



Who We Are; Whose We Are

Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #42

Romans 8:12-17

Dave DeHaan

June 19, 2016

Romans 8 is such an amazing chapter and this is the third sermon on from it. Or is it the fourth, David? I know you didn't know there was going to be a quiz but it's at least the third. Either way, three or four is hardly enough from this rich chapter, which is arguably the greatest in the Bible.

Romans 8 is all about freedom. Everybody in our world longs to be free. Paul begins the chapter with precious words that wash over us with refreshment like a Lake Michigan wave on a hot summer afternoon: *"There is therefore now no condemnation..."* How can this be, when every human being has this uneasy sense of being judged? We say it to one another all the time: "Hey, don't judge me! I don't want to be judged. I hate how that feels." We may protest and convince one another to live and let live—"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" or "If you won't tell, I won't tell"—yet there's this nagging feeling in the very pit of our stomachs that suggests one day we will be called to account by someone much greater than ourselves: the Judge.

In Romans 1:18, Paul gives definition to this fear, showing that it is well founded: *"the wrath of God is revealed [poured out] from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..."* Romans 2:1: *"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself..."* Then in Romans 3, Paul gets to the source of the condemnation, the evidence for it and the reality of it in our lives. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We can't keep God's Law, even if we're trying to. We continually fall short, proving what we suspected was true: condemnation!

How can human beings go from condemnation (at the beginning of Romans) to no condemnation in Romans 8? That, dear friends, is the refreshing theme of Paul's letter to the church at Rome: how can unrighteous people like you and me, who desperately need righteousness in order to live in the presence of our Creator, obtain the righteousness of God. That's the big problem with humanity: a righteousness deficit.

The answer is in Romans 3:21-22: *"But now"*—an epic time in salvation history:

...the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

(Romans 3:21-22a)

The answer to the condemnation dilemma (which is a result of the lack of righteousness dilemma) is to look outside of ourselves for righteousness—to stop trying to obtain righteousness by working to keep the Law (and continually failing). Instead we should place our faith in the only human being who kept the Law perfectly and proved to be truly righteous to the very end: Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God.

Paul instructs us to look to Christ in faith and rely on Him—the new Adam. Through the first Adam, disobedience came into the world, bringing condemnation to all people. But Jesus' obedience—particularly His obedience to death on the cross—led to justification for all who believe. Now, those who exercise faith like Abraham's—that God can raise the dead, starting with Jesus—will be justified before the Judge of the world. He will look at them as He does His Son: as truly righteous, because they look to Jesus, the Righteous One, not to themselves.

Because of what Jesus accomplished for those who trust in Him, men and women can know freedom. They can know for themselves the refreshing words: that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

Romans 8:3 tells us that this is because God did for us what we could not do. He condemned sin (notice that word) in the flesh of His Son Jesus. Because when Jesus died on the cross, He received in His body the condemnation that we deserved, we can now receive the gift of eternal life. Then God says to us, "There is no condemnation. You are free."

We have been transferred from the realm of death, where we lived with a death sentence over our heads, to the realm of life. Paul defines this earlier in Romans 8 as "life in the Spirit." The very Spirit of God (also called the Spirit of Christ) is dwelling inside of His people, the new humanity, and guaranteeing them eternal life.

That's where we pick up the storyline in our text today. We're moving from justification (where we are declared righteous, so that we can be in the presence of a holy God) to sanctification (where we become more righteous in our experience). Although God declares us to be righteous through faith, and views us that way in Christ, we know from experience that we don't live righteously all the time. The righteousness that God has declared for us is beginning to be worked out in real life.

That's where we are in Romans 8:12. After lauding the glorious freedom of the children of God—the freedom of the Spirit and of “no condemnation”—Paul now says:

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 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.

(Romans 8:12-13)

Paul begins by saying, “*So then...*” In other words, “Therefore, now that a fundamental change has taken place, your obligations have changed.” Note that he’s addressing brothers and sisters in Christ—those who have been united together in Him. “Formerly,” he says, “you were debtors to the flesh—to those anti-God, pro-me-myself-and-I desires of the old self.”

Paul’s not saying that being in a physically encased body is a bad thing. It’s actually quite a good thing. God created the universe. He created human beings. It’s good to be human and to have a fleshly body. But things are not the way they were supposed to be. We live in a fallen universe, which includes fallen humanity. The world is tainted, crooked and bent out of shape. Is there any doubt about that? All I have to do is say words like “Orlando”, “election” or “Baylor”, and you know it’s true. Pictures of fallenness come to your mind. But if I knew about your life, I could mention a date, place or person, and you and I would be reminded of the fallenness in our lives.

Paul says to believers, “You used to be part of that anti-God, pro-me world system. You thought it was freedom, but you were really in a debtor’s prison. You were once a slave to sin.” He says this several times in Romans 6:

- You were slaves to sin.
- You were indebted to sin.
- You were obligated to sin.
- You were obligated to the sinful desires of your flesh.

“But now”—those two beautiful words—“something has changed. You are no longer slaves to sin and fear; no longer obligated to live according to the flesh. In fact, those who live that way will die—not just physical death, but spiritual, eternal death: eternal separation from the life-giving Creator, God of the universe.”

Paul says to these brothers and sisters in Christ, “That is not your identity. You should feel no obligation to continue in your former way of life.” “So,” you might ask, “does our life in the Spirit and freedom through Jesus Christ mean that we don’t have any obligations?” No, the

text says, “*we are debtors...*” We do have an obligation. Look at 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.*” Do you notice how he moved from life to death, and back from death to life? If you live by the flesh you will die, but if you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live eternally.

The obligation that is presented to us through God's Word is to engage in a battle to the death. As the Puritan John Owen famously put it, “Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.” Your obligation, brothers and sisters, is to put sin to death.

Here's where we are so far: having been united to Christ—that is, transferred from the realm of death into the realm of life—and having the Spirit indwelling us, we're no longer obligated to live according to the anti-God inclinations of our flesh. Doing so would actually indicate that we're still in the realm of death. Rather, our obligation is to terminate those old practices as the Spirit empowers us—to fight sin to the death. This, Paul says, is the pathway that ends in eternal life.

Let me ask you: how do you feel about being in a fight? What if I told you that somebody who is ready to rumble is waiting in the parking lot for you, with the cage all set up for a no-holds-barred cage match? It's you and some MMA fighter. How would you feel about that? I know what I would do. I'd verify those couches are still in the youth room so I could spend the night there and not have to go out there at all. I'm not really jazzed about the idea of being in a fight with somebody. I mean, the prospect of being in a fight itself is scary, but the prospect of being in a fight to the death is downright frightening. How can I know that I'm going to have confidence to engage in the battle? How can I know this will end well for me—as Paul says, in eternal life? How can I avoid slipping back into fear and engage in mortification by faith? Mortification is a fancy theological word for “putting sin to death”.

Friends, I believe that God has not given us this passage of Scripture to defeat us in this, but to encourage and equip us to battle indwelling sin in our lives. I believe that God, in His kindness, has given us this text so that we can engage in mortification by faith. I see this in two ways in today's text. He equips us to put sin to death by giving us hope and by giving us help.

Mortification: Our Great Hope

I think there's great hope in the two verses that we've just looked at. First of all, Paul tells us (in verse 12) that we are not obligated to indulge in sin. We don't have to give in to those temptations. We're no longer slaves. Jesus has set us free from the penalty of sin by taking it

upon Himself on the cross. Our sin is forgiven, but He's also defeated its power. We're not obligated to sin anymore because its power has been broken. There's great hope in knowing that in the moment of temptation, you don't have to give into sin and temptation again.

But there's also great hope in this passage in three words that precede the "putting to death" phrase. Engaging in a battle can be daunting, but look how Paul prefaces that in verse 13: "...but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body..." God has given us His Spirit, Who dwells within every believer. One of the Spirit's jobs is to empower us to fight sin. You don't have to sin, and the power to fight it has been provided for you supernaturally by the Holy Spirit—God living in you. You do not engage in the battle with sin in your own strength.

I want to ask you something: who would you put your money on in a fight between the Holy Spirit and your sin? Did you see what the Spirit did for Jesus when He was tempted in the desert after 40 days? Friends, the same Holy Spirit dwells within believers. His goal is to empower you to fight temptation and sin, putting sin to death in your life. It's your sin that should be scared, not you.

I think that if your sin could speak, it would echo the words of President Snow from The Hunger Games: "Hope is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous." When your sin sees that you have hope, you are dangerous in the battle. When Satan sees that you have hope, that you know you don't have to sin, and that you understand the Holy Spirit empowers you and you're embracing that power, he is the one who should be scared. When you and I know that we don't have to sin, and it's the Spirit's job to empower us, then you and I will put sin to death and engage in the battle with great hope.

Mortification: Our Great Help

This text provides us with great help in our fight against the remnants of the old self in our lives. Let's look at the help that is given to us through the rest of the passage (verses 14-17), because I think it shows us a strategy for fighting sin. We know we don't have to, and that the Spirit empowers us. Here is a weapon against sin that is ready for us:

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ 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!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

(Romans 8:14-17)

Friends, what is our most powerful and effective weapon against sin? The presence of the Holy Spirit within the life of a believer, telling him or her “You are a child of God.” The way the Spirit empowers a Christian to fight against sin is by communicating to the believer, at the deepest part of his or her being, “You are a true child of God.” Look at verse 16 again: “*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit...*” The Holy Spirit Himself bears witness at the deepest part of our being.

Think about “bearing witness.” If someone in a court of law, under oath, made testimony that they saw a white male, about 6’2”, wearing a blue shirt, exit this building around 11:30, would them saying so make that event happen? No. If they’re telling the truth, they’re just affirming what has already happened. If the Spirit is bearing witness that you are a child of God, He isn’t making you a child of God at that moment. He is affirming what is already true: your identity as a child of God.

Verse 14: “*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*” That’s what we learned last week from verses 9-11: the Holy Spirit indwells each believer. When Paul uses the term “led” here, he’s not really talking about guidance—whether I should take this job or move to that place, seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance on those kinds of decisions. He’s talking about what controls and leads you. What is the controlling factor in your life? For the believer, it’s the Holy Spirit.

If you have the Spirit dwelling in you, because you trusted in Jesus, then you are God’s child. There’s no doubt about it. You are His son or daughter. How do you think God feels about His children? That’s quite easy to answer: how does He feel about Jesus? He told us, loud and clear, so that everyone could hear, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*” I’m not just a little bit pleased with My Child, but well pleased. This is My beloved Child.”

Friends, the Father sees us in the same way. Verse 15 says that we have received “*adoption as sons*” which is one word in the original Greek. It’s a status, an identity of privilege. In saying “*adoption as sons*”, the idea is not to exclude women. Men and women have the same adoption status. Paul’s drawing on a picture in the ancient world of a wealthy landowner who might purposefully select a son to adopt in order to perpetuate his name and estate. That adopted son would have every legal right that any natural-born son would. That’s what Paul is saying about believers: “You are My adopted children—My adopted sons and daughters.” That’s God’s identification for us.

This picture of adoption is so beautiful and precious to many families in this congregation. When families adopt children, it's a picture of what God does for us in Christ. Every adopted child knows at least one thing: "My parents wanted me. They went to great lengths to include me." What did God the Father do to make us His sons and daughters? He gave up His Son—the One of Whom He said, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*" Friends, that ought to fill us with great joy and confidence. That ought to fuel our battle against indwelling sin. We are His true children.

We know this because we're heirs. If you're not a true child, you don't get anything—but if you're a true child, you're an heir. As the text says in verse 17, we're "*heirs of God.*" We're going to receive something from our Heavenly Father. We're fellow heirs, right alongside our elder brother, the Lord Jesus.

The message of God's Word today, which I think He wants us to hear above anything else, is that the most powerful and effective weapon the believer has in his or her battle with sin is the Spirit's assurance that we are His beloved children, and He is our true Father. It's the weapon that will do the most damage. It will attack sin at its root—knowing that we are no longer slaves to fear, but children of God.

What could this truth look like in our lives? I want us to think about that as we begin to draw our hearts toward the communion table and think about the way that God made us His children through His Son's sacrifice. What could it look like to fight sin by claiming our identity as children of God? I think there are some clues for us in verse 15. Look at the beginning of verse 15. I think you'll agree with me that it's a picture of temptation. Verse 15 begins, "*For you did not receive spirit of slavery to fall back into fear...*" Isn't that what happens when we're tempted? We fall back into fear and act as if we're slaves to sin. We sense that we're being tempted, and think, "Okay, my flesh is tempting me to fall into that same sin that I've done so many times before. I guess I'm going to have to do it again this time. I always do. I'm a slave to it. Doggone it, God is going to be really mad at me. He's going to make me pay for it. I'm going to get a ticket when I'm driving or something. He's going to make me pay for it somehow."

Being a slave to sin is not living as a child. It's falling back into fearing God as our Judge. Is God still the Judge of His people? Absolutely not! For those who trust in Jesus Christ, God is not your Judge. He is your Heavenly Father. Your judgment was poured out on the Lord Jesus Christ as He bore the Father's wrath on the cross.

Here's where I believe the Spirit goes to work, empowering us to fight back against sin: we begin to understand that we have received the Spirit of adoption. Did you see the word

“received”? It's a gift of God's grace. We didn't do anything to earn this status. We received it from Him. When we understand that, something very different happens in our times of temptation. First, we tell ourselves, “Wait a second. God isn't my Judge. Even if I do follow through and fall into sin, which I don't want to do, it would not change the Father's love for me. I'm a child of God.”

We must remind ourselves that “I'm a child of God. Children of a good dad don't fear their father. Instead, we cry out ‘Abba, Father! Dad! Dad, help me.’” That phrase “cry out” is almost like a guttural shriek. As a dad, I can verify that there are a lot of things dads don't hear. We just miss some things. [I thought I'd get a lot of “Amen!”s from the moms right there, but I didn't.] It's true: there are a lot of things we miss. But there's something dads never miss, especially when their kids are small: when their child yells out, “Dad! Dad, help me!”

Friends, we don't need to cry out in some formal, “Oh, thy Heavenly Father” way. We can be real and cry out, “Dad! Abba, Father! I'm on the edge right here. Help!” When we do this, we're reminding ourselves of the gospel and the cost that was paid for God to become our Father. We couldn't call Him Father if Jesus, our elder Brother, had not laid down His life and had His body broken and blood shed for us. But He did. And you know what? He did it willingly for the joy that was set before Him (Hebrews 12:2). He didn't do it begrudgingly, but so that He would be the firstborn of God's many sons and daughters, in order to unite us together as the one people of God, the new humanity, from every tribe, language and nation.

As we come to the communion table—as we take the bread and drink the cup—yes, they are symbolic and representative, but they're also real. You can touch them. You will taste them. They remind us that we have a real elder brother, Jesus Christ, Who laid down His real body in order to make us children of God. We can gratefully proclaim the true testimony of our hearts: “I'm no longer a slave to fear. I don't fear God's wrath and judgment. It was taken for me. I live under the banner. I'm waving the flag of ‘No condemnation.’ Praise God, I'm in Jesus Christ.”

If that is the testimony of your heart and life, then take the bread and cup with great joy. If that's not the testimony of your heart, then I hope your interest has been piqued and that you have been intrigued by the idea that you could be a child of God—that God would welcome you into His family. You only need to turn from your sin and admit, “I am under the just judgment of a holy God. I have sinned and fallen short His glory. I turn from that. I turn to Jesus Christ, trusting and embracing Him by faith.” All who trust Him, take the bread and cup. All who do not, come to Jesus now as we worship together.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Text provided by sermontranscribers.net ♦ emily@sermontranscribers.net