

Lesson 19: Kingdom Transfer from Flesh to Spirit

Romans 8:1-17

The Gospel Restated and Including the Holy Spirit

¹ Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Contrast between the Fallen Human State of the Flesh and the New Gospel Reality of the Spirit

(1) ⁵ For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

(2) ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,

⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

(3) ⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.

¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

(4) ¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴ For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*.

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Introduction

God’s purpose through the good news of Jesus Christ is not merely to provide forgiveness. God’s plan goes further to make us his children and to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ. But the gospel does begin with forgiveness.

We saw this in chapter 3. Paul focused on our justification when he stated the gospel in terms of law and grace in Romans chapter 3. Then in Romans chapter 5 Paul restated the gospel in the universal terms of Adam and Jesus. He did this to emphasize the universal human problem of sin which leads to death and the universal divine solution of justification which leads to life. Again, Paul’s focus there is not on our obedience as followers of Jesus; not on our righteous actions. His focus is on the obedience and righteousness of Christ. As in chapter 3 he establishes again the answer to the first question of covenant, “What makes me acceptable to God or righteous that I might be in relationship with him?” The righteousness of Jesus makes us righteous.

Chapter 5 ends with the claim that grace was given so that “grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Is Paul only talking about the righteousness of Jesus and the eternal life of heaven? Or does the gospel affect the here and now? Is the way of grace only a future hope or is the way of grace intended to bring about practical righteousness and a new quality of life in the followers of Jesus?

The second question of covenant, “How then shall we live?” is left hanging at the end of chapter 5. We know what Christ has done on our behalf. We do not know what we are then expected to do ourselves. We ask, “Saved by grace, how then shall we live?” Shall we live by a new law or by no law?

Paul's short answer to that is, "Neither!" He proceeds to explain to us in chapters 6 and 7 another option, a new way. It is not a way of no law if we mean by no law no commands, no effort, no obedience. But it is also not a new law in the sense that moral obligation is imposed from a new external code as though we are children being watched over by an ever-present tutor. There is a new way of obedience that comes from union with Christ. Paul teaches us about this new way in chapters 6 and 7. Through his rhetorical pattern of invitation, objection, short answer and long answer, he describes for us the strength of grace and the weakness of the law, claiming in 7:6 right at the center of his argument, "that we serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter." Not the way of the no law, not the way of law, but the new way of the Spirit.

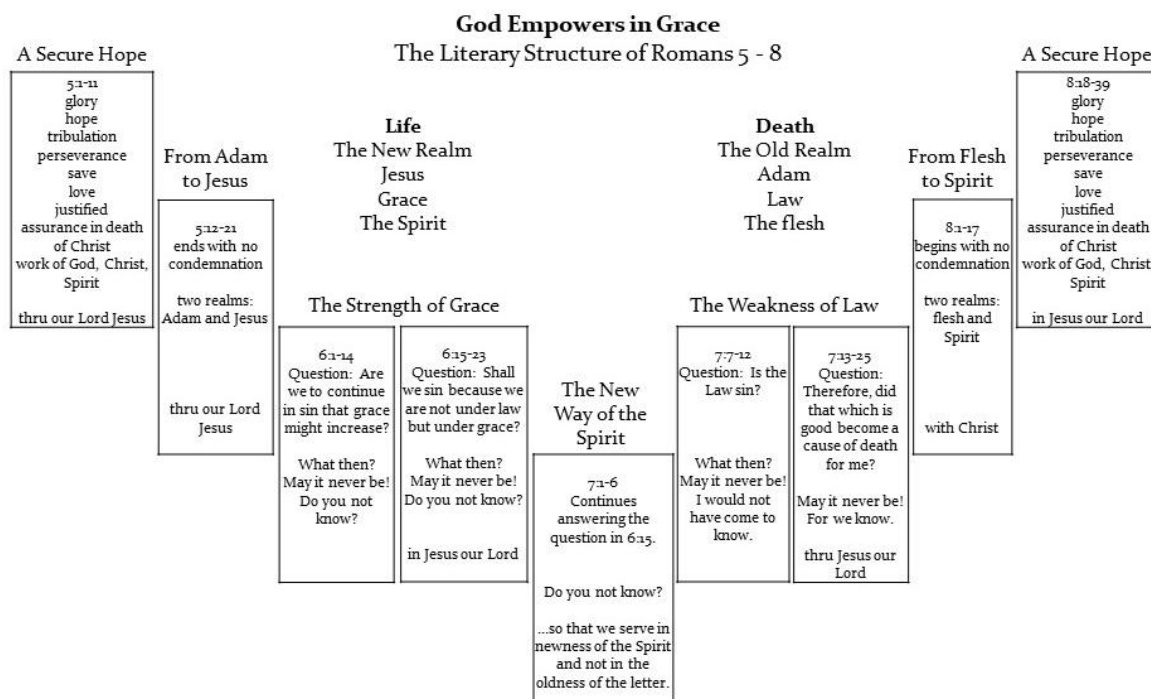
Paul holds off in chapters 3 and 5 from bringing the work of the Spirit into his description of the gospel so that he might establish the reality of our justification in Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in John 16:14-15, the Spirit comes to glorify the Son and the Son to glorify the Father. Jesus must remain at the forefront of the gospel message. But Jesus also said in John 16:7 that it is better if I go away, so that I might send the Holy Spirit to you. Jesus should remain as the focus of our gospel message, and the work of the Holy Spirit is an essential part of that message.

Having described in chapter 7 the new way of grace as living in the newness of the Spirit, at the beginning of chapter 8 Paul now restates the gospel again, this time in terms of the Holy Spirit. Let's read that in the first four verses of chapter 8.

The Gospel Restated and Including the Holy Spirit

[Read Romans 8:1-4]

Now as we move into chapter 8, we need to remind ourselves of the structure of chapters 5-8 so we continue to get the flow of Paul's argument. You will remember that Paul has employed a chiasmic or parallel structure for these four chapters. And Romans 7:1-6 and the new way of the Spirit is right at the center of the structure. The two parallel sections on either side of that center are the two arguments for the strength of grace in chapter 6 and the two arguments describing the weakness of the law in chapter 7. Then moving out from the center one more step, we have the second half of chapter 5 and the first half of chapter 8. These two passages parallel one another by describing a realm or kingdom transfer that occurs through faith in Christ. In 5:12-21 Paul described this kingdom transfer by contrasting Adam and Christ. We move from Adam to Christ. Here in 8:1-17 Paul describes the kingdom transfer by contrasting fallen human flesh to the Holy Spirit. We move from flesh to Spirit.



In addition to the two contrasts of Adam to Jesus and flesh to Spirit, these two sections connect like puzzle pieces at the ending of chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 8. We could read Paul's argument through chapter 5, skip over chapters 6 and 7, and smoothly pick right up in chapter 8. Chapter 5 ends declaring in verse 18, "through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."; and in verse 21, "as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Now at the beginning of chapter 8, we start with the proclamation, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"; and the promise that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." Two key ideas in there connect in these two passages: condemnation and life in Jesus. The only two uses in these four chapters of the word "condemnation" occur at these two places in 5:18 and 8:1. So, they link together. And the idea that grace reigns in life through Jesus Christ in chapter 5 is now described in chapter 8 as "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus."

The major difference in chapter 8 is that Paul has now brought in the work of the Holy Spirit as critical to the life-giving power of the gospel. And he has also clarified for us that eternal life in Christ is not only a promise for heaven, but a reality we begin to participate in immediately. Christ promised abundant life. The gospel forgives, providing eternal life. The gospel also transforms through unity with Christ to start a new quality of life now.

After this restatement of the gospel in verse 1-4, from verse 5 to 17, Paul contrasts flesh and Spirit. We are going to get to that contrast in a moment. Before we do, let's focus in more closely on the gospel statement in verse 1-4. There are three tricky issues of interpretation in these four verses that we need to look at.

(1) Use of the Greek word Nomos (law or principle)

First, we need to notice Paul's play on the Greek word *nomos* in verse 2. *Nomos* is the word translated in Romans as law. The word in Greek can mean law in the sense of legal code or law in the sense of principle. A law of physics, like the law of gravity, would be a principle stating truth about how the natural world functions. *Nomos* was also the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word *Torah* which is the first five books of the Bible, the covenant given by God through Moses. So, we have three options for the one Greek word. It can mean principle. It can mean legal code. Or it can mean the Torah, the Mosaic Covenant. Reference to the Mosaic Covenant is the most frequent use of the word *nomos* by Paul in Romans. The interpreters of my English Bible point out when they think Paul is using *nomos* to refer to Mosaic Covenant by capitalizing the English word "Law". I don't know if your Bible does that.

In 8:2 the word *nomos* is used twice to refer not to Mosaic Code but to a principle of spiritual or moral reality. The law of the Spirit of life is not law in legal or covenantal terms. It is not a list of rules or commands. It is the principle that the Spirit of God is at work in a person united with Jesus to bring about life. Opposing the principle of the Spirit is the principle of the law of sin and of death. Again, this is not a legal law. This is the principle that human beings in their fallen state are slaves to their own desires and thoughts. The experience of this principle at work was described so well by Paul in our last passage. Even if we acknowledge what is good, the law of sin moves us to do evil, leading inevitably to death. That principle in us, that is the law of sin and death.

In verse 3, Paul returns to his normal use of *nomos* as the Mosaic Covenant. Listen then how those three uses of the word law read in these two verses. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did..."

In chapters 2 and 3 Paul argued that the Law of Moses could not justify a person. And in chapter 7 he has argued that the Law of Moses does not enable us to live for God, even when we are forgiven. The Law of Moses is not the solution for the law of sin and death. The law of the Spirit is the solution.

Paul has said that that Law of Moses is holy and good. The weakness is not in the Law, but in the fallen nature, the flesh of human beings. The Law could not be the solution for our problem. Jesus had to be. So, verse 3 says, "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh." This is the gospel statement of chapter 3. The Law demanded death from each of us for our breaking of the Law. Jesus offered himself as the payment, the sacrifice for each of us. We were condemned to death. But now there is no condemnation.

That is the first critical move of the gospel, to rescue us from the guilt of sin. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus does that and more. We are rescued from the guilt of sin and also from the power of sin. This brings us to verse 4 and our second tricky point of interpretation.

(2) Fulfilling the requirement of the Law

It says, "He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us."

What does it mean that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us? Here is one thing it cannot mean and two things it could mean.

(a) This cannot be an answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes me righteous or just before God?" The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is not the principle that he gives us the ability to live out the righteous requirement of the law in order that we might justified ourselves before God.

We do not go to church or participate in the Lord's supper or pray and read the Bible in order to gain the grace we need to become justified or to stay justified. That would overturn Paul's whole careful argument of Romans 1-4 and would counter the intent of chapter 5:1 in declaring justification as a past tense reality for the one who has believed. We are justified in Christ and by Christ. Grace is not the power to keep ourselves justified.

So, when Paul says that God "condemned sin in the flesh in order that the requirement of the Law might be met in us" he cannot mean that the gospel enables us to meet the requirement of Law through our own works in order to be justified.

What could this mean?

(b) One option is that Christ has fulfilled the requirement of the Law for us. The word requirement is singular, not plural, suggesting that Paul is not talking about the various requirements of the Law, the various commandments. The Law has two absolute requirements. Live it out completely or pay the penalty of death. Either one of those could be what Paul is referring to when he says, "the requirement of Law." Whichever he has in mind here, Jesus has done both. He lived a perfect human life. And he paid the required penalty of the Law for us through his own death. He fulfilled both requirements of the Law, the living it out and the taking of punishment. We could understand our union with him in his death as meeting the requirement of death and our union with him in life as meeting he requirement of righteous perfection. This then would be a statement referring to the first question of covenant. We are able to live righteously before God because he has fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law for us in Christ Jesus. Now, I believe this interpretation is true to the gospel. I am not sure if it is the meaning Paul was getting at. There is another option.

What else could this mean?

(c) This could be a statement about the second question of covenant, "How then should we live?" In that Paul could be declaring that the law of the Spirit of life enables us to live out the requirement of the law, not in order to be justified, but as a way of giving glory to God and living a life as it is truly meant to be lived. If this is the case, the requirement of Law cannot mean fulfilling all the ceremonial and civil rules of the Old Covenant. When we think about the requirements of Torah Law, it is impossible to conclude that Paul is teaching that we are now equipped to live out all those regulations. There is another possible way to take what Paul is saying. In Romans 13:8-9 he writes, "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law...and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" This fits with Paul's teaching

about love, law and the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5. It would be a way of fulfilling the requirement of law without living under Law or being obliged to all the non-moral regulations of the Law.

I also believe this interpretation is true to the gospel, and I am also not sure if this is the meaning Paul is getting at. I am undecided on this point of interpretation. I like both options, and I think both options fit the context. I suspect Paul had something like one or the other in mind, not both. I am not sure which. I am sorry about that, but I cannot give a confirmed opinion. Either it means that Christ has fulfilled the righteous requirement for us or it means that through the gospel we can now begin to live out the requirement of love that sums up the Law.

We have one more tricky phrase to consider in the second half of verse 4.

(3) Those who walk according to the Spirit

“He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

The challenge here is to understand why Paul describes us as those who walk according to the Spirit.

(a) It could sound like those who walk according to the Spirit are the ones in whom the requirement of the Law is fulfilled. In that case, Paul’s emphasis would be on how we fulfill the requirement of the Law. But that misses the focus of this passage on the Holy Spirit in my opinion. Paul could talk about the “how” of our life in the Spirit. He could talk about our need to walk in the power of the Spirit or to be filled with the Spirit. But through most of this passage he is not exhorting us to how we ought to live. Rather, he is describing for us what is already true about us if we have placed our faith in Jesus. The difference here is sometimes described as the difference between the indicative and the imperative. The indicative is the truth that if you are in Christ then you have been transferred from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit. The imperative would be the command to live according to the Spirit who indwells you. So, indicative states a truth and imperative states a command.

The emphasis in this section is not on the command to live in the power of the Spirit, but on the indicative that if you are in Christ, you are in the Spirit.

(b) I believe the emphasis in verse 4 is not that we fulfill the requirement of the Law by living according to the power of the Holy Spirit, but that we who have believed in Jesus Christ are those who do not walk according the flesh, but according to the Spirit. It is a statement of truth about we who are in Christ. And this emphasis will play out in the verses that follow.

Let’s turn now to the rest of the passage. In verses 5-17, Paul gives us four statements of contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. Since this is a lot of text, I will move more quickly hitting some of the major highlights.

Contrast between the Fallen Human State of the Flesh and the New Gospel Reality of the Spirit

[Read Romans 8:5-17]

(1) First contrast

Our first contrast is in verse 5.

⁵ For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

The first contrast makes me feel like I am definitely not according to the Spirit. My mind is often on things of the flesh and not the Spirit. But then again, I know what it is to rejoice in Christ and to feel contrition and to desire God’s glory, so I cannot say that my mind is always set on the flesh. The contrast is set in strong terms all on one side or the other.

(2) Second contrast

The second contrast is a restatement and development of the first. It comes in verse 6 with the development in 7 and 8. The contrast is:

- ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,
⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*,⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

So again, the contrast sets up polar opposites. Paul develops the condition of the fallen human nature as hostile and impotent. Even if a person wanted to submit to God, he or she could not bring themselves to do so. This is the bondage of sin. The human will is unwilling and unable to submit. As a result, there is no way that a human being in his or her fallen state can please God.

There is a story about Abraham Lincoln riding in a coach. He is arguing with his companion about whether a human being could ever perform a truly selfless act. The coach forded a river. As it came out on the far bank the riders could hear piglets squealing, caught in the mud of the bank and unable to get out. Abraham Lincoln exits the coach. And he goes into the mud. And he rescues the piglets. As he re-entered the coach, his companion remarked, "You have made my case. The piglets offered you nothing in return. Your act was truly selfless."

Lincoln responded, "No. I just couldn't bear to hear them squeal." His point was that even if he did an act that looked good and selfless on the outside, he was still acting out of selfish motives of his heart.

Now, according to Romans 2:14, there is some moral impulse in human beings that moves non-believers to shame believers through their moral actions. Yet, Paul suggests here that something deep within the human heart brings into question even our outwardly good moral actions. Jeremiah claimed that the human heart is deceitful above all (17:9). Paul says here that as long as we are acting in the flesh, we cannot please God. It is not true submission to God. There is something deeply wrong in the fallen heart.

(3) Third contrast

Now we move onto the third contrast, and this comes in verse 9. To this point, we may not want to identify as being of the flesh, but also rightly hesitate to claim to be of the Spirit. Paul settles the matter in this third contrast. So, verse 9:

- ⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

Paul's words clarify that when he refers to those who are of the Spirit, he is not talking to a particular class of Christian. This is not an extra-spiritual person. This is not a saint. This is not someone who has gone through a second or third spiritual experience. Paul is talking about anyone who has placed their faith in Jesus. It is what we want to mean when we use the word Christian. But it is possible to grow up in a home or culture that uses the label Christian, and yet, the person never truly places their faith in Christ. A person can claim belief in Jesus without understanding and responding to the gospel of grace. That is not who we are talking about. Paul is speaking of the person whose eyes have been opened to God by God in such a way that they see their sin, see their need for God, see the sacrifice of Jesus, see the gift offered by grace, and receive it. Something like that. Seeing Jesus and receiving his gift of grace, that is saving faith. Anyone then, who has this faith in Christ has been united with Christ and is the person Paul is talking about when he says, "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit." He makes it clear by following up in verse 9 with the truth that, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." It is not possible to be a Christian without being indwelt by the Spirit of God, and it is not possible to be indwelt by the Spirit of God without being a Christian. Union with Christ is what happens when you trust in him. And union with Christ is either synonymous with being indwelt by the Spirit, or it is contemporaneous with being indwelt by the Spirit. We are baptized in the Spirit when we place our faith in Christ. If we have not been baptized in the Spirit then we are not in Christ. This is why spiritual life is the expected outcome of the gospel. At the same moment we are forgiven of our sin, we are also born again through union with Jesus and the indwelling of the Spirit.

Having told us that we who believe have the Spirit dwelling in us, Paul goes on to tell us that the Spirit in us strengthens our hope in being resurrected. If he can raise Jesus from the dead, then this same Spirit can also give life to our mortal bodies.

¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Almost certainly Paul wants us to think ahead to our resurrection into glory with Jesus. But I think he wants us also to think about the life the Spirit gives to our mortal bodies. The Spirit in us gives us hope for the future, but also hope for the now. It is through his power that we are no longer slaves to sin. It is through his power that we can begin to live the abundant life offered by Jesus.

(4) Fourth contrast

Paul's fourth contrast moves us from the indicative to the imperative, that is, from what is true about us in Christ to how we ought to live based on what is true about us. Verse 12 and 13:

¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

We have an obligation to live according to the truth of who we are in Christ. In Christ we are of the Spirit, not of the flesh, therefore we ought to live that way.

Verse 13 troubles me. It sounds to me like Paul is saying that if we do not obey the imperative of living according to the Spirit then we must die. But if we succeed then we will live. This is not physical death he is talking about but spiritual death. Traditional theology tends to agree that Paul is here connecting the indicative with the imperative. We are of the Spirit in Christ, and we must put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit if we are to live. Arminian theology would embrace this statement as evidence that true believers can fail to attain heaven. I cannot agree to that line of thinking because Paul argued a strong case for eternal security in Christ in 5:1-11 and he is going to argue an even stronger case in 8:26-39. So, I don't think Paul means here that if we fail to walk according to the Spirit we will die eternally.

Calvinistic theology tends to agree that this passage shows the necessity of the Christian actively putting to death the deeds of the body in order to attain to eternal life. So, the Calvinist would differ from the Arminian by asserting that all true believers will succeed, nobody is going to fail. If you are a true believer, you succeed in putting to death the deeds of the body in some way that is acceptable to God. That's the part I cannot get my mind around. From all of what Paul has argued so far in Romans, I cannot understand what level of spiritual effort is required for the believer to avoid spiritual death.

I would like to say that this verse is talking about our experience of death and life in our current state. We do believe that our effort in relationship with God affects our experience of the abundant life. When we follow the demands of the flesh, we who believe still suffer consequences of sin, and we participate in the corruption of death. Conversely, when we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit, we experience the blessing of truly being alive. And I believe that is a true description of our walk with Christ as believers. But Paul's language here is stronger. He has written that "if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." That sounds like eternal death and eternal life. And it sounds like it is according to our effort in the Spirit.

A possible answer to the dilemma comes in verse 14. Paul indicates our obligation in verse 12. This is the imperative to live according to who we are. We are obliged to live according to the Spirit. I suggest that he moves back to the indicative in verse 13, to what is true about a person. This is what is true. If you are the kind of person who lives according to the flesh, then you can expect to die because your

own internal spiritual state witnesses to you that you are of the flesh. But if you are moved internally to put to death the deeds of the body and live according to the Holy Spirit, then you will live, because your internal state shows that you have true faith, that you to be a true child of God.

This is possibly what Paul is saying in verse 14. He follows it up with, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” This is an indicative statement, not an imperative. He is not saying that as long as you are led by the Spirit of God he will call you his son and when you are not he will not call you his son. Rather, he is stating that the true mark of sonship is the internal leading of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit leads you then you know that you are a son or daughter of the Father.

The imperative becomes important in order to affirm who you truly are. If you do not exert effort in your becoming then the mess in your heart will continue to be a mess that is hard for anyone, including you to decipher. Are you a child of God? Hard to tell. You are not seeking to put to death the deeds of the body, you are not producing the fruit of the Spirit. It is really hard to tell what you are?

Paul does not really delve into this reality here. Paul’s focus here is on establishing us in what is true about us in Jesus Christ. Paul is teaching us about what accompanies true faith. If we want to ask how to know whether our faith is true, we would need to turn somewhere else, like the letter of James. That’s the question James struggles with. He sees those who claim to be Christians but by their lives he cannot tell whether they really are or not. This is one of the problems with spiritual growth. We can put a fruit tree seed into a pot of soil beside another pot and put a pebble inside that pot. We wait for the tree to show. Depending on the environment it may take a long time to see significant growth. And it might even be a weed that a weed pops up, and we are not sure, “Is that a tree or something else?” We can’t tell. We can’t prove that God is not working. There could be all kinds of growth under the soil, real growth that we can’t see. But we also can’t distinguish between the one in whom the true seed is planted and the one who has a pebble in their pot.

Paul does not develop this idea or this thinking here. But I believe it is the idea he has stated. We are obligated to live according to the Spirit because of who we are in Christ. And those who live according the flesh must die and those who put to death the misdeeds of the body will live, not because of their actions, but because the activity of the Spirit shows them to be what they truly are, a child of God.

We then have a double motive for living according to the Spirit. We are motivated to live according to who we are in Christ, and we are motivated to see the activity of the Spirit affirm who we are in Christ.

Back in chapter 5, Paul indicated both an objective and a subjective aspect to our assurance in Christ. We know that God loves us because the Spirit pours out the love of God into our hearts. That is a subjective experience that we have inside of ourselves. Only we can know if we have experience love for God. But our subjective experience is not always stable or consistent. Paul encourages us that our faith is not dependent on our subjective experience, but on the objective reality of God’s love. So he also tells us in chapter 5 that God died for us even while we were sinners. That is the truth. Whether you feel God’s love at this moment or not, does not change the fact that God loves you and has proven it by dying on the cross.

Here in chapter 8 we again encounter the objective and subjective. If you believe in Christ, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and you are being changed from the inside out. That is objective fact, whether you feel it or not. It is something God has done that you cannot affect or change. But there is also a subjective reality that speaks to our heart, affirming to us that we have indeed trusted in Christ. We sense the leading of the Spirit of God and in us he cries out “Abba, Father.” This is how our passage ends in verses 15-17.

¹⁵ For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*.

Only you can know if the Spirit has cried out in your heart, “Abba! Father!” That is something you sense, something you experience. But our hearts are neither stable or consistent. We do not always hear or listen to the voice of the Spirit. Our emotions can drown him out, our lack of emotion can shut him off. We do not hear his voice, and we do fear. That lack of subjective experience does not change who you are. You are not a child of God because you hear the Spirit saying it. You are a child of God because you have been included into Christ. That is objective fact for all who have believed. God affirms that objective truth by speaking into our hearts with the subjective confirmation of his voice. “You are mine. You are my child.” To which we cry back, “Abba! Father!”

Personal Responsibility and the Invitation of Grace

I’d like to conclude with the challenge that Paul leaves us, if you noticed it at the end of verse 17. We have the good and comforting news that the Spirit affirms our status as son and daughter. We are children of the king! That’s something we can get excited about. Then Paul goes on to say, “fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” Did you catch the word that is not so exciting? I’d not mind if the suffering part were left out.

Then I think about my own kids. I think initially every parent would say, “I don’t want them to suffer.” But is that really true? It’s not really true. I want my kids to be pushed academically and that is going to require some suffering, some late nights. I want my kids to engage in sports and physical activity and that requires some suffering, some falling down, some getting hurt, some learning how to get back up, learning how to push past the point of endurance. I want them to excel in their gifts and that requires some suffering. More importantly, I want them to grow in character, to become more patient, to become compassionate. I want them to learn to look past their own needs to the needs of others. And they can’t do that without suffering. I want them to have friendships. I want them to love. How do you do that without suffering?

I want that they even go beyond this. I want them to be like Jesus Christ who understands the suffering of the world and chooses to enter into our suffering in order to bring life into our darkness. And I want my kids to participate in that. Maybe not the surface of my emotions but deep inside I want my kids to participate in the suffering of Christ, with him and through him. And I know that God wants the same for me as a father. And he wants the same for you. He wants that we would experience life in this world even as he has experienced life in this world. And you can’t do that without suffering.

One of the secrets of grace is in the invitation. There is power in the invitation. God has made us new in Christ. He has indwelt us by his Spirit. He is changing our desires. He has called us sons and daughters. And he has decided not to impose on us from the outside the rules and regulations of the family. He has not given us a tutor to hover over us, making sure we live up to the family standards. That is how Paul describes the Law in Galatians 3, as a tutor ready to slap the knuckles and enforce the correct behavior.

Now that we are indwelt by the Spirit of God, he has chosen in grace to treat us as adult children. He is inviting us to step up. We have been invited to own who we are in Christ Jesus. We have been giving real responsibility to be salt and light in this world, but no one else can decide for you whether you will step into who you are. You have been given an invitation to abundant life, to real purpose, to being truly human. We have been transferred from the kingdom of Adam, flesh, sin and death and included into the Kingdom of Jesus, the Spirit, obedience and life. God knows the power of working from the inside out when it is truly your heart that desires the life and purpose that he is offering. He invites you to participate in becoming who he created you to be. And he is honest. This means suffering. This means effort. This means falling down and getting back up. But it also means life and transformation and living in a way that brings glory to God in Heaven. The way of the Spirit is the way of real life. Grace transforms you and now invites you. Here is the invitation of grace. Will you step into it?

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 8:1-17? What are some questions that the text raises for you?
2. Based on Paul's teaching in chapters 6 and 7, along with this additional material in 8:1-17, how would you describe (a) the difference between the way of the Spirit and the way of law and (b) the difference between the way of the Spirit and the way of no law?
3. Paul does not develop our experience of living in the power of the Holy Spirit. His focus is more on the truth that if we are in Christ, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. How do you understand or describe your experience of living in the power of the Holy Spirit? In what way does Paul's teaching here help you to define or understand your own experience? Does this passage change or challenge in any way your view of your experience?
4. How would you explain or describe the obligation of verse 12? What are we obligated to do and why are we obligated to do it? How does this obligation fit in with the covenant of grace?
5. Why does Paul contrast the spirit of slavery to the spirit of sonship in verse 15? Has this principle of being God's child had an impact on how you see yourself or how you relate to God? What does it mean for you that you have received the spirit of adoption?