

Life in the Spirit: Our Obligation and Assurance

Romans 8:12-17

Like some of you, I'm pumped that baseball season has started. I've been a lifelong Royals fan and so it has been fun that they are good again. And I'm excited that they are off to such a good start. The other day I was listening to 810 Radio and they were playing some excerpts from the Royal's manager, Ned Yost. One of the comments that Ned made was that he sees a kind of swagger in this year's team. After the success of last year, they actually believe that they have talent and that they are good. And so every time they step onto a field right now they believe that they can beat anybody. They play with confidence.

What we think about ourselves matters a lot. It is true on the sporting field; it is true in the classroom or workplace or in the home and it is true in our spiritual lives as well. What we think about ourselves matters a lot. Here's the deal, as believers what we think about ourselves is to be rooted in what God says is true about us.

In Romans 8, Paul has been talking about two categories of people – those who are according to the flesh and those who are according to the Spirit. Because the Spirit lives within every believer (8:9), Paul says that every believer is in fact according to the Spirit. That's who God says we are. And because of this truth, we have an obligation and we have assurance. And knowing these things matters a lot because it can affect how we live.

And so, first, let's look at our obligation in the Spirit.

I. Our Obligation in the Spirit (8:12-13)

In verse 12, Paul writes:

¹² *So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—*

Paul is making some conclusions based on what he has taught. Because it is true that believers are according to the Spirit, we are *under obligation, not to the flesh*. Remember, *flesh*, is that part of us that seeks to live independent of God; it is where sin dwells within us. While we live in our mortal bodies, even though we are according to the Spirit as believers, we will continue to do battle with the flesh. But, we are not *under obligation* to it.

To be *under obligation* is to have duties that are required. It is to be someone's debtor. We are not debtors to the flesh. The fact that Paul makes this point means that it is a real possibility to live like we are under obligation to the flesh. It is still possible to make choices to live according to the flesh. But we don't have to. We are not under obligation to the flesh.

In this verse, Paul breaks off his train of thought and goes on to give a warning about living according to the flesh in verse 13. And so it is left for us to infer the positive side of what he is saying. The positive side of what he is saying is that we ARE under obligation to live according to the Spirit. That is where our duty lies. Our obligation lays with the Spirit and what He wants to do in our lives.

Now as we come to verse 13, Paul gives a warning. He continues with his thought of living according to the flesh and he says:

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.

When Paul says *you must die*, he is not talking about physical death. He is talking about the certainty of eternal death for the one who is *living according to the flesh*.

Paul is not saying that eternal death is certain if you are struggling with the flesh. He made it very clear in Romans 7 that a struggle with the flesh will be the experience of every believer. And so he is not talking about one who is struggling with the flesh, but rather one who is *living according to the flesh* – *living*, as an ongoing, present tense experience. If that is you, he says there is a certainty that you will face eternal death.

On the other hand, he says, *if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live*. The term for what he is talking about here is mortification. Mortification is the process of *putting to death* our sinful patterns and habits so that we are increasingly free from sin.

He says that one who is doing this *will live*, which refers to eternal life. Mortification is not the condition for eternal life, but rather the result. Paul is not saying that we earn eternal life by putting to death the deeds of the body. He has been clear earlier in Romans that we are justified by faith (5:1) and that this is a gift by His grace (3:24). And so putting to death the deeds of the body does not earn salvation, rather it is that proof that we are according to the Spirit and that we are indeed saved.

This ongoing act of mortification is the normal Christian life. And this is our obligation in the Spirit. The one who is genuinely living according to the Spirit will put to death the deeds of the body. He will work hard at this. But mortification is never accomplished by mere self-effort, because Paul says that we do this *by the Spirit*. By the Spirit's empowering grace we put to death the deeds of the body.

Now, how one puts to death the deeds of the body is a sermon series in itself. But let me offer a couple thoughts about this. We put to death our sinful habits by renewing our mind with God's Word, through prayer, through confessing our sins to one another. We practice spiritual disciplines in order to open our lives up to God and His transforming work. There are all sorts of things we must do. We can't just have a "let go and let God" kind of approach to this. Effort must be applied. But it is effort energized by faith and trust in God. It is effort *by the Spirit* who empowers us to fight this battle.

And so here's the question for you: Are you making an effort to put to death the sinful deeds of the flesh? Are you living out this obligation of life in the Spirit? If you are, this is a sign of the Spirit of life within you and you will *live*. Eternal life is your certain future. But if you are making no effort to put to death the deeds of the body, if it is not even a concern of yours, then Paul is warning you. And the warning is that if you are living according to the flesh, *you must die*. Eternal death is a certainty.

If you find yourself connecting with what I'm saying, I think Paul would say to you, "Don't just tell yourself 'I'm a Christian' if you are not making an effort to put away sin. Don't just say, 'Hey, I go to church. I'm good.'" Make sure of your salvation. Make sure that you truly are according to the Spirit.

Will we struggle with sin as believers? Yes, throughout our whole lives. Will that struggle at times be intense? Yes. But a sign of being according to the Spirit is that we are engaged in the struggle to put away our sin. We are grieved by our sin. We have a desire to put it away. This is our obligation in the Spirit. And of course, Paul also teaches that we never just put off sin, we also put on the virtues of Christ (Col. 3:5-14).

Now, as we come to verses 14-17, Paul moves from talking about our obligation in the Spirit to our assurance from the Spirit about our standing with God.

II. Our Assurance from the Spirit (8:14-17)

Verse 14,

¹⁴ *For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.*

The, *for*, lets us know that this verse is explaining what he has just said. And what he is saying is that there are certain people who are *sons of God*. Who are they? They are the ones *who are being led by the Spirit of God*. *Being led* is a passive verb, which means that we allow the Spirit to lead us. We allow the Spirit to guide us and set the direction of our lives. In the context, I think he means the sons of God are those who are led by the Spirit in this activity of putting off sin. Obviously, *being led by the Spirit* is a much broader thing than this, but that is the focus here.

This is the first time in Romans that Paul calls believers *sons of God*. This is a significant phrase with Old Testament connections. It was used to denote Israel's standing as the people of God (Hosea 11:1). For the Jewish people in Paul's day, they would have thought that having the Law and being faithful to the Law was evidence of being God's people. But Paul is saying that it is not the possession of the Law that matters, it is indwelling presence of the Spirit evidenced by His leadership in our lives that matters. It is those who are being *led by the Spirit* who are the *sons of God*. And a distinguishing mark of one being *led by the Spirit* is a growing life of holiness.

Paul moves on then to press into the assurance we receive from the Spirit in verse 15,

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!"*

Last Sunday Steve mentioned how it is hard for translators at times to know if the word "spirit" refers to the human spirit or to the Holy Spirit. The translators of the NASB use a lower case "spirit" here meaning the human spirit. But I think he is talking about the Holy Spirit. You see that sense in the NIV's translation. And so another way to say what Paul is saying here is this: "The Holy Spirit you received is not a Spirit of slavery that leads to fear again, but He is a Spirit of adoption."

When he says that the Spirit is a Spirit of adoption, it could be that he is saying the Spirit is the one who effects our adoption or He is the one who confirms our adoption. I think he is saying that the Spirit is the one who confirms our status as being adopted *as sons*. We have assurance as the Spirit confirms our status as sons of God through adoption. In the Roman world adoption was a legal act whereby a person could adopt a child giving that child all the rights a natural born child would have.

Earlier in Romans, Paul taught that in Christ a believer is justified. Justification is positional truth that is declared to be true the moment we believe. He is saying that same thing here about adoption. Adoption is positional truth that is true the moment we believe. And there is great assurance in knowing that this is our standing with God.

And out of this relationship as sons *we cry out, "Abba! Father!"* We can approach God as a Father in our prayers. You might remember that when Jesus prayed in the Garden, this is exactly how he addressed his Father (Matt. 14:36). There is a kind of intimacy that is expressed in this address. These terms communicate closeness. Paul is saying that just like Jesus, as the Son of God, addressed the Father with the intimacy of a son, so too believers due to our adoption as sons come to God in the same way.

He goes on to say:

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.*

The Spirit of God makes us aware *that we are children of God*. Paul uses the term, *children*, instead of son here. Sonship emphasizes our legal standing; being a child stresses the family relationship. The Spirit *testifies with our spirit* that we have this status with God. He gives us a kind of inner conviction in the deepest part of us that we are actually in the family of God. And it is out of this awareness that we cry out *Abba! Father!*

Most of what Paul has done so far in Romans is to lay out objective truths about what the Gospel has accomplished in our lives. We draw great assurance from understand-

ing these truths about our standing with God. But our assurance goes beyond just understanding declared truths. Those who are according to the Spirit are also given this subjective experience of the Spirit testifying with our spirits that we have the standing of being *children of God*.

Paul goes on to say that because we are children of God, we are also *heirs*. We are *heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*. Because of our adoption, there are things we experience in the present, but there are also things we look forward to in the future with hope. We look forward to the inheritance that awaits us. This is an inheritance that is a gift of God's grace flowing from our status as children of God.

We are *heirs of God*. We have the certain hope of receiving what God has promised. In the Old Testament, the land that was promised to Abraham and his descendants was the focus of "inheritance" for God's people. But in the New Testament, "inheritance" is not about land and possessions on earth, but rather it is about what was symbolized by the Promised Land. The promised inheritance that we look forward to is the full realization of the kingdom of God. It is a promise of salvation (Heb. 1:14) and blessing (1 Pet. 3:9) and glory (Rom. 8:17-18) and incorruption (1 Cor. 15:50). That's what we hope for.

When Paul says that we are *heirs with Christ* he is saying that we inherit the blessings of God's kingdom only by virtue of our connection with Christ. He is the true heir of all that God has promised (Heb. 1:2), but through our union with him we too are heirs.

At the end of verse 17, Paul gives a conditional statement that we will be fellow heirs with Christ on the condition that we *suffer with Him*. Paul's point is that if we are truly sons of God, participating in the life of Christ, we will suffer with Christ in this world. This is an idea woven throughout the New Testament (Phil 1:29; 3:10; 2 Cor. 1:5). Paul is not saying that we earn our inheritance through suffering, but rather that sonship and suffering go together. If we are a true son, we can expect to suffer. But on the other side of anything that we might suffer is the promise of being *glorified with Him*. This is part what we will inherit. And this is assurance from the Spirit.

Ravi Zacharias shares a story about some friends of his who established an orphanage that seeks to help children who were born deformed. They try to find medical help to correct what can be corrected and then they try to find people who will adopt these kids. One particular little boy had been passed over for adoption because of a rare brain malfunction that he had that makes it hard for him to connect thoughts. Here how he tells the story:

At about nine years of age . . . he was becoming despondent as, one-by-one, he saw his housemates being selected by families and leaving. He began to ask those who were taking care of him why no one was adopting him. Why didn't anybody choose him?

Through an incredible series of events, a couple from Texas, who had already adopted one child from the same orphanage, called to ask if this

boy was still there. Through the goodness of the parents' hearts, and the generosity of the couple who established the orphanage in agreeing to cover all the costs of his adoption, the day has been set for this little boy to be taken to his new home. . .

His actual name is quite hard to pronounce, but it is quite a normal name in his native setting. His adoptive parents have sent him the name they want to give him—Anson Josiah, the initials of which are A.J. He now walks around that home, waiting for his new parents to come for him, telling everybody as he points to his chest, “You can call me A.J. My name is A.J.” Is it not interesting that even with the debilitation of disconnected thoughts, he is able to pick up the redeeming thrill of relationship and particular worth evidenced in his new name?

(<http://rzim.org/just-thinking/the-hunger-of-the-spirit-and-the-ties-that-bind>)

The redeeming thrill of relationship! The worth evidenced in a new name!

In your mind, maybe you have thought that your name is “not good enough,” or “not wanted,” or “loser,” or “shameful,” or “dirty.” Or maybe you have believed that your name is determined by the sin with which you struggle. But here's the deal, God has walked into the “orphanage” of our world and He set His eyes upon you and He said, “I want that one.” He chose you. And He brought you into His family through adoption. And He gave you a new name – Child of God. And the Holy Spirit whispers to your spirit that this is true.

And because of this name, you can have incredible assurance – assurance that you are loved; assurance that you can approach your Heavenly Father boldly; assurance that you will inherit the kingdom of God in all its fullness; assurance that no matter how much you may suffer in this life, you will be glorified with Christ; and, assurance that you really can by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit put to death the deeds of the flesh.

You are God's child! Live in light of it!

Amen.