



Central Peninsula Church

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Romans 8:4-13
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The Promise of Freedom

SERIES: *His Precious and Magnificent Promises*

Someone has said that “God’s promises are like life preservers. They keep the soul from sinking in the sea of trouble.” I think that’s true. That’s why we’re studying the promises of God from Rom. 8. Rom. 8, of course, comes right on the heels of Rom. 7. In Rom. 7 Paul describes his own struggle with sin. Over and over again, he says that deep down he really wants to keep God’s law. He agrees with it and strives to live by it. But there is another force at work within him. He calls it “the flesh.” The flesh is that natural propensity within all of us that pulls us towards sin. It’s like a gravitational pull that we can’t escape. It’s a force so strong that at the end of ch. 7 Paul cries out, **“Wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death?”** Paul is sinking. But this leads him to make a statement at the end of ch. 7 and the start of ch. 8. First he says, **“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** The answer to his cry is somehow in the person of Jesus Christ. And then in the first few verses of ch. 8 he tells us why that is. He lays out a great life preserving promise which comes to us through Christ and his work for us on the cross. He says, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** I hope that you’ve thought about that the last two weeks. In your own struggle with sin, I hope that you’ve been brought back to the great promise that because of Christ, God the Father holds nothing against you; that you’re as beloved and well-pleasing to him as his own Son is.

But this also leads to a question: Is that it? In the midst of my struggle with sin, while it’s good to know that nothing I do will be held against me, am I just doomed to live in perpetual defeat? Will I never be able to counteract with any kind of success this natural pull towards sin I feel in my life? Am I like a boxer that goes into the ring, knowing that I’m going to lose the fight, but simply comforted by the fact that the defeat won’t go on my record?

I. God promises that we are free from the power of sin.

The answer to that question is a resounding NO! In Romans 8:4 Paul says that Christ didn’t just die to free us from the penalty of sin but also to free us from the power of sin. In theological language, he came not just for our justification but for our sanctification. Justification is the promise of a right standing before God. Sanctification is the promise of a right heart before God.

Look what he says starting in v. 3.

“For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (vv. 3-4).

You see, God sent his Son, not just as an offering for sin; not just to take on our condemnation; but also so that something might happen IN US; so that the Law might be fulfilled in us. So the struggle that Paul describes in Rom. 7 is not one in which we’re doomed to defeat.

By the way, this is what the Enemy would like us to think. He would love for us to have an excuse to just give into the flesh whenever it pulled us in the direction of sin. He would love for us to think, “Well, I can’t help it. It’s just the way I am. Why should I try to fight sin? I’m just going to lose anyway. At least I know that in the end I’ll be forgiven.” So we go into the ring and don’t even put up a fight. We just lay down. Satan would love for us to think like that.

But that’s a cop out. And it reflects an incomplete understanding of all that you’ve been promised in Christ. God has sent you another life preserver, another promise. When you hang onto this promise, you’re able to resist sinking into sin. When you hold fast to this life preserver, you begin to change from the inside out; you begin to reflect in your heart the very righteousness of God.

I’m talking about the promise of the Holy Spirit. Paul alludes to it here in v. 4 when he says the Law is fulfilled only in those who walk according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh; only in those who have a new gravitational pull in their lives. Paul goes on and explains why that is and how that works.

II. How we live is determined by who we are.

A. Those in the flesh: The first thing we should know is that how we live will always be determined by who we are. This is what Paul is saying in vv. 5-8.

“For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

He talks about those who are living “according to the flesh.” Who is he talking about? This refers to those who are without Christ, whose whole life is dominated by the flesh. Later in v. 9, when he addresses believers, he says, **“However you are not in the flesh...”** So here he’s describing those who ARE in the flesh. And he says that those who are in the flesh will naturally set their minds on the things of the flesh; they have no choice but to be occupied by fleshly things. The idea of a “mind set” has to do with what preoccupies us, with the ambitions that drive us and the concerns which engross us. If you’re in the flesh you’ll be absorbed in fleshly things.

What does that look like? You only have to look around to see what that is. You only have to watch TV, or read the newspapers, or observe people, and you’ll see what this is. It’s the natural viewpoint of life. Fundamentally, it’s a mind set that’s preoccupied with self. Like earth and all the planets revolve around the sun, the mind set on the flesh is such that everything revolves around self. Of course, that can express itself in many different ways. Sometimes it looks very good on the outside; very respectable, even religious. The flesh has tremendous religious potential! There can be a great drive towards doing what is right, accomplishing much, being responsible. But fundamentally, it’s all about you; it’s all FOR you. We can even come to church and sing praises to God, but deep down we’re patting ourselves on the back and wondering how many people have noticed. Sometimes the flesh is easier to spot. We can spot it in the desire for money, because money provides the pleasures that we would like to have. Modern advertising plays on this constantly. We can also spot it in the desire to have fun. The world is committed to that. It takes having fun very seriously! We can spot it in the desire for fame and recognition. People are always manipulating life to acquire some degree of recognition, to be seen and known. People will give their right arm to gain standing and prestige. We see this mind set in just a desire to be fulfilled. These are the things that the world lives for. It’s not that these things are wrong in and of themselves, but when a

person is in the flesh, self is at the core of these things. And if self is at the core, God is on the fringe. That’s why he says this mind set is hostile towards God. It doesn’t submit to God; it’s not even able to do so. Even if it tried it cannot please God. The apostle John described it this way, **“Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world”** (1Jn. 2:15-16). That’s the mind set of those in the flesh.

It’s kind of like being raised here in the Bay Area as a Giant’s fan. From the time I was a small boy I’ve hated the Dodgers. It’s part of who I am, and who I am always expresses itself in my mind set, in how I live. Even when the Dodgers have made it into the World Series, and I think I should root for them because, like the Giants, they’re in the National League, I can’t bring myself to do it. I have a basic hostility towards the Dodgers. It’s part of who I am and who I am is expressed in how I live.

B. Those in the Spirit: But this same principle, how we live is determined by who we are, applies to those who are “in the Spirit.” In v. 9 Paul turns to believers and explains this principle as it relates to us. Look what he says.

“However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” (vv. 9-11).

Follow the reasoning here: First he says that those who are “in the Spirit” are not in the flesh. He’s talking about the Holy Spirit, not the human spirit. To be in the Spirit means to have his Spirit dwelling in you. By the way, this was a promise that Jesus made. On the night of the last supper, Jesus said to his disciples, “I’m going to leave you, but don’t worry, you’ll be better off when I’m gone.” Why? “Because if I go I’ll send you my Spirit (notice he’s called here in Rom. 8 “the Spirit of Christ”).” Jesus said that he would *“abide with you and be in you”* (Jn. 14:17). You see, when he was physically present on earth, Jesus limited himself to being in one place at one time. The only help he could offer was external. But now his Spirit is with us wherever we go. And he’s not just with us, he’s IN us, working in our hearts, manifesting his life through us.

This promise of the Holy Spirit is so basic that Paul says those who aren’t indwelt with His Spirit don’t belong to

Him. So this wasn't just for his disciples. And it's not just for a few super Christians. It's not for those who experience some kind of "second blessing" of the Spirit after they become Christians. This is the mark of every true follower of Christ. It's the Spirit who causes us to be born anew. Jesus said to Nicodemus, **"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit"** (Jn. 3:6). The Holy Spirit, the same one who raised Jesus from the dead, brings new birth to our human spirit. Not only that, one day he'll raise up our mortal bodies. Meanwhile we have this new life within us. That's who we are. We're not what we were. We're not in the flesh. We're in the Spirit. It's like me being reborn as a Dodger fan. Then I would root for the Dodgers!

Who you are determines how you live. Those who are in the Spirit will set their minds on the things of the Spirit. They'll root for the things of the Spirit. What does that look like? Does it mean that you don't worry about making money, having fun, fulfilling yourself? That you go around memorizing Scripture and thinking about God all day long? That you go around reciting Scripture verses and telling people what is wrong with their lives? No! It means that in the midst of making money and having fun and doing many of the same things other people do, your primary desire is to please God. It doesn't remove you from life, it puts you right back in it. But with a different point of view. Now he's the center of your life rather than yourself. His purposes are most important to you. You want God glorified in these things. You look at events of life from God's point of view. Your value system is changed and that impacts everything you do.

That sounds so good, doesn't it? But you're probably thinking, why is my life such a struggle then? If I have the Spirit of God living in me, if I have the mind set of the Spirit, why am I so aware of the flesh?

III. Though we're still in a battle, we can choose to walk according to the Spirit's desires.

The fact of the matter is, the flesh is still something even those who are in the Spirit have to contend with. Until we get our new bodies at the resurrection, we're in a battle. But it's not a battle we have to lose. Now we have the resources to win. In vv. 12-13 Paul says three things that are the keys to overcoming the flesh.

"So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – 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."

First, he says we're under obligation, not to live according to the flesh but to live according to the Spirit. To

be under obligation means to be a debtor. The idea is that we don't owe the flesh a thing. Our obligation is to the Spirit. He's the one who gave us new life. He's the one we should be listening to and serving.

There is an old story about the famous cuckoo bird that never builds its own nest. Instead, it flies around until it finds someone else's nest with eggs in it. While the mother bird is away, the cuckoo lands there, quickly lays its own egg, and then flies away. The thrush, whose nest has been invaded, comes back. Not being able to count, she starts to hatch her eggs. Pretty soon four little thrushes hatch, and one rather large bird called a cuckoo hatches as well. The cuckoo is two or three times as large as the baby thrushes. Then Mrs. Thrush has the job of feeding her young. She finds that there are four little mouths to feed and one very large one. Guess who gets most of the worms? Pretty soon, you've got a huge cuckoo in the nest with four starving thrushes. You can always find a baby cuckoo's nest. Next to it are a bunch of dead little thrushes, which the cuckoo has thrown out one at a time.

Paul teaches us here in Rom. 8 that, spiritually speaking, you and I have two natures in one nest. Which one are we going to feed? Which one are we obligated to feed? We're not obligated to feed the flesh, like the thrush feeds the cuckoo, no matter how powerful it seems. We're obligated to feed the Spirit; that's who we belong to! And the more we feed it, the stronger that nature will grow. Feed the Spirit; starve the flesh; and that which you starve will diminish. That's your obligation.

You ask, well, how do I do that? This leads to the second thing Paul says to help us overcome the flesh. He says we have to employ the Spirit to put it to death. There is a balance here. On the one hand, WE have to do it. Notice we're the ones who put to death the deeds of the body. But, on the other hand, we can only do that by means of the Spirit. We must choose to cooperate with the work of the Spirit. So you're going along and you find that you're facing some temptation. Whatever it is, it seems very attractive. You begin that process of rationalization in your head. The Enemy tells you it's really no big deal. God will be there to forgive you when it's all over. And it wouldn't really hurt anyone. And God really does want me to be happy. After all, nobody's perfect. But then the Spirit, often times through the word, shows you that it's wrong. Deep down you want to please the Lord. You know you belong to him. Even though he'll forgive you, you don't want to grieve him. And so you pray, "Lord, help me right now to turn away from this." And he does help you. You turn away and put it to death. One thing is for sure,

you can't play around with it. You can't coddle it. If you do that, the flesh will eat you up. You have to kill it. You have to be ruthless with it. You have to make NO provision at all for it.

The Spirit of God within you is a powerful force, but he works through your choices. When I was a small boy, I was daily harassed by a school bully that was twice my size. I was really no match for this guy. But I also had an older brother. He was in Jr. High and he was big, very big. So one day, after school, my brother walked to my elementary school from his Jr. High. I followed behind him as he called out this oversized 6th grader. I had a few words to say to him too. It's funny how confident you are when you have big brother by your side! In many ways, that's what God promises us in this passage. At times the flesh seems so huge, how can we win? But God has sent One who is so much stronger to be with us. And do you know what's even better? He comes and lives within us. It's like me having the spirit of my big brother in me. Then I could fight my own fights, but he would be doing it through me. That's what it's like for us; WE do the fighting, but we do it in the strength that he provides.

The third thing Paul says to help us is a motivation. He says, **"If you live 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."** He said the same thing up in v. 6: **"The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace."** He's talking about spiritual death. Death is not something that comes at the end of life; it's something that people experience now. Death, in this present experience, always comes down to four basic things: fear, guilt, hostility, and emptiness. Fear can appear as worry, anxiety, dread, or timidity. Guilt can show up in your life as shame, self-hatred, or perfectionism. Hostility will manifest itself as hate, resentment, bitterness, or revenge. Emptiness shows up as loneliness, discouragement, despair, meaninglessness. These are symptoms of death. When the flesh cries out and it looks so good and seems so right, we have to remember that the result is death. But when we walk by the Spirit, the result is life and peace. That's the opposite of death. If death is fear, then life and peace is trust, hope, and confidence. If death is guilt, then life and peace is acceptance, security, assurance. If death is hostility, then life and peace is love, kindness, reaching out. If death is emptiness, then life is a sense of well-being, fulfillment, excitement, fullness of life. Do you want

life or death?

CONCLUSION

I was out in my yard the other day and from a distance I could see that one of my plants, a Star Jasmine, had died. I walked over to it and I found that it really wasn't dead; in fact, only a part of it was dead. Literally, coming out of the same root ball was a plant that was both dead and alive. Instead of pulling the whole thing out, all I have to do is cut off the dead part. Then life would take over again. When you have the very life of Christ living inside of you, that life is meant to take over. That life is what you want to cultivate. But to do that you have to cut out the dead stuff; you have to crucify the flesh. When you do, life and peace are the result. You see, **THERE IS A KIND OF LIFE THAT LEADS TO DEATH, AND THERE IS A KIND OF DEATH THAT LEADS TO LIFE.** If you live to indulge the flesh, the result will be death. But if you put it to death and cut it out, you'll live.

Do you believe that? Do you believe this great promise? You don't have to sin. If you belong to Christ, you have his Spirit living within you and you are a new creation. If you choose to starve and kill the flesh and live according to who you are, you'll find life and peace.

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