's Basilica. The building is huge, but there is no mistaking the focal point. Cathedrals are designed in the shape of a cross. When viewed from the air this is obvious. As you enter the church, you are drawn to the light coming from the dome, located at the point where the vertical and horizontal crossbeams of a cross intersect. When you stand at that place and look up, the view is breathtaking. The dazzling light coming through the stained glass windows replaces the darkness that meets you when you step through the door.

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Romans 8 is the focal point of all sixteen chapters of Paul's letter. In chapters 1-7, Paul described the fall of mankind and God's plan of salvation for all who would receive it. In chapter 8, he introduced his readers to a new power—the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The apostle made mention of the Spirit in 7:6, then made the Spirit the focal point of chapter 8. The word "Spirit" or "spirit" occurs twenty-one times in this chapter. In 8:27, it is the understood subject of the verb, "intercedes." So in twenty-two occurrences, most scholars will capitalize the word eighteen times. When capitalized, the term refers to the Holy Spirit.

There are more references to the Holy Spirit in Romans 8 than any other chapter in the letter. This chapter speaks of the possibility of living a victorious Christian life and the hope of eternal glory. The Spirit of God secures both of these realities. The power of the Spirit enables us to live victoriously in the present (8:1-17), and the same Spirit is our promise of our heavenly inheritance (8:18-39).

In this chapter, Paul presented the total picture of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He described once again what Jesus accomplished on the cross. One of the clearest pictures of God's love is found in 8:3. From here, Paul spoke of the assurance we have in Christ. Some have referred to Romans 8 as the Christian's Bill of Rights.

Illustration: Most people don't know what the First Amendment is all about. Congress adopted the ten amendments known as the Bill of Rights in 1790, but most people draw a blank when asked to give the basic definition of the amendment. It guarantees freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, and the right to petition the government. Paul reminded his readers of their "bill of rights" as well as the responsibilities that went along with these freedoms. Unfortunately, many people are unaware of the freedom that Christ offers to those who will put their trust in him.¹

Commentary

Our outline of Romans.²

Salutation (1:1-17)

Paul, a Servant of Jesus Christ (1:1-7)
Thanksgiving and Prayer Request (1:8-15)
Theme: the Righteousness of God (1:16-17)

The Sinfulness of Men (1:18-3:20)

Pagan Lostness (1:18-32)
Jewish Lostness (2:1-3:20)

The Grace of God (3:21-8:39)

The Heart of the Gospel (3:21-4:25)

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Made Right with God (5:1-6:23)
Living in the Spirit (7:1-8:39)

This week's lesson covers 8:1-17.

Deliverance from Bondage (8:1-11)

8:1-2. Paul returned to the language of the courtroom here. "Condemnation" occurs only here and in 5:16, 18. Believers escape the penalty of sin, which is death. The reason we have this freedom is because the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (8:2).³

8:3-4. This verse provides us with a restatement of what salvation is—a gift of God's grace. Salvation grants us freedom from condemnation along three lines. First, we have no condemnation due to past sins. Second, we have no condemnation even though we still deal with an old sin nature. Christ atoned for our sin (our state of being) as well as our sins (our past, present, and future failings). And third, because we have no condemnation, it is possible for us to overcome sin. Perfection is not possible, but sanctification (growing more and more like Christ) is certainly a worthy and attainable goal.

*Illustration: In the novel entitled, ***The Plague***, by Albert Camus, a French port town of Oran on the Algerian Coast was shut off from the rest of the world by a plague. The Black Death moved in its haunted agony across the city leaving behind its anguish, cruelty, pain, grief, and countless victims. The town physician worked tirelessly to treat as many of these stricken people as he could. When the quarantine was eventually lifted, he noticed the celebrations of the population.*

But the doctor knew what these jubilant crowds did not know: that the plague never dies or disappears for good. Rather it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-closets. It bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves. Then at a time that cannot be explained or understood, it infects rats and sends them forth to wreak destruction and death again.

Just as there is a never-ending battle against infectious disease, there is a continuous struggle against the recurrence of sin. The war against sin must be fought daily. Sin will lift its ugly head in many ways and places, but we live with the awareness that it is not by our strength alone, but by the grace and power of God, which gives us the victory.⁴

Paul carefully described the coming of Jesus, upholding both his sinlessness and his humanity. The term, "flesh," refers to the sinfulness of fallen humanity. Paul did not say Jesus came in "flesh," rather Jesus came in the "likeness of flesh." Though he did not sin, he offered his life as a worthy sacrifice for our sins.

The law was unable to save us (8:3-4) because of our sinful nature (requiring Christ's

sinless sacrifice.) The term “sin offering” refers back to the Old Testament sacrificial system (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 10:4). When these sin sacrifices were made, they were more like a “stay of execution” rather than a “pardon.” They pointed to the need of a faultless savior.

Paul concluded this section with a description of how the law is ultimately fulfilled. Believers fulfill the purpose of the law by living in the power of the Holy Spirit.

8:5-8. Paul drew a stark contrast between the Spirit and the flesh. Think of the references to Spirit as referring to the presence of Christ in our lives. Think of references to flesh as the sinful inclinations we all possess.

Paul’s basic point was obvious: flesh brings death and Spirit brings life. He employed the word, “mind.” This word can be translated “mind-set,” referring to the direction of a person’s will. Those whose mind-set and direction are focused on the flesh cannot please God. Paul took this idea a step further. Not only can such people not please God, they are not able to connect or perceive his presence.

Illustration: Two men were visiting one day. The year was 1968 and their conversation centered on the Vietnam War. The son of one of these men was serving our country in that war. He was a member of the specialized force, the Green Berets. It was the responsibility of this soldier to go far back of the enemy lines at night, often in remote areas where he was not heard from for weeks at a time. He carried only three weapons—a pistol, a knife, and a piece of wire.

Because his work was to be done in complete silence, the pistol was used only as a last resort. The wire was for garroting the enemy around the throat from behind. The knife, of course, was for stabbing. The blade was made of a special metal that had to be shipped back to the USA for sharpening.

One man said to the father of the soldier, “Your son is on a very dangerous assignment.” The father replied, “He is, but what I dread most is what this will do to his soul.”⁵

8:9-11. Paul encouraged his readers: “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit” (8:9). A great statement of assurance is found here. Where does the Spirit of God reside? He lives in those who have put their faith in Christ. New Testament scholar, Douglas J. Moo, put it this way.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the automatic benefit given for anyone who knows Christ. Every Christian really is ‘in the Spirit’—under his domination and control. We may not always reflect that domination, but it is a fundamental fact of our Christian existence and the basis for a life of confidence and obedience to the Lord.⁶

In the meantime, how does one reconcile this life “in the Spirit” with being plagued by sin and death? We live in the tension between the “now” and the “then.” Our bodies will eventually decay and die. This is the result of sin. Yet, we will experience the resurrection of body to unite with the spirit in the future. In a sense, we can celebrate and experience the future because the Spirit of God lives within us.

Sonship: an Intimate, Personal Relationship (8:12-17)

8:12-13. Some of us give up the pursuit of growing in Christ because of indifference and a desire to live under the bondage of sin. Some of us strive to do right solely because we live in dread of a God who will punish us if we stray in any way. Paul issued a blunt call to obedience when he said, “We are under obligation . . .” (8:12). Great blessings involve grave responsibilities. Our salvation came at a great price, so in a sense, obedience is a debt we owe to God. The twist of the gospel appears here. We cannot possibly pay the debt for God’s gift of grace. And the only one who can empower us to live in the Spirit is the Spirit.

Illustration: People are all over the map when it comes to debt. Our society promotes debt as a means to live the good life. Other voices warn about the consequences of failing to meet one’s obligations. The Bible warns against excessive borrowing. Regardless of where you personally stand on this subject, one thing is clear—when you are in debt, it dominates your mind. Unless you see nothing wrong with walking away from a debt, then most of your plans for the future are colored by how much you owe.

Paul commanded his readers to not be in debt to sin, but to recognize our debt to God. In the positive sense, our minds and hearts are drawn to God because we know how much our ransom and salvation cost God.

8:14-17. Paul chose a powerful analogy to describe our relationship with God—adoption. Sixty percent is a realistic figure for the number of people living in the first century who were owned by someone. Paul asserted that Christians did not relate to a God who acted as a cruel slave master. Instead, believers could be confident in their status as adopted children.

Illustration: Adoption was common among Greeks and Romans in the first century. Following Roman law, when you adopted a son, that child was granted all the privileges of a natural son, including inheritance issues. As believers, we are granted all the blessings and privileges of God’s natural son—Jesus.

The word “adoption” occurs only five times in the New Testament, all in Paul’s letters (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5). This word correctly expresses the fact that the adopted child was permanently placed in the family.

William Ramsey, in his commentary on Galatians, held that a natural born baby could be disowned, but not an adopted child. Ramsey quoted from ancient Roman sources that laid down the principle that a man could never put away an adopted son. He stated: “It is

remarkable that the adopted son should have a stronger position than the son by birth, yet it was so.”⁷

Illustration: To most of us, the birth of one's own child is regarded as more desirable than adoption. Why, then, would Paul use this term to describe our relationship to God's family? One view is that in the first-century Roman culture, people recognized when a baby was born, you got what you got, whether you liked it or not. This included gender, birthmarks and the like. In light of this, one could disown a natural born child. However, when you adopted a child, you knew exactly what you were getting. The adoption process was a declaration that you deliberately chose this child to be part of your family. This process was permanent. Since many first-century believers were Roman citizens, to use "adoption" when describing God's children was a reminder that one's relationship with God was secure and permanent.

The word, “Abba,” was the personal, intimate title for one’s father in the Aramaic language. Aramaic (in the Hebrew family of languages) was the language Jesus spoke. I called my father, “Daddo.” Some called their father, “Daddy.” The Message Bible says it’s greeting God with a childlike “What’s next, Papa?” (8:15).

*Illustration: The children's story, **The Ugly Duckling**, teaches an important lesson about identity. A false self-image caused the ugly duckling a great deal of pain. He was born into the wrong family and every attempt to discover who he really was brought rejection and frustration. From the outset, it was obvious he was a misfit. He didn't look like the others. He couldn't quack like the others. His own family was ashamed of him and drove him away.*

One day he happened upon the most beautiful creatures he had ever seen. Their color was like pure white snow. They moved across the water like poetry in motion. They were simply graceful. He moved in for a closer look, and when he glanced at his reflection in the water that was their home, he realized his image was the same as these beautiful creatures. He was not an ugly duckling. He was a beautiful swan.

Our journey to find out who we are is not unlike the ugly duckling. We search for significance apart from God and discover that sin is the only thing that defines us. Moving through life with this distorted view, we try to behave like something less than what we were created to be. We suffer because of this false image. Only the discovery of Jesus can reveal to us who we really are. He is the mirror that will reflect our true identity—sons and daughters of God.⁸

If one needs assurance of this incredible adoption process, the Spirit stands ready to testify and announce our status as children of God. As children, we are also “heirs” to the riches and majesty of God. As children, we are also promised the very glory of Christ if we are willing to endure suffering because of our love for him.

Conclusion

Romans 8 is the focal point in Paul's letter. What did Paul convey in this chapter that justifies such a statement? Consider the following thoughts.

We are free indeed. The law of Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death. Whereas, the power of our human will cannot grant us this freedom, the power of Christ can. God, in Christ, has declared us free, not guilty, and clean.

The Holy Spirit resides in you and me. The presence of God's Spirit is given to us at the moment of conversion. We don't have to wait. There is no second blessing that comes when we practice a certain spiritual discipline or activity. The issue is not "Does God live in my heart?" The issue is "Do others see Jesus in me?" God's Spirit will not overpower your sinful, selfish desires. We can stifle, quench, and resist the Spirit by our thoughts and actions.

We do not have to yield to temptation. We face a constant battle with our sinful self. Though we are not perfect, we can have victory over the sins that so easily distract and derail our lives. The Holy Spirit gives us the power to overcome our human spirit.

Obedience is not an option. Paul said we have an obligation to stand against evil and to resist the powerful influence of sin in our lives. When we compare the cost of our salvation, our obligation pales in comparison.

We serve a God who is approachable. God is holy. God is just. God is sovereign. He is almighty. He deserves our praise and adoration. We should gladly bow the knee as we think of coming in his presence. God is also our Father. He is "Abba." He is the loving parent who cares for us and welcomes us as members of his family.

We are part of God's family forever. Assurance is the great equalizer when it comes to matters of faith. If we lived our lives wondering if God really cared for us or if our sin cut us off from his love, then we would live lives of defeat and discouragement. But God has adopted us into his family. He will never let us go. He will keep us in his grip of grace.

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¹James E. Hightower, Jr, Compiler, *Illustrating Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Nashville:Broadman Press, 1984), 55.

² J. W. MacGorman, "Romans" *The Layman's Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 9-10.

³See the illustration in Lesson 4, under the discussion of 3:27-28.

⁴Hightower, 54-55.

⁵Ibid., 56.

⁶Douglas J. Moo, "Romans" *The NIV Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 251.

⁷W. M. Ramsay, *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprinted 1979), 353.

⁸Hightower, 57-58.