

Romans 8 (15-17) – How the Spirit Leads You

In our last message, we talked about Romans 8:12-14, and described, “*Where the Spirit Leads You.*” I commend that message to you, because it informs the meaning of today’s message. For now, let’s give a brief recap.

In vs.12 Paul declares that you are no longer constrained to live like a slave to your sinful nature. And vs.13 says you can live according to the divine nature, to do God’s will, by the power of God’s Spirit. Vs.14 says that God’s children are led to do that, which produces an assurance of their salvation.

In vs.13, the *if you live according to the flesh you will die* refers to a declining knowledge of God in your experience, the failure to earn rewards in eternity, and a decreasing witness for Christ. The *if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live* means that you will gain a greater experiential knowledge of God (John 14:21), you will earn greater rewards in eternity (1 Corinthians 3:10-15), and your life will become a greater witness to the power and worth of Christ (Matthew 5:16 / Philippians 2:12-15).

Believers still struggle with sin. But no born-again believer will continue to live according to their sinful desires as the main emphasis of their life. Because they are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. As vs.14 says, “*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*” In this context, being led by the Spirit is not some mystical movement, it is being led to *put to death the deeds of the body*. In other words, our sinful appetites. But it’s like the weeds that keep trying to grow back, and you continue to pluck them from your life. And killing your sin by the Spirit produces an assurance of your salvation.

Now, since it is *by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body*, it becomes obvious that you need to be filled with the Spirit. And here is what that actually means. You are being filled with God’s Spirit as you are being filled with God’s word. How do you know this? Because to *be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5:18) is the same as *let the word of Christ dwell in you richly* (Colossians 3:16). How do you know that? Because the results are the same.

The result of Ephesians 5:18 is a list in Ephesians 5:19-20. The result of Colossians 3:16 is a list in Colossians 3:16-17. And the lists look the same. The truth is you are filled with God's Spirit as you are filled with God's word.

If you want to gain a rock-solid assurance of your salvation, a deep experiential knowledge of God, earn greater rewards in eternity, and become a powerful witness for Christ, you need to put to death the deeds of the body. Which means you need to be filled with God's Spirit. Which means you need to be filled with God's word. That's *where* the Spirit leads you.

Now, let's examine Romans 8:15-17, and discover *how* the Spirit leads you. Briefly said, the Spirit leads you by liberating you from fear (vs.15). He leads you by assuring you that you're a child of God (vs.16). And the Spirit leads you to suffer well, knowing that the cost is worth the reward (vs.17).

In vs.15, Paul says that when you were born again you received something. And he says you did not receive *the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear*, but you did receive *the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"*

If you are a Christian, when you became a Christian, you did not receive *the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear*. Most people are slaves to fear. But the Holy Spirit has liberated you from the bondage that fear brings.

Now, what does this mean? Think of the context here, being led by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the body. And so, the slavery referred to here is slavery to sin, and our sinful desires. This slavery leads to a fear of having to face God as accountable for their sins. This is why people deny God. Sinner's fear being in God's presence. Saints fear the absence of God's presence.

Most people's primary focus is on things they want to get, and things they don't want to lose. This is why they don't trust God, and it leads to fear. Because no matter how carefree a sinner may appear, or how secure without God they may think they are, strip them of earthly things, and as they suffer loss, they experience the loss of control, and fear overwhelms them.

But strip a maturing disciple of earthly things, and while the losses hurt, and they lament, weep, and are broken, those losses will not overwhelm them. Why? Because they know Jesus, they are God's jar of clay, and the losses will manifest God's power in them and through them (2 Corinthians 4:7).

You have come out of the bondage you once lived in. You are no longer constrained to live like a slave to your sinful nature. Slaves live in fear of the consequences of failing to meet the expectations of their masters. But Galatians 4:7 says – *So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.* The Spirit leads you away from the fear of hard situations. 2 Timothy 1:7 says – *for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.* This is the certainty of God in the uncertainties of life. This is faith over fear, and prayer through the pain, as you call on God as your Father. And it is a trust in God no matter what may come. Even death. Hebrews 2:15 says that Jesus came to *deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.* You do not have to fear death, earthly or eternal.

If you are a Christian, when you became a Christian, you did not receive *the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear.* Amen! But you did receive *the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"* Hallelujah!

Are you one of God's adopted children? This is important, because the statement, "We are all God's children" is not true. There is no such thing as the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. Jesus told the Pharisees that they were of their father, the devil (John 8:44). So, not all people are the children of God. You must be adopted into the family of God (Galatians 4:4-7). We are called children of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2, 5:6 / Colossians 3:6) before we are called out of the darkness (1 Peter 2:9) to be children of light (Ephesians 5:8). We are born into the kingdom of men, but we must be born again into the Kingdom of God (Galatians 3:26).

How can you know you've been adopted by God? Paul tells you in vs.15-16. The Spirit causes your heart to cry, "Abba! Father!" (vs.15). And that's how the Spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are God's child (vs.16).

Let's describe this experience in your life. In Galatians 4:6, we read this: *And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"* This is what happens when you are born again. God's Spirit calls into your heart that God is your Father. And in Romans 8:15, we read *you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"* By the Spirit your heart answers back to God.

The Holy Spirit calls into your heart "Abba, Father." That's Galatians 4:6. And then, by the Holy Spirit, your heart cries back to God "Abba, Father." That's Romans 8:15. God cries out, "You are mine!" And then you cry out, "I am yours!" And this is how the *Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.* But this needs some further explanation.

You might think that Romans 8:16 is about some sort of mystical witness by God that equates into a recognizable and unmistakable "God spoke to my heart that I am his." And this verse does say that God speaks into your heart that you are his. But the context and content of that cry to your heart and your heart cry in return doesn't mean you "hear God's voice."

What this does mean may sound intangible and less than "a more exciting" experience like a direct feeling that God speaks to you. But this truth of God's Spirit bearing witness that you're a child of God, and your spirit expressing that you're a child of God, has some very tangible expressions in your life as you progress in your Christian walk. It is a beautiful thing.

The Spirit bearing witness with your spirit that you are a child of God is about more than just when you are born again. It is a continual thing as you get closer to God. When I got married, my wife and I said, "You are mine, and I am yours." But now, each passing day adds to the number of times that I have heard "I love you." My experience with her becomes deeper, greater, and more varied. And the closer our relationship is, the more assured of our love I become. I feel the union between my wife and I. And I have faith in the union between my wife and I. Our hearts speak to one another in ways that mere words cannot fully express, but life does.

And this is how practical it is with the Spirit bearing witness with your spirit. It is in some sense mystical, and at times it may even feel somewhat magical. But it displays itself and evidences itself in ways that the context of this passage spells out clearly. Like prayer and the pursuit of holiness.

Think about what this looks like in your own life, and how it relates to this passage. You are no longer a slave to fear. So, you actually want to get closer to God. And you follow the Spirit's leading, filling yourself with God's word, and putting to death the deeds of the body. It's the God-born desire to pursue holiness as a means of knowing God. Your heart cry to God, which manifests as an increased assurance of your salvation and deeper experience of God's work in your life, is the evidence of the Spirit's action. And the Spirit is the cause of your action in seeking God's heart. And this is how you know that you are God's child; your heart longs for God.

So, the question is, "Does your heart long for God?" That's how you know if you're a child of God. But what that looks like is defined here in these verses. And you're fooling yourself if you think your heart longs for God, but you don't care about the things that Paul says prove your heart longs for God. If you don't care, the Spirit isn't there. And as Romans 8:9 says – *Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*

The Spirit leads you to put to death the deeds of the body, by being filled with God's word. And the Spirit leads you by liberating you from fear, which causes you to seek to know God, and therefore leads you to suffer well, knowing that the cost is worth the reward. This is how the Spirit witnesses to your heart that you are God's child.

And that brings us to vs.17. It serves as a bridge that reaches back to vs.12-16 about being a child of God, and reaches forward to vs.18 and following to address suffering in this present world. If you are God's child, then you are God's heir, and a fellow heir with Christ. The Father gives an inheritance to his Son, which is the entire Kingdom, the whole universe, and then Jesus shares that with us. All that is his, and he himself, will be ours.

And we are assured of that because we have a down payment on it. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of the presence of God in your life. The presence of God isn't about feeling God in your physical senses, it's about knowing God in your spirit. It is that witness of God's Spirit to your spirit that we see in vs.16. And the Bible describes it as a love beyond knowledge (Ephesians 3:19), a joy inexpressible and filled with glory (1 Peter 1:8), and a peace that surpasses your understanding (Philippians 4:7).

So, I'm not talking about chasing a feeling. I'm talking about how the Spirit leads you by liberating you from fear. And now you know that you don't have to prove yourself to God, because God has proven himself to you. I'm talking about how the Spirit assures you that you're a child of God. So, you start looking more like Jesus, but you yearn to know him and radiate him even more. And I'm talking about how the Spirit leads you to suffer well, knowing that as vs.17 says, suffering is part of God's plan for you, and the cost is worth it. Now you know that when life puts you on the cross, Jesus is with you for your good and his glory. And so, your attitudes and reactions reflect the family values. You're not losing, you're winning. You're earning eternal rewards as part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken!

Vs.17 obliterates the idea that having faith means you won't suffer. The truth is that Jesus leads you in suffering, and having faith means you suffer well. Philippians 1:29 says – *it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake*. Philippians 3:10 says that knowing Jesus means knowing the fellowship of his sufferings.

Suffering can leave scars. And scars will either be a symbol of submission, or a badge of bitterness. Either way, your scars will speak. And it all comes down to what you think those scars are there for. They are part of your testimony. Think about Jesus, whose scars speak of your salvation. Learn to suffer well, and let your scars speak of the mercy and grace of God.

I'm God's child. I'm God's heir. I'm a fellow heir with Christ. And I will suffer with him and be glorified with him. That's how the Spirit leads you.