

Message: “God’s Children Set Free”

What does it feel like to be free of a burden weighing your life down? We’ve all had this experience. The pandemic was a burden for all of us, no matter what you believed or practiced in your personal life. There was nowhere to go or anyone you could turn to and escape the effects it had on our life and community. The same is true for those who are struggling with debilitating conditions, financial hardship, loss of a loved one, addictions, homelessness, racism, abuse and violence.

What can we do when we feel miserable about ourselves and our life? Two weeks ago, we considered Paul’s description of our human nature, *“What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious God’s command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help!”* (Romans 7:15-17, MSG).

Sadly, the law often just amplifies our awareness of the problem or may be used against us by some in their zeal to uphold the law. As Paul cried out, *“I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope! Is there no one who can do anything for me?”* (v24, MSG).

I invite you to take in what God reveals to Paul in our scripture for today. Reading from The Message, *“With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, this fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ’s being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death”* (Romans 8:1-2, MSG).

What about the law? Paul says, *“The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law asked for but we couldn’t deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us”* (v4). Embrace God’s Spirit and let the deep healing begin.

And God does the heavy lifting. Paul wrote, *“God went for the root when God sent the Son. God didn’t deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In Jesus, God personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity to set it right once and for all. The law, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that”* (v3).

God knows us, inside and out. And God knew we’d take advantage of every loophole we could find in the law. So God sent Christ to make things right. And he did, offering us the gifts of forgiveness, love and grace. These gifts are beyond measure. They make all the difference.

As Paul said, *“... passing laws against sin only produces more lawbreakers. But sin doesn’t have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that’s the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life - a life that goes on and on and on, world without end”* (Romans 5:20-22, MSG).

How do we respond when we hear this good news? There are two choices: the path of trust in God versus the path of trust in ourselves. One of these paths leads to a more peaceful, whole life. The other leads to life filled with distress and spiritual deadness.

Paul taught, *“Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God’s action in them find God’s Spirit is in them - living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God”* (Romans 8:5-8a, MSG).

I invite you to choose the path of life. Jesus offers this gift and will send the Holy Spirit to live inside you, guiding you, teaching you and prompting you every step along the way. As you embrace your new life, the old life with its unhealthy patterns and behaviors will fade away. We will become more like Christ, able to love more wholly and perfectly, by God’s perfecting grace.

Making this choice doesn't mean you'll have it easy in life.

Paul reminds us we'll struggle. But there is hope. As he said, *“When you welcome God, even though you still experience all the limitations of sin, you experience life on God's terms. It stands to reason, doesn't it, if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, God will do the same thing in you that God did in Jesus, bringing you alive to God? When God lives and breathes in you, you are delivered from dead life. With God's Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!”* (Romans 8:9b-11, MSG).

The lesson is elegantly clear: when you choose life in Jesus Christ, you are choosing eternal life with God. *“Sin will have no power over you, because you aren't under Law but under grace”* (Romans 6:14, CEB). Choosing to follow the way of the Spirit is necessary to access this new life. And Life in God, which the law could not provide, is now possible through Jesus Christ. Christ put on human flesh and dealt with sin and death. Now, new life can live in the place of death within God's people.

How is this possible? God resurrected Jesus Christ from the dead, proving God is greater than death. With unparalleled power, the resurrected Jesus brings new life to God's people. If Christ is in you, the Spirit of God and the power of the resurrection lives in you. Praise God!

Let me close with a final thought as we conclude our meditation on the first part of Romans 8. There is no condemnation for those who, by faith, believe in the resurrected Jesus. Any guilt we may feel comes from our own, informed conscience, not God or from outside of us. God's forgiveness is freely offered when we are ready to ask for it and receive it by grace. The good news we share is news of faith, hope and love. Distrust, shame and apathy won't be preached or taught here. Fear will not rule over us. We aren't here to make you feel guilty, so you say the words you think we want to hear. This is a safe place where you can rest, grow and flourish in Christ.

Together, let's gratefully receive God's grace and then joyfully share it, sowing seeds of faith in the lives of all who we meet.

To God be the glory!

Romans 8:1-11 (CEB)

So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. God has done what was impossible for the Law, since it was weak because of selfishness. God condemned sin in the body by sending his own Son to deal with sin in the same body as humans, who are controlled by sin. He did this so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us. Now the way we live is based on the Spirit, not based on selfishness. People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit. The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't. People who are self-centered aren't able to please God.

But you aren't self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, they don't belong to him. If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.