

The Liberating Spirit of God
Romans 8:1-4
April 26, 2020

We are spiritual beings opposed to many philosophical and psychological theories suggesting we are biological beings driven by inner forces which have little to do with any spiritual connection. This runs counter to any religious understanding of the nature of humanity which defines us through a relationship with God. Paul is a master at defining the human person through spiritual concepts. He has provided the church the language, the practicality and the insights to help us understand our spiritual problem and how God has supplied the gifts to develop our spiritual nature. In Romans 8 Paul begins to build this coherent understanding of our spiritual life defined through the presence of the Spirit. He previously identified our spiritual problem in Romans 7 through a tightly constructed argument of how sin ravages our lives. These two chapters form a coherent picture of living through and in the spirit of Jesus. Here lies the power of our spiritual purpose—to live in the Spirit given to us by Jesus.

Paul begins chapter 8 of Romans with this pithy argument about life in the Spirit: ***“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”*** With what Paul has written earlier in chapters 6-7 there seems to be no doubt that the purpose in life is to live “by the Spirit” that God has provided us through his Son. The very nature of our new life with each other and God is bound up with joining them in a new relationship empowered by the liberation of the Spirit. We begin this new life by dying with Christ, then raising with him. What does this mean?

Anyone familiar with the ancient world knows that the spirituality of a person, for Greeks and Jews, is driven by the character of the god. In other words, the person that claims a certain god as their divine master becomes like them. They are to exhibit the character of the god. So, when Paul says in Romans 6, ***“How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life”*** he is connecting the worshipper with being in union with his god—with Jesus. This is where his directives to life come from and his empowerment to live in freedom for his savior. This is essential for Paul to develop given that the Jewish people have failed to fulfill their obligations of justice and mercy. The reasons for their failure are important to understanding because it gives us a clear view of how God provided a real path to liberation.

According to Paul, the failure of the Jewish people and the law is because of the power of sinfulness in the individual. He calls it “living in the flesh.” Think of it this way, the law

is good but because of the presence of sinfulness the law could not be fulfilled. Therefore, the law is insufficient to bring about righteousness and goodness because the Spirit of God in Jesus was not available to achieve its purpose. But now through union with Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus living in us, we have thrown away that old life and sought to live like Jesus who has fulfilled the law through love.

What Paul is trying to tell us, who are spiritual beings, is that there are two competing forces in the world that are trying to capture the heart of people. There is the Spirit and there is the flesh. I like to think of these two competing spheres of life this way. Spirituality is about relationships. The Spirit of Christ moves us closer inside the heart of Jesus, which in turn empowers us to live out the fruits of Jesus' character and purpose. The flesh is antagonistic toward this pursuit, believing that we can do it all on our own without help from the Spirit. That which is required by the law of our religion then becomes for the person driven by the flesh a means of competition with others and self-glory. For the one driven by the Spirit the requirements of the law are a delight that reflects the god that we adore. Therefore, we do it with love and honor bringing no glory to ourselves. Jesus being the incarnation of God is then trustworthy and most honorable to receive our worship and devotion. After all we all "become what we worship."

Christianity did not exchange one code for another demanding through our will that we obey its tenants. Christianity is thoroughly a spiritual religion for spiritual people. If it was another code then we would still have the same old problem of using it for our self-glory. Liberation for Paul is liberation from the sinful power that drives us to use the law as a benchmark of our goodness instead of experiencing the delight to see our God and his character.

Every generation is in danger of losing this special spiritual gift through the fear of losing a harsh morality they believe can save us. We are in such a time again. We are hearing of movements that are becoming harsher and harsher in their pursuit of the Christian walk. They are hounding Christians and non-Christians that wish to walk by the Spirit and not the rulebook. They are losing their witness of love by becoming deeply embedded into the issues of the day they believe will bring Christianity back as a shining example of hardline morality. But it's the same old fight that Jesus engaged; it's the same old fight that drove the church into terrible division at the Scopes Trial and it's the same fight that drove the hatred of others during the crusades. Paul would say that we are driven by the flesh and not the Spirit when we turn our faith into us and them. It is time to liberate ourselves through the Spirit of Christ. It is time to be known as those ***"who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."***