

A Sermon by
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Chinese Christian Church
of New Jersey

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The Spirit-Filled Life, Part I

ROMANS 8:1-17

In the seventh chapter of ROMANS the Apostle Paul used clear logic along with his own testimony to dismiss the notion that the law plays any part in saving a man from the clutches of sin. The question he asks at the end of chapter 7 sets the stage for the proclamation of good news. *Since the law cannot save me from sin, then “who will rescue me from this body of death?”* The answer to this question, which begins with verse 25 of chapter 7 and is then developed in chapter 8, is the good news that becomes the climax of everything Paul set out to say in his letter to the Romans. The words recorded in today’s scripture reading should produce in us a sense of standing on holy ground. They should almost compel us (in a figurative sense) to “remove our sandals from our feet” as we are overwhelmed with the glory of God’s grace. At no other point in Romans does the glory and splendor of God’s grace shine through as it does in this section of scripture.

What is it about the good news of God’s grace that makes it so good? Many people believe the thing that makes the good news of God’s grace so good is the doctrine of “positional righteousness”. The doctrine of positional righteousness goes something like this: *Once I have experienced eternal life, God accepts me as being righteous regardless of what I appear to be on the surface. Once I have received eternal life, I am no longer condemned. So the question of how much I have sinned in the past or how much I am sinning in the present or I how much I will sin in the future can no longer change my status (or position) of being righteous before God. In other words, when God looks at me, He no longer sees my sin. What He sees is the righteousness of Jesus Christ.*

This doctrine should sound familiar to most of us. And it should be a cherished doctrine for those of us who really understand the meaning of what happened when God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” That is fantastic! And it is certainly a part of what we call “good news.”

However a doctrine alone is not good news for a certain individual, unless that individual has some evidence that being “in Christ” is making a real difference in his life. If someone ever does come up with a sure cure for cancer, the thing that will really make it good news for a person who has cancer is not just the fact that a cure has been found. It is also the fact that the cure is producing positive results in his body. He needs evidence that the cure is really working. Such assurance is really good news!

What the Apostle Paul does in ROMANS 8 is to establish the fact that a person in Christ has more than a doctrine. He has life. The doctrine of positional righteousness states the fact that God has provided a cure for the sin problem. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. If a person is “in Christ,” then that person, by definition has received the cure. But the assurance that I am in Christ must be based on some evidence that being in Christ is making a real difference. That is what really makes being in Christ good news. Acknowledging the doctrine of positional righteousness and even claiming it as a promise will not (and should not) give me the assurance that I am in Christ. When it comes to the question of assurance, what we should be looking for is not doctrine. We

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should be looking for life. And, more specifically, we should be looking for the Spirit-filled life.

Today's scripture lesson will present the Spirit-filled life as the foundation for any assurance we have that we are in Christ. We will begin with the conjunction "because" found in at the beginning of verse 2. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, **because...**" This conjunction bridges the great doctrine of positional righteousness to the whole topic of the Spirit-filled life. The good news that is presented in Romans 8 is not just the fact that we are no longer condemned, but it is also the reason why we can know that we are no longer condemned. The person in Christ can know that he is no longer condemned because "the law of the Spirit of life has set him free from the law of sin and death." The foundation upon which we should base our assurance is the reality of the Spirit-filled life that we are experiencing in the present.

Please notice how the Apostle Paul describes the Spirit-filled life. The first thing I would like to draw your attention to is the fact that the Spirit-filled life is a life of power. ROMANS 8:3 emphasizes that the very weakness of the law is that it is powerless. In contrast, verse 4 teaches us that the Spirit-filled life gives power to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law.

Let it be remembered that the theme of power was the Apostle Paul's starting point in ROMANS 1:16. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of salvation of everyone who believes..." The power mentioned in that verse, and referred to here in ROMANS 8:3-4, goes way beyond theory. It is quit real. The fact that we cannot define this power in a way that can be measured objectively does not mean that it is not real.

When I was growing up, I used to go to the confessional box almost every Saturday evening. There I would confess to the priest the sins I had committed during the week. Invariably, one of the sins I would confess to the priest was the sin of dishonoring my parents by arguing or fighting with my mother. I would tell the priest that I had dishonored my mother two times or three times or five times or how many times I could remember committing the sin. I would then be given a certain amount of penance to do. That approach to religion was very objective, and it gave me a sense of relief that my sins had been forgiven, at least for another week. However, it gave me no power to overcome the problem. The very next week I would repeat the sin and have to go again to the confessional.

But when I began to experience the Spirit-filled life, a wonderful thing happened. I actually began to experience power I never had before. It was the power to keep my mouth shut while my mother was screaming at me at the top of her lungs. And not only was I able to avoid fighting back, I was also able to think positive thoughts toward my mother while she was screaming at me. Now that is real power! I can still remember running down the country roads of central Pennsylvania and lifting my arms up to God in worship as I marveled at the transformation that had come about.

The power could not be objectively measured. I cannot say that the number of times I sinned was reduced by 50% the first month and another 50% reduction occurred the next month. It is so dangerous to try to measure God's power in that way. But even though the way we measure the power must be subjective, it is nonetheless very real and very specific. I can give you specific illustrations of how the power of grace has and still does have an impact on my life. The Spirit-filled life is a life of power.

And the Spirit-filled life is also a life of devotion toward God. Romans 8:5-8 tells us that those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires, and what the Spirit desires is the same thing that Jesus desires. It is the desire to please God. To seek the power to obey the commands of God without a true devotion to God was a mistake made by a certain young ruler. He wanted so bad to enter into the kingdom of God. From the time he was a young child, he had worked very hard at obeying all the commandments. But he lacked devotion to God. When Jesus told the young man to sell his possessions and become His devoted disciple, he was reluctant to do so.

There are too many people trying to get to heaven without complete devotion to God. It is a mistake for us to become more devoted to our idea of what Jesus wants us to do than to Jesus Himself. There is a difference between the attitude that says, "Jesus, please tell me what to do so I can get to heaven," and the attitude that says, "Jesus, I love you; for this reason I will do whatever you say." One is a selfish attitude that robs the soul from experiencing peace and results in death. In contrast, the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. The Spirit-filled life is a life devoted to God. That is the second thing I wish to emphasize.

The third thing I want to say about the Spirit-filled life has to do with control. Last week I made a statement that could have been easily misunderstood. I said that no Christian who is still alive is completely or 100% controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. When I made that statement, I certainly did not mean that it is possible for people to live outside of God's sovereign control of everything that goes on in this universe. I made that statement to emphasize a fact of which we are all aware. It is that no one alive is sinless.

But now, I think I should have chosen a different word to say the same thing, because when I come to the words recorded in ROMANS 8:9-11, I discover that being controlled by the Holy Spirit is the primary theme. In fact, verse 9 tells me that, if the Holy Spirit does not control a person, then that person does not have the Holy Spirit. And if he does not have the Holy Spirit, then he does not belong to Christ. In other words, it is impossible to have the Holy Spirit and not be controlled by the Holy Spirit.

So what does being controlled by the Holy Spirit mean in ROMANS 8? Obviously, here it does not mean moral perfection. But it does mean that the life of the Holy Spirit is so infused with our own lives that, regardless of what we are doing we are always and forever aware of God's presence. In ROMANS 8:9-11 there is repeated use of the phrase "the Spirit of God lives in you" or "Christ in you." I believe that the Apostle Paul was trying to impress upon His readers the fact that, if the Spirit of God lives in you, there will never be a moment when you will feel comfortable doing something that is displeasing to God.

It used to be that I would feel pretty clever if I could get away with something without being noticed. Learning how to beat the system made me feel smart and victorious. But now it is not easy for me to compromise truth in order to reach my personal objectives. I still find myself trying to do so from time to time; however, the Spirit of God in me causes me to be much more sensitized about my intentions.

Last week I took my car in for inspection and it failed the emission test. Actually, they never even tested the emission, because the guy in the first stall revved up the engine creating a cloud of smoke. Now I have known for quite some time that my car burns a little oil. What can you expect from a 15-year-old car with 183,000 miles? But I was also convinced that it would pass the emission test if given a chance. So I left the inspection station bound and determined to get the car passed without spending a lot of money on fixing the real problem. And so I decided to take the car to private inspection stations until I could find someone who would pass it. The first place I took it too wouldn't even try. The mechanic told me that nothing short of an expensive engine job could cure the problem. So I tried again. But before I tried again, I took the car in for a deluxe tune-up and changed the oil and added something to the oil that is supposed to seal up any minor leaks in the system. And then I tried another private place certified to give state inspections, hoping that my cover-up would produce the results I was looking for. But you know something? Although I was not doing anything illegal, the Spirit of God in me was not pleased, and I knew it.

The events that transpired over the next two days caused two things to become very clear to me. It became clear to me that I could beat the system if I kept trying. I eventually could find a private inspection station that would pass the car. The second thing that became clear to me is that my car smokes and it is not going to stop smoking unless I replace the engine or rebuild the engine. The only way I can beat the system is to compromise my integrity, that is, to be something less than totally honest with myself and with other people. In the past, that was easy for me to do. But with the Spirit of Christ in me, that is not easy to do.

Christ in us does not mean that our bodies no longer have to cope with the issues of mortality and temptation and corruption. We live in a corrupted world where the majority of people are out to beat the system. But the close relationship He now has with us will make a difference. It will cause us to feel intensely more sensitive toward the things of God. God will cause our spirits to come alive in a way that they could never come alive if Christ were not in us. And though the battle will be intense at times, victory will always be within reach.

The Spirit-filled life is a life where a person lives with a body that is subject to mortality and corruption because of sin; and, at the same time, has a spirit that is sensitized to live in a righteous way. God does not solve the "body" problem of man until the resurrection at the end of his age. At that time the God will also give life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in us.

So far I have tried to emphasize some major themes relating to the Spirit-filled life. They are the themes of power to act in a righteous way and devotion toward God and greater sensitivity to do the things that are right. Now, as we go on to look at the verses remaining in our scripture reading, please do not forget the main point of all of this. Everything mentioned about the Spirit-filled life deals with real changes that are happening right now. They are very specific changes that can be illustrated with real live testimonies. Without these very specific changes, there is no evidence that we are in Christ. Without these changes, there is no real assurance of salvation. Romans 8 is not a rejection of the doctrine of "positional righteousness" in Christ; rather, it is teaching us that real life changes must become the foundation of any assurance that we are in Christ.

In verses 12-13 of ROMANS 8 we see just how important it is for a person experience the Spirit-filled life. These things must not be taken lightly. The reason why we need to experience assurance that we are in Christ is not just so that we can have a good feeling about ourselves. The difference between experiencing these changes in our lives and not experiencing them is the difference between life and death. To base the assurance of our salvation on our objective decision to claim the promise of positional righteousness as our own can be a fatal mistake. That is doctrine-based assurance. But what we really need is assurance based on real life changes. In fact, those of us who claim to be in Christ should feel an obligation to seek assurance based on real-life changes produced by the Holy Spirit. We are not obligated to produce the evidence in our own power. But we are obligated to seek the Spirit-filled life and to use the evidence of the Spirit-filled life as the foundation of our assurance.

In ROMANS 14-17, the Apostle Paul goes on to describe the Spirit-filled life, giving the man in Christ even more specific examples of the kind of real-life changes he can expect to see happen in his life. ROMANS 8:14 begins the same way that ROMANS 8:2 began. Paul's logic has not changed. In ROMANS 8:2-11, we are told that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, and the reason why we can be assured that there is no condemnation is because of what the Holy Spirit has done and is doing in our lives. We have experienced the power. Our increased love and devotion to God is unmistakable. And our increased sensitivity and awareness of God's presence is too real to deny. Now, in ROMANS 8:14 the logic reappears. Just like in ROMANS 8:2, verse 14 begins with the word "because". People who put to death the misdeeds of the body will live. That is a fact. But how do we know they will live? We know it "because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, *Abba*, Father."

Here we are talking about an internal change brought on by the Holy Spirit that might not be as visible on the outside as the changes I have just described, but it is nonetheless unmistakable. The Holy Spirit causes the person in Christ to sense that his very identity has changed. God is no longer just a supreme being who governs the universe from a distance. God has now become our Father. Jesus Christ is God's only true Son, but because the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is actually in us, God the Father adopts us as His own children.

In what practical way does this change manifest itself? I believe the change manifests itself in the way we relate to God and in the way we call upon His name. It seems to me

that the majority of people these days have become quite used to verbalizing the name of God. Hardly a day goes where you don't hear someone say "Oh God" or "Oh my God". People who claim to be atheists as well as people who profess to be Christian both call out to God in this manner. And when I stop to think of what they really mean, I must conclude from the context that what they are really saying is, "My God, I can't believe this is happening" or simply "I can't believe this is happening," because many people are not even thinking about God when they say it.

But, when a certain person really begins to see God as his Father, that person will begin to call upon his Heavenly father the same way that Jesus called upon His heavenly Father when He walked this earth. When Jesus called out to His heavenly Father, His meaning was never, "Oh my God, I can't believe this is happening!" His meaning always seemed to be, "Dear Father, in light of what is happening, please help me to do your will." That is the way an adopted child of God relates to his Father in heaven. That is what it means to cry out "*Abba*, Father."

When we sense this kind of internal change taking place in the way we relate to God, that becomes super-strong evidence that we are in Christ, because such internal change cannot be humanly produced. The role of the Holy Spirit in producing this kind of change is emphasized in GALATIANS 4:6 where Paul uses almost the identical words. But in this case it is not the man in Christ who is crying out to God; rather, it is the Spirit of Christ in man who cries, "*Abba*, Father." What a beautiful picture of adoption! The adopted son crying out the same words as the true Son. '*Abba*, Father, may Your Name be holy, may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

1 JOHN 3:24 says, "And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us." Notice how ROMANS 8:16 says practically the same thing. It says, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Now we can better understand just how the Holy Spirit gives his testimony. He doesn't do it by giving us a good feeling about ourselves. Nor does he do it by reminding of that we at one time prayed a certain prayer or claimed a certain promise. He does it by causing change to take place in our lives. 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 says, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" It is the Holy Spirit who makes the old go and the new come.

ROMANS 8 has already given us several examples of the kinds of changes that the Holy Spirit brings about. These changes are unmistakable, and they affect both our outward behavior as well as our inward thinking. The last verse in today's scripture lesson reveals yet another internal change that the Holy Spirit causes to happen with the person in Christ. In the second half of verse 17 we see that the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to share in the sufferings of Christ. This particular "new thing" that the Holy Spirit brings about in our lives will be developed more in the rest of the eighth chapter of Romans. It really deserves a whole sermon, because it is such a magnificent change. Today I will only say a few words in the way of an introduction.

What I would like to say is that the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ who resides in us is extremely concerned about the lost condition of the whole world; therefore, the person in Christ who is so intimately connected to the Holy Spirit cannot help but have the same compassion and suffer the same heartache for the lost souls of people and the fallen condition of the whole world in which we live. The key word that will be used to describe how the Holy Spirit views the state of affairs is "groaning". It is not "hilarity". That is the way the sitcoms view the sad state of affairs—with sarcasm and laughter.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he first establishes the fact that all men need the gospel. He then goes on to describe the gospel that all men need. In ROMANS 8 a climax is reached. The good news is that there is a sure cure to the problem of sin. And the really good news comes when you see the cure taking affect through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your own life. As subjective as the change is, it is nonetheless specific and undeniable. It becomes the foundation of our assurance that we are in Christ.

Because the change is subjective, there is really no way for us to be able to judge where others stand. God certainly knows, and I also believe it is possible for us to be aware of

the reality of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. But when it comes to the status of other people, we must leave the final judgment call to God.

Although we cannot and should not judge other people, we can and we should help other people understand the truth contained in today's scripture lesson, so that they can begin to base the assurance of their salvation on the correct standard. This may help those who are basing their assurance on doctrine alone to consider the Spirit-filled life as a better standard. Such a shift of standard may help salvation come to some professing Christians who are living a life of self-deception.