



Children of God

Romans 8:12-17

Rev. Fred Greco

This morning we'll be looking at Romans 8:12-17. If you've been with us now for some time, you knew this is where we would be because we finished chapter 8, verse 11, last week. We're in the middle of what many have called the greatest chapter in the Bible. It is a chapter about what the Lord has done for us in Christ and how we can have great assurance. This chapter begins in verse 1 with, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Now we pick up in verse 12 where Paul speaks to us of the family of God. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 8, verse 12:

"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."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we pray this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we would look into your Word and see the Lord Jesus Christ, we would see the magnificence of his work, we would see the grace you have shed on us through it, and we would see, O Lord, the assurance that comes to us that we are the children of God. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

As we think this time of year about the birth of Christ, we need to also think about what God is accomplishing *through* the birth of Christ. Jesus is called in the Scriptures the *only begotten*, but he is also called the *firstborn* in Colossians 1, in Hebrews 1, and in Revelation 1. Why is he called the firstborn? It's because Jesus is the firstborn among many brothers. Jesus came and Jesus is the firstborn so we could become the children of God.

So this morning, as we look at our text from Romans, chapter 8, we're going to look at what it means that we are the children of God. First, we will see what it is like to be *living as children*, how Paul describes for us how we are to live as the children of God. Then, secondly, we will see that we are *children only by the work of God*, that it is God's work that makes us children. Finally, we will be *assured that we are children of God*. Living as children, children by the work of God, and assured that we *are* children.

Living As Children

As we come to this text, it is a part of a typical Pauline pattern. We see this in all of his letters, including *this* one to the Romans. What Paul does is, first, he lays down truth. He tells us what God has done, and then he shows the duty that flows from that. It is always the same, it is always in the same order, and the order is critical. It is the only biblical order. God does, and then we live in the state of reality God has created.

He does this in each of his letters, and the main place he does this in Romans is in chapter 12 where he begins to apply the truth he has laid out in chapters 1-11. He says, "So therefore..." Then you know you're going to see a series of commands, of applications, how we are to live in light of the truth of who God is and what he has done. Here in chapter 8, verse 12, we have an instance of it. We have a command, as it were. We have an imperative that comes here in the middle of this greatest chapter in the Bible.

The question we may ask ourselves is... *Why here?* "If Paul still has more to teach us, why does he stop here with an exhortation? He still has to get through the rest of chapter 8, chapter 9, chapter 10, and chapter 11, Pastor. You just told us that. *Why does he stop here?*" I think it's because of the subject he's teaching on. He wants you and me to have assurance about what he's teaching, and this exhortation is a part of that assurance.

Chapter 8, verse 12, begins with a familiar phrase. It's not exactly the familiar phrase we know, but you'll see it, I think, as we look at it closely. You've seen it several times in chapter 5. We saw it again in chapter 6 and at the beginning of chapter 8. It's that word *therefore*. Hopefully I have trained you well, that every time you see a *therefore* you then look back to see what the *therefore* is there for.

Here we don't have the word *therefore*, but we actually have it twice. Our translation says, "So then..." but we can almost translate it as, "Therefore, therefore..." or "Consequently, therefore..." Paul really wants our attention here. He stops us in our tracks. He does not want us to go forward until we realize that this is rooted and grounded in what he has said at the beginning of chapter 8.

He wants us to understand that the truth he's going to give to us flows from the fact that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We have been told we have been set free from sin and death by the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and that that same Spirit is the Spirit who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. So what should result from all of that? That's the work of the Spirit in our lives.

The result that comes to us then is what I would call a *negative obligation*. That is, Paul tells us something we must not do. Look with me at verse 12. "...we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh." Paul starts here on the negative. He says you owe nothing to the flesh. You don't have your new life from the flesh. You don't have your relationship with God from the flesh. You don't know Jesus after the flesh, so don't live as if you did.

We might put it a bit more pragmatically or colloquially *this* way: you ought not to live as if the life that has been given to you in Christ is not real. Think about it *this* way. What would you do if I said to you, "I'm concerned today. I'm trying hard to preach, and I'm very concerned that my head is going to slam into the

ceiling. At any moment now I could just float and hit the ceiling, so I have to be very careful. I have to hold on all the time. I dare not let go, because any moment now I could hit the ceiling"?

You would look at me and say, "Have you ever heard of gravity? What world are you living in? Why are you worried and living in a way that's not real? That's never going to happen. Live in accordance with reality." That's what Paul is saying to you. A work has been done in you by God. Live in accordance with the reality of that work.

Now there's a positive inference that comes from this negative obligation. The opposite is implied by Paul. He tells us not to live according to the flesh. Of course, we know from this dichotomy he has been describing to us in chapter 8 that we can either live according to the flesh or live according to the Spirit. What he's really telling us is we must live according to the Spirit.

He's telling you that you are to grow in grace, that you are to live out who you are, that Jesus has freed you from your sins, that God has given you his Spirit, and because that change is real you need to live like it. Live like people who are headed to glory. Live in accordance with the new reality that is yours in Christ.

Paul then moves on to the *reason* for this obligation. He reminds us of what it means to live after the flesh. It means death. He says in verse 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." What Paul wants us to remember is that if we live in accordance with sin and the flesh, that is the way of death.

He's not talking about individual instances of sin. He *can't* be, because just in chapter 7 he told us that *he* struggled with sin, that this is something that comes to all believers. So it doesn't mean if you sin once you are headed to death. No, if you are redeemed by the blood of Christ, you must live in accordance with the Spirit and not live in the way of the flesh. There are two ways of living, two paths you can be on. There are only two kinds of people: those who live after the flesh and those who live after the Spirit.

God saves us *from* sin, but God does not save us to leave us *in* sin. He changes us. The believer in Christ instead has the Spirit. He doesn't live according to the flesh. The believer lives in accordance with the new reality of his life in Christ, and that means battling against sin. That means struggling. The irony here is the key to life is death. Do you see that here? The key to living is to put to death the deeds of the body, to put to death the flesh. It's what the old theologians called *mortification*.

What does this mean? What does it mean to put to death the deeds of the body? First and foremost, it's an action. It is not passive. We must take the initiative against sin. We must be active in putting to death our sin. Secondly, it means to be aggressive; not to be complacent with sin but to attack sin; not to wait for it to respond to us but, rather, to seek out the sin in our lives and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, root it out, to put it to death.

The great theologian John Owen put it this way: "[Always] be killing sin or it will be killing you." There is a concrete, practical nature to this. Paul talks about the deeds of the body that we are to put to death. As we

saw before, when Paul uses this phrase he doesn't just mean the sins of the flesh. He doesn't just mean sensual sins. What he means is to give us a concrete example of the demands before us, that we are to attack the sin that is before us.

Now what does that mean? First, think about the things in your life that are displeasing to God. Then look into God's Word to get direction as to how he would have you live in those areas. Then make a plan of action in your life for following the Scriptures and abandoning your sin. Then find people in your life who will hold you accountable, and pray to the Lord that he would give you deliverance from these sins. You have to remember that this struggle is real and it is continual. It is something we all face.

Now this sounds like an awful lot of work. It sounds hard. It *is*. How can we put to death these sins? Well, the short answer is...*you can't*. You don't have the ability in yourself, but the good news of the gospel is that God has not left you to put to death your sin. This all flows from the work God has already done, from the fact that there is already no condemnation. The power of sin and the penalty of sin have already been defeated by Jesus Christ.

More than that, Paul says, Jesus has sent us his Spirit so we might *live* in the Spirit and so the Spirit might put to death the sin in our lives. That's what Paul says. Look with me at verse 13. We are to put to death the deeds of the flesh...how? By the Spirit, Paul says. It's very clear. It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit, only by relying on God and his Word that you can make any progress to live as a child of God.

Children By the Work of God

We understand that this is hard work. We must also understand that our work is grounded in and only possible by God's work. Paul then reminds us of the work of God that makes us children of God. He does this in two ways. First, he describes how the children of God are *led by the Spirit*, and then he says the children of God are *adopted by God*. Let's take them in turn.

What does it mean when Paul says in verse 14, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God"? What does it mean to be led by the Spirit? Well, I think the most important thing we can realize is it means to be continually under the Spirit. I think, for most of us, we think about being led by the Spirit as a series of punctuated events with great gaps of time in between them.

We know we're supposed to live the Christian life, we know we're supposed to follow what God says in his Word, we know we're supposed to seek holiness, but we believe the bulk of the time in our lives we've got it. We can handle it. "God, I've got this." Until a crisis hits. *Then* we need to call in the Spirit. There happens to be a critical point right now that we can't handle, so now we need the Spirit to come in and bail us out so we can get back on an even keel and be on our own again.

This is the completely wrong way of thinking about being led by the Spirit. It's not that we only look for the Spirit in a time of crisis. That's not biblical. We are to *walk* in the Spirit. We are constantly to be motivated by and guided by the Spirit. What this means, primarily, is following the path of God's Word, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. He is the author of God's Word. If we are to be led by the Spirit, then we

must be constantly in God's Word. It means finding power to live *in* the Spirit, finding that as our source of power and life.

The Holy Spirit is not just a source of information. He *does* give us truth, but he's so much more than that. The Holy Spirit gives us life. He empowers us to live as we're called to live. That's why the Bible emphasizes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit is life. We see this in this chapter. The Holy Spirit is connected with life in verse 2, in verse 6, again in verse 10, again in verse 11. The Spirit of God is the giver and bringer of life.

Notice something else here. Paul says this is true of *all* Christians. "For *all* who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." The two categories are the same. Sons of God are led by the Spirit of God. Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. This picks up a theme we saw earlier, where Paul tells us there are not two categories of Christians. There's only one type of Christian. All of the children of God are led by the Spirit. There are no super-Christians who are led by the Spirit of God.

What this means for you today is if you believe on Jesus, you have the Spirit, you are led by the Spirit, and you do not live according to the flesh. If you claim Jesus Christ as your Savior, you have the Spirit, and the power the Spirit brings is yours, Paul says. Well, Paul continues then in verse 15 with his logical sequence. Do you see how Paul continues to build an argument? I like to think in my sanctified imagination that Paul at least spent one year in law school, because his arguments are so logically tight.

He begins in verse 12 by telling us we're not to live according to the flesh, and then he says, "For..." "Let me tell you why." "For if you live according to the flesh you will die..." "For all who live by the Spirit are sons of God." Now in verse 15 he connects it again. "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!'"

Paul has linked the way we are to live with the leading of the Spirit, and then he is linking the leading of the Spirit with being children of God. So if we know we're children of God, we know we're led by the Spirit, and if we know we're led by the Spirit, we know we can live according to the Spirit. Paul is grounding our actions in unalterable truth, in a status we have. Our lives depend upon who we are in Christ.

He grounds this in the work of God to make us children, and he starts with the evidence for us. He doesn't start with the process; he starts with the evidence. He says, "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons..." This is a tricky verse for some, and it's tricky because of capital letters.

You may or may not know this, but Greek manuscripts are all capital letters. They're actually all capital letters with no spaces. If you think it's hard to read the fine print on prescriptions, imagine reading something that was in all capital letters with no spaces. Here we have the word *spirit* not once but twice. The question immediately comes to us, "Is it capital S or lowercase S? Does it mean the Holy Spirit or does it mean *our* spirit?"

As you can imagine, there is no end to the number of assumptions here. Some say they're both lowercase *S*. It describes *our* spirit and the way we feel. Some say, "Well, one is a capital and one is a lowercase." That's what you see in your text here before you. Other translations, I think, are better in seeing that both of these *spirits* here should be capitalized, that they both describe the Holy Spirit in the same sentence.

You say to me, "But, Pastor, how can you describe the Holy Spirit as one of slavery and fear? That doesn't sound like the Holy Spirit to me." No, it doesn't. That's Paul's point. Do you know the Holy Spirit? Is he one of slavery and bondage? Does he drag you back into fear? No! You haven't received *that* Holy Spirit. That's not who the Holy Spirit is. Paul is again grounding it in the nature of God, not your subjective experience. He doesn't want you just to say, "I *feel* free." He wants you to *know* you are free because of who God is. That's the critical point.

He says the Holy Spirit is not one of slavery and bondage that leads you back again into fear. No, instead, he is the Spirit of adoption. You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, the one who indwells you, the one who makes you more and more like Jesus Christ. The goal of the Spirit is that you would live more and more like a son, that you would look more and more like a son, and that you would rest more and more in being a child of God. That's who the Spirit is.

Notice that the Spirit is not the one who adopts. He is the Spirit of adoption, and he does bear witness to our adoption, but who he points to is the Father. He causes us to cry out to the Father as the adopter. We cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit is not the Father. How are we adopted, then? Well, I think it helps us to go to a parallel passage in Paul's letter to the Galatians in chapter 4.

Paul writes in verse 4, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" You can just hear the parallels there, can't you? *Adoption. Abba Father. Sent his Spirit. Cry out.* This is the same thing Paul is talking about here.

Paul says we once were enslaved. We were once alienated from God, but then look at what happened. God sent his Son to redeem. Jesus was sent so we might receive adoption and be children of God. Do you see the result of Jesus coming? Jesus came to redeem a people. In doing so, he makes us so much more than forgiven. We think of our Lord Jesus Christ coming, and we think of our need for forgiveness and our need for justification, and this is true, but Jesus makes us children of God, and because we are children we have an intimate relationship with God.

Paul describes this relationship by our being able to call out, "Abba! Father!" This phrase itself shows our union with Christ. Do you know where the phrase *Abba Father* occurs first in the Bible? It is a combination of the Aramaic word and the Greek word for *father*. It is a heart's cry. "Daddy! Daddy!" It first occurs when our Lord Jesus Christ is at his point of greatest distress, when he's in the garden of Gethsemane, when he's asking his Father if, perchance, this cup could pass from him.

He cries out, "Abba! Father!" And would that he would, because that's the closeness of the relationship between the Father and the Son. What Paul is saying here, then, is you have that same kind of relationship because of the work of Jesus Christ. Because of your union with Christ, because of the work of Christ, you have the same intimacy of relationship as your Mediator has with his heavenly Father. It's an expression of confidence, an expression of warmth. It's a phrase that would be used by a child who has no hesitation to come to his father.

You know what that looks like in your own homes, don't you? There are times when your children come to you, and they don't really *want* to come to you. They have to tell you something is broken or they've spilled something or they've gotten a *D* on a test, and they mumble under their breath, "Dad, Mom." They hope you don't hear them. There's no boldness there.

Then there are other times when they long to be with you. Maybe you've been on a long business trip and you're home, and they come to you running. "Daddy! Daddy!" That boldness, that intimacy...that's the relationship we have with the Father because of the work of Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit. Because we have the Spirit, we can live as children of God. It all traces back to the work of God.

You believe on Jesus. Do not be afraid that you won't make it, that God is done with you. No, God is just *starting* with you. He has laid a foundation by making you his child in Jesus Christ. Because you are his child, he gives to you his Spirit. You know you are his child because you have his Spirit. You know you have his Spirit because you struggle against sin. You can only struggle against sin by the Spirit.

Assured We Are Children

Our call is not to be free from all sin now; our call is to put sin to death now. God will take care of sin, but there's more. Paul doesn't just want us to have a subjective sense of our relationship with God. He wants us to be assured that we are children, so he gives to us the witness of his Spirit. Look at verse 16. "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God..." He doesn't just want us to live in accordance with our calling. Paul wants us to have assurance right now that we belong to God.

There is a witness *beyond* our witness. Our witness is found in the fact that we cry out (verse 15), "Abba! Father!" God has given us a sense by his Holy Spirit that we are children of God, but now, on top of that, the Spirit bears witness to us himself. That witness comes alongside us. That's actually what the verb means. It means to witness along with. It's a compound verb. We have *our* internal testimony, and the Holy Spirit comes up alongside of us and gives us *his* testimony that we are the children of God. We don't have to choose between a subjective witness and an objective witness. We have both.

So what does this witness look like? Well, first and foremost, it is the Holy Spirit reminding us of the promises of God, because if we have the promises of God we know that God is ours and we are his. It's these kinds of promises: "I will be your God. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I have prepared a place for you. There is an inheritance laid up for you in heaven, imperishable, unfading." These are more than words on a page. The Spirit makes these promises take root in us. They are our reality.

Secondly, the Spirit gives us an assurance of the great love the Father has for us. "See what kind of love the Father has for us," the Scripture tells us, "that we should be called the children of God." Are you called a child of God? Paul calls you that if you're in Christ, and if you're called a child of God, see what great love the Father has for you.

The Spirit makes it clear to us that we can only be called the children of God because of the great love of God, but there's more to the fact that we are children than our relationship of love with God. When we think of children, we naturally gravitate to thinking about love, of closeness, of a relationship. That is true, so we should, but there is more there. We not only receive that witness of the Holy Spirit; we are told that we are fellow heirs with Christ.

Paul does this by telling us that we have the Spirit of adoption as sons. This word *adoption* is a technical term. It is a legal term. What it means is that the one who is adopted has a legal right to all of the benefits of the heir. He is as if he was a natural son. God has only one only begotten Son. The Bible makes this clear. Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father, come into the world to be the firstborn of many brethren.

It's what's so special about Christmas. It's the miracle of miracles. It's something that not only had never happened before and will never happen again; it is something unthinkable, that the Creator could take on flesh, that the one who flung the stars into the sky had to be held in the arms of his mother, that the one who possesses all knowledge and wisdom had to grow in knowledge and in stature and wisdom. It's something unfathomable to us.

John puts it this way in John, chapter 1: "No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." And, of course, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, so that we might live through him."

Jesus is unique. He is the only begotten Son of the Father, but we, Paul says, are adopted. Therefore, we are also children. Therefore, we are heirs along with Christ. That means we enter into the inheritance that was given to Jesus. That's why Paul gives us a word of caution here. He says in verse 17, "...provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." This is the order appointed for Christ. We cannot change that order. It is suffering, *then* glory.

We live now and we suffer. We suffer with our battle with sin. We suffer in a world filled with sin. So did Jesus. Jesus lived in a world filled with sin, yet he was completely without sin. Can you imagine the hostility of that? It's hard enough for *us* to deal with the sin around us, and we're sinners. Jesus was not defeated. Therefore, Paul tells us, neither will we. Our inheritance is ultimately glory. This is always Paul's end that's in view. Everything else is toward that end.

Our justification and forgiveness fit us for glory. Our sanctification is a temporary journey toward glory. That is why we must remember that the babe in the manger is the King of Glory. We're not called to look at

the baby; we are called to glory with the King. The manger was necessary for the cross. The cross was necessary for the crown. The good news of Christmas is that King Jesus has purchased for his people an inheritance of glory. Rejoice, for you are a child of the King!