

Romans 8:12-17

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TO PREACH ON ROM 8:12-17 is a formidable challenge for a number of reasons. First, it seems like we are walking into the middle of a conversation; hence, an understanding of the prior context is essential. Second, each verse is so loaded with its own theological concepts that a number of sermons could be preached from these six verses. Which one is a preacher to pick? Third, Paul begins by telling us to what Christians are *not* obligated but never really (or directly) says to what we are obligated. In fact, Paul does not return to the theme of Christian obligation until 13:8, where he discusses our obligation to love. Fourth, a number of very bad doctrines could be harvested from these verses if taken out of context. Fifth, a sermon on spirituality could flow nicely from this text, but Paul's whole understanding of "spirituality" involves the Spirit's reality in our lives, whereas we often discuss spirituality in terms of personal practices of prayer, piety, and contemplation. Finally, Paul moves very quickly from not living according to the flesh to our present suffering and future glorification with Christ. Consequently, attention must be paid to the development of Paul's theological thought. Ultimately, Rom 8:12-17 focuses on family life, and so a sermon could well present what life in God's family entails.

The text's opening, "so then," signals an implication being drawn from what Paul established regarding the antithesis between the Spirit and the flesh in vv. 4-11. Flesh, in this context, does not refer to our physical existence or our lower human nature. Rather "flesh" is a theological depiction of fallen existence under the dominating power of sin. To live according to the flesh (8:4-5) means that sin's inducement for self-centered, self-serving, fractious, autonomous living is the standard motivating our conduct and relationships. This understanding of the flesh is not the relic of an outdated theological system but a clear reality in our "what's in it for me" twenty-first century world. Paul claims that the law was given by God to identify and condemn such conduct, but the law did not have the power to stop such conduct nor the capacity to enable proper conduct and relationships (7:7-8:3a). Through God's own Son, God accomplished what the law could not (8:3b). Because Christians belong to Christ and have God's Spirit dwelling in them, they live neither in the flesh nor according to the flesh. Rather, Christians live in the Spirit and conduct their lives according to the Spirit (8:4-9).

Because this is our God-given spiritual reality, we are not obligated to the flesh (8:12). In other words, our Christian obligation does not involve returning to a sin-induced self-centered standard that motivates our actions, attitudes, and values in life. For Paul, human

reality and human conduct are fully commensurate. When our reality was in the flesh, our conduct was according to the flesh. Christians are now in the Spirit, and so our conduct is to be according to the Spirit. Does that mean that Christians go through life on automatic pilot? Not at all. What if a Christian ends up living according to the flesh? That is the possibility that Paul presents in 8:13a, and he immediately concludes such a person will experience eschatological death. For Paul, being a Christian does not automatically guarantee salvation. Neither baptism nor confessing Jesus as Lord is a license to live according to the flesh. If a Christian chooses to live with a sin-induced self-centered standard which motivates their actions, attitudes, and values in life (i.e., to live according to the flesh), then they will experience eschatological death rather than eschatological resurrection. Here is the Pauline paradox: Christians do absolutely nothing to save themselves, but they do have the awful ability to separate themselves from God's promise of eternal life. Paul had the same theological perspective in 1 Corinthians 10. This was part of the issue involved in Galatians. Christian conduct is to be reflective of Christian reality. If a Christian would choose the former standards of the flesh to shape their actions, attitudes, and values, then their reality will be reckoned as sin, whose wage is eschatological death (8:13 recalling 6:16, 20, 23). A sermon on this aspect of the text would want to hold the Pauline paradox, while avoiding claims of salvation by superior moral living.

Since Paul's focus is on life in God's family, he really does not dwell on this negative possibility. Instead, in 8:13b he tells his audience that if by the Spirit they put to death the practices of the body, then they will experience eternal life. Plucked out of its context, the claim of 8:13b could be used to establish a doctrine of salvation by works or to claim that we must finish what God began in baptism to accomplish our salvation. Paul is saying neither of these things. The emphasis here is on the Spirit as the means by which we put the practices of the body to death. We do not and cannot achieve this by our own efforts. We rely on the Spirit's power because we live in the Spirit's reality. To put to death the practices of the body (the use of body in 8:13b points to our mortal existence as in 6:12, 13; 7:24; 8:10, 1) is tantamount to living according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh. Note that Paul does not use imperatives here because ultimately this is the activity of the Spirit, not the Christian. Thus spirituality in this context means that the Spirit has created our reality and so by means of the Spirit we do not live according to the flesh's standards. Instead, as Paul immediately says in the next sentence, we are led (or more emphatically, we are driven) by the Spirit.

Being Spirit-led is also a prime mark of membership in God's family (8:14). Thus the Spirit that we received does not involve a return to life in sin's dominion wherein we fear God's condemnation but marks us as divinely adopted children. (Note that in 8:15 both references to the Spirit should be capitalized—something missed in the NRSV). Indeed because the Spirit makes us God's adopted children, we are empowered to address God in intimate and direct parental terms: *Abba, Father*. This use of adoption imagery combines the Greco-Roman legal concept of adoption and the Jewish concept of Israel's election as God's child. An adopted child is one whose identity, status, and relationships are now determined by belonging to the family. The Spirit emphatically testifies to the depths of

our inner being that we have the identity, status, and relationships that go with full membership in God's family (8:16). A sermon on this aspect of the text will want to highlight healthy family intimacy. Because God's Spirit is intimately at work in the totality of our lives, we are empowered to address the Creator and Judge of the cosmos in the most intimate of parental terms.

The status of child also means the status of heir. We are God's heirs and Christ's co-heirs (8:17a). As Abraham and his descendants were promised the world as their inheritance (4:13), so we as God's Spirit-created children are promised eschatological life as our inheritance. Of what shall that promised life consist? Nothing less than full participation in the reality of the divine glory that we shall share with Christ who already reigns over the cosmos in divine glory (8:17b). Thus in our future reality as God's children and heirs, we will experience the divine glory lost in the fall (3:23), because we will be fully conformed to the glorious image of God that now exists in God's Son, Jesus Christ (8:29). There is, however, a Pauline caveat to our future participation with Christ. In the present we also participate in Christ's sufferings (8:17b). In other words, present life for God's children is the way, life, and outlook of the cross, just as it was for God's Son. Though in 8:17 Paul does not spell out the details of this cruciform life, the total context of Romans allows us to discern that it entails selflessness, suffering, vulnerability, and love for the sake of others in faithful obedience to God (cf. 3:24-25; 4:25; 5:1-11, 17-19; 6:3-5; 8:2-4, 32-39; 13:8-10; 14:7-20). This way of cruciform life is not an option; it is a full and indispensable component of the Spirit-created, empowered, and led life in the family of God. It is also the direct antithesis to life according to the standards and motivations of the flesh as 8:17 arcs directly back to 8:12.

One way to proclaim Paul's vision here is to highlight how Christian life in the present is a matter of "No Longer, Already, Not Yet." That is, we are no longer in sin's dominion so that we no longer utilize the self-centeredness of the flesh as our motivation and guide in life. We have already received the Spirit and are led by the Spirit's guidance as God's children and heirs. Nevertheless, we have not yet received the full inheritance of eschatological life and glory that awaits us. Our life in the present as God's spirited-children entails the cross, for that was precisely the way of life set forth for God's Son, Jesus Christ.



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