

Living in the Spirit

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon on Romans 8:12-17

Author: Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546) Year: 1526

Text

¹²So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh: ¹³for if ye live after the flesh, ye must die; but if by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live. ¹⁴For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵For ye received not the spirit of bondage again unto fear; but ye received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. ¹⁶The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God: ¹⁷and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him. (Romans 8:12-17)

Sermon

Living in the Spirit as God's Children

¹ This text, like the preceding one, is an exhortation to Christian life and works. The language employed, however, is of different construction. The hateful machinations of the devil, by which he produces so much disaster in the world, make it necessary to urge this exhortation in many different forms upon those who have become Christians. For when God out of grace, without any merit on our part, bestows upon us the forgiveness of sins which we ourselves are unable to buy or acquire, the devil instigates men at once to conclude and exclaim: Oh, in that case we need no longer do good! Whenever, therefore, the apostle speaks of the doctrine of faith, he is obliged continually to maintain that grace implies nothing of that kind. For our sins are not forgiven with the design that we should continue to commit sin, but that we should cease from it. Otherwise it would more justly be called, not forgiveness of sin but permission to sin.

² It is a shameful perversion of the salutary doctrine of the Gospel and great and damnable ingratitude for the unfathomable grace and salvation received, to be unwilling to do good. For we ought in fact to be impelled by this very grace to do, with all diligence and to the utmost of our knowledge and ability, everything that is good and well-pleasing to God, to the praise and glory of his name.

³ Of this Paul reminds and admonishes us here, in plain and simple but earnest and important words, in which he points out to us how much we owe to God for that which we have received from him, and what injury we shall suffer if we do not value it as we should, and act accordingly. He says:

“We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.”

⁴ Because we have been redeemed from the condemnation we deserved by our sins, and now have eternal life through the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us (he speaks of this in the preceding verses), therefore we are debtors to live after the Spirit and obey God. This Paul declares also in the text for last Sunday: “*Now being made free from sin and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto sanctification.*” Romans 6:22. Therefore, he says, ye are debtors; your new calling, station, and nature require of you that, since ye have become Christians and have the Holy Spirit, ye should live as the Holy Spirit directs and teaches. It is not left to your own caprice to do or to leave undone. If ye desire to glory in the possession of grace and the Holy Spirit, ye must confess yourselves debtors to live, not after the flesh, the only desire of which is to continue in sin, but after the Spirit; the Spirit shows you that, having been baptized and redeemed from sin, ye must turn from sin to the new life of righteousness and not from that new life to sin.

“*For if ye live after the flesh, ye must die.*”

⁵ Here judgment is plainly and tersely pronounced on the pretensions of those foolish people who seek to make the freedom of grace a pretext for giving license to the flesh. The apostle speaks these words that he may deter them from presumption, lest in place of the life and grace in which they pride themselves, they bring upon themselves again eternal wrath and death. It would be utterly inconsistent in you who are now saved and freed from eternal death to desire henceforth to live after the flesh. For if ye do that, ye need not imagine that ye shall retain eternal life; ye will be subject to death and condemned to hell. For ye know that it was solely because of your sins that ye lay under the wrath of God and had incurred death, and that it was because ye lived after the flesh that ye deserved condemnation. Most assuredly Christ has not died for those who are determined to remain in their sins; he has died that he might rescue from their sins those who would gladly be released but cannot liberate themselves.

⁶ Therefore, let him that is a Christian take care not to be guilty of such nonsense as to say: I am free from the Law, therefore I may do as I please. Rather let him say and do the contrary. Let him, because he is a Christian, fear and shun sin, lest he fall from his freedom into his former state of bondage to sin under the Law and God’s wrath; or lest the life, begun in God, lapse again into death. For here stands the express declaration, “*If ye live after the flesh, ye must die ;*” as if the apostle meant: It will not avail you that ye have heard the Gospel, that ye boast of Christ, that ye receive the sacraments, so long as ye do not, through the faith and Holy Spirit received, subdue your sinful lusts, your ungodliness and impiety, your avarice, malice, pride, hatred, envy and the like.

⁷ For the meaning of “*living after the flesh*” has been repeatedly stated and is readily understood. It includes not only the gross, sensual lust of fornication or other uncleanness, but everything man has inherited by his natural birth; not only the physical body, but also the soul and all the faculties of our nature, both mental and corporal—our reason, will and senses—which are by nature without the Spirit and are not regulated by God’s Word. It includes particularly those things which the reason is not inclined to regard as sin; for instance, living in unbelief, idolatry, contempt of God’s Word, presumption and dependence on our own wisdom and strength, our own honor, and the like. Everything of this nature must be shunned by Christians (who have the Holy Spirit and are hence able to judge what is carnal) as a fatal poison which produces death and damnation.

Putting to Death Sin

“*But if by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live.*”

⁸ Here the apostle confesses that even in the Christian there is a remnant of the flesh, that must be put to death—all manner of temptation and lusts in opposition to God’s commandments. These are active in the flesh and prompt to sin. They are here called the “*deeds of the body.*” Of this nature are thoughts of unbelief and distrust, carnal security and presumption instead of the fear of God, coldness and indolence with respect to God’s Word and prayer, impatience and murmurings under suffering, anger and vindictiveness or envy and hatred against our neighbor, avarice, unchastity and the like. Such inclinations as these dwell in flesh and blood and cease not to move and tempt man. Yea, because of human infirmity they at times overtake him when he is not careful enough about transgression. They will certainly overpower him unless he resolutely opposes them and, as here stated, “*puts to death the deeds of the body.*” To do this means a severe struggle, a battle, which never abates nor ceases so long as we live. The Christian dare never become slothful or negligent in this matter. He must arouse himself through the Spirit so as not to give place to the flesh. He must constantly put to death the flesh lest he himself be put to death by it. The apostle declares, “*If ye live after the flesh, ye must die,*” and again comforts us, “*If by the Spirit ye put to death [mortify] the deeds of the body, ye shall live.*” For the Christian receives the gift of the Holy Spirit that he may become willing and able to mortify these sinful lusts.

⁹ This mortifying of sin through the Spirit is accomplished on this wise: Man recognizes his sin and infirmity, at once repents, remembers God’s Word, and, through faith in the forgiveness of sins, strengthens himself against sin, and so resists it that he does not consent to it nor permit it to come to deeds.

¹⁰ This constitutes the difference between those who are Christians and sanctified and those who are without faith and the Holy Spirit or who grieve and lose the Spirit. For although believers, as well as unbelievers, are not wholly free from the sinful lusts of the flesh, they yet remain in repentance and the fear of God; they hold fast to the belief that their sins are forgiven, for Christ’s sake, because they do not yield to them but resist them. Therefore they continue under forgiveness, and their remaining infirmity is not fatal nor damning to them as it is to those who, without repentance and faith, go on in carnal security and purposely follow their evil lusts against their own conscience; who thus cast away from themselves both faith and the Holy Spirit.

¹¹ So Paul admonishes the Christians to remember what they have received, and whereunto they are called. Having received the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, they are to be careful not to lose these again; they must use them in contending against the sinful lusts of the flesh. They are to comfort themselves with the fact that they have the Holy Spirit, that is, have help and strength by means of which they can resist and mortify sin. These things are impossible to those who have not faith. Therefore Paul declares further:

“*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.*”

¹² Like ourselves, Paul had to deal with two classes of people, the true and the false Christians. There is not so much danger from the adversaries of the doctrine; for instance, from popery: their opposition is so open that we can readily beware of them. But since the devil sows even among us his seed—they are called Christians and boast of the Gospel—it behooves us to take heed, not to the mouth, but to the works, of those who claim to be Christians. Not what they say, but what they do, is the question. It is easy enough to boast of God and of Christ and of the Spirit. But whether such boasting has any foundation or not, depends on whether or not the Spirit so works and rules in one as to subdue and mortify sin. For where the Spirit is, there assuredly the Spirit is not idle nor powerless.

He proves his presence by ruling and directing man and prevailing on man to obey and follow his promptings. Such a man has the comfort that he is a child of God, and that God so reigns and works in him that he is not subject to death; he has life.

Meaning of “Led by the Spirit of God.”

¹³ To be “*led by the Spirit of God*” means, then, to be given a heart which gladly hears God’s Word and believes that in Christ it has grace and the forgiveness of sins; a heart which confesses and proves its faith before the world; a heart which seeks, above all things, the glory of God, and endeavors to live without giving offense, to serve others and to be obedient, patient, pure and chaste, mild and gentle; a heart which, though at times overtaken in a fault and it stumble, soon rises again by repentance, and ceases to sin. All these things the Holy Spirit teaches one if he hears and receives the Word, and does not willfully resist the Spirit.

¹⁴ On the other hand, the devil, who also is a spirit, persuades the hearts of the worldlings. But it soon becomes evident that his work is not that of a good spirit or a divine spirit. For he only leads men to do the reverse of that which the Spirit of God leads them to do; then they find no pleasure in hearing and obeying God’s Word, but despise God, and become proud and haughty, avaricious, unmerciful.

¹⁵ Let every one therefore take heed that he do not deceive himself. For there are many who claim to be Christians and yet are not. We perceive this from the fact that not all are led by the Spirit of God. Some spirit there must be by which men are led. If it is not the Spirit of God leading them to oppose the flesh, then it must be the other and evil spirit leading them to give way to the flesh and its lusts and to oppose the Spirit of God. They must, therefore, either be God’s own, his dear children, his sons and his daughters, called to eternal life and glory; or they must be rejected and abandoned, children of the devil; and with him heirs of eternal fire.

¹⁶ Paul takes occasion to speak more at length on the words “*sons of God,*” and proceeds in beautiful and comforting words to describe the nature and glory of this sonship. He only begins the subject, however, in today’s text. He says:

“For ye received not the spirit of bondage again unto fear; but ye received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.”

¹⁷ This is a noble and comforting text, worthy of being written in letters of gold. Because ye now through faith, he means to say, have the Holy Spirit and are led by him, ye are no longer in bondage as ye were when under the Law; ye need no longer be afraid of its terrors and its demands, as if God would condemn and reject you on account of your unworthiness and the remaining infirmity of your flesh. On the contrary, ye have the consolation that, through faith, ye have the assurance of God’s grace, and may consider God your Father and call upon him as his children.

Two Kinds of Preaching and of Works

¹⁸ Thus he contrasts the two kinds of works which spring from the two kinds of preaching and doctrine—of the Law and of the Gospel—and which constitute the difference between the Christians and those still without faith and the knowledge of Christ. They who have nothing and know nothing but the Law, can never attain to true, heartfelt trust and confidence in God, though they do ever so much and exercise themselves ever so earnestly in the Law. For when the Law shines upon them in real clearness and they see what it demands of them and how far they come short of its fulfillment, when it thus discloses to them God’s wrath, it produces in them only a terror, a fear and dread, of God under which they must at last perish if they be not rescued by the Gospel. This is what Paul here terms “*the spirit of bondage*,” one that produces only fear and dread of God. But, on the other hand, if the heart grasps the preaching of the Gospel, which declares that, without any merit or worthiness on our part, God forgives us our sins, for Christ’s sake, if we believe in him—then it finds in God’s grace comfort against the terrors of the Law; then the Holy Spirit enables it to abide in that confidence, to hold fast to that comfort, and to call upon God sincerely in that faith, even though it feels and confesses to be still weak and sinful. This is what is meant by receiving “*the spirit of adoption*.”

¹⁹ Paul speaks of the “*spirit of bondage*” and the “*spirit of adoption*” according to the customs of his times. In those days men-servants and maid-servants were the property of the master of the house in the same sense that a cow was his property. He bought them with his money; he did with them as he pleased, just as with his cattle. They were afraid of their master and had to expect stripes, imprisonment and punishment even unto death. They could not say, So much of my master’s property belongs to me, and he must give it to me. But they had always to reflect: Here I serve for my bread only; I have nothing to expect but stripes, and must be content to have my master cast me out or sell me to someone else whenever he chooses. They could never have a well-grounded hope of release from such fear and bondage and coercion.

²⁰ Such a slavish spirit, such a captive, fearful and uncertain spirit, ye do not have, says the apostle. Ye are not compelled to live continually in fear of wrath and condemnation as are the followers of Moses and all who are under the Law. On the contrary, ye have a delightful, free spirit, one confident and contented, such as a child entertains toward its father, and ye need not fear that God is angry with you or will cast you off and condemn you. For ye have the Spirit of his Son (as he says above and in Galatians 4:6) in your heart and know that ye shall remain in his house and receive the inheritance, and that ye may comfort yourselves with it and boast of it as being your own.

Children of God

²¹ On this “*spirit of adoption*,” that is on what the apostle means when he says “*whereby we cry, Abba, Father*,” I have spoken at some length in my sermon on the text Galatians 4:6, where the same words are used. In short, Paul describes here the power of the kingdom of Christ, the real work and the true exalted worship the Holy Spirit effects in believers: the comfort by which the heart is freed from the terror and fear of sin and given peace, and the heartfelt supplication which in faith expects of God an answer and his help. These blessings cannot be secured through the Law or our own holiness. By such means man could never obtain the comfort of God’s grace and love to him; he would always remain in fear and dread of wrath and condemnation, and, because of such doubt, would flee from God, not daring to call upon him. But where there is faith in Christ, there the Holy Spirit brings the comfort spoken of, and a childlike trust which does not doubt that God is gracious and will answer prayer, because he has promised all these—grace and help, comfort, and answer to prayer—not for the sake of our worthiness, but for the sake of the name and merit of Christ, his Son.

²² Of these two works of the Holy Spirit, comfort and supplication, the prophet Zechariah 12:10 said that God would establish a new dispensation in the kingdom of Christ when he should pour out “*the spirit of grace and of supplication*.” The spirit he speaks of is the same who assures us that we are God’s children, and desires us to cry to him with heartfelt supplications.

²³ The Hebrew word “*Abba*”—which, as the apostle himself interprets it, means “*Father*”—is the word which the tiny heir lisps in childlike confidence to its father, calling him “*Ab, Ab*”; for it is the easiest word the child can learn to speak: or, as the old German language has it, almost easier still, “*Etha, Etha*.” Such simple, childlike words faith uses toward God through the Holy Spirit, but they proceed out of the depth of the heart and, as afterwards stated, “*with groanings which cannot be uttered*.” Rom 8:26. Especially is this the case when the doubtings of the flesh and the terrors and torments of the devil bring conflict and distress. Man must defend himself against these and cries out: O dear Father! Thou art, indeed, my Father, for thou hast given thine only and beloved Son for me. Thou wilt not be angry with me or disown me. Or: Thou seest my distress and my weakness; do thou help and save me.

“The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God.”

²⁴ That we are children of God and may confidently regard ourselves as such, we do not learn from ourselves nor from the Law. We learn it from the witness of the Spirit, who, in spite of the Law and of our unworthiness, testifies to it in our weakness and assures us of it. This witness is the experience within ourselves of the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, and the knowledge that our experience accords with the Word and the preaching of the Gospel. For thou art surely aware whether or no, when thou art in fear and distress, thou dost obtain comfort from the Gospel, and art able to overcome thy doubts and terror; to so overcome that thy heart is assured of God’s graciousness, and thou no longer fleest from him, but canst cheerfully call upon him in faith, expecting help. Where such a faith exists, consciousness of help must follow. So Saint Paul says, Romans 5:4-5: “*Steadfastness worketh approvedness; and approvedness, hope: and hope putteth not to shame.*”

²⁵ This is the true inward witness by which thou mayest perceive that the Holy Spirit is at work in thee. In addition to this, thou hast also external witnesses and signs: for instance, it is a witness of the Holy Spirit in thee that he gives thee special gifts, acute spiritual understanding, grace and success in thy calling; that thou hast pleasure and delight in God’s Word, confessing it before the world at the

peril of life and limb; that thou hatest and resistest ungodliness and sin. Those who have not the Holy Spirit are neither willing nor able to do these things. It is true, that even in the Christian, these things are accomplished in great weakness; but the Holy Spirit governs them in their weakness, and strengthens in them this witness, as Paul says again: "*The Spirit also helpeth our infirmity.*" Romans 8:26.

Heirs of God

"And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him."

²⁶ Here, then, thou hast the high boast, the honor and the glory of the Christian. Leave to the world its splendor, its pride and its honors, which mean nothing else—when it comes to the point—than that they are the children of the devil. But do thou consider the marvel of this, that a poor, miserable sinner should obtain such honor with God as to be called, not a slave nor a servant of God, but a son and an heir of God! Any man, yea the whole world, might well consider it privilege enough to be called one of God's lowest creatures, only so that they might have the honor of being God's property. For who would not wish to belong to such a Lord and Creator? But the apostle declares here that we who believe in Christ shall be not his servants, but his own sons and daughters, his heirs. Who can sufficiently magnify or utter God's grace? It is beyond the power of our expression or comprehension.

²⁷ Yet here our great human weakness discovers itself. If we fully and confidently believed this, then of what should we be afraid or who could do us harm? He who from the heart can say to God, Thou art my Father and I am thy child—he who can say this can surely bid defiance to all the devils in hell, and joyfully despise the threatenings and ragings of the whole world. For he possesses, in his Father, a Lord before whom all creatures must tremble and without whose will they can do nothing; and he possesses a heritage which no creature can harm, a dominion which none can reduce.

²⁸ But the apostle adds here the words, "*if so be that we suffer with him,*" to teach us that while we are on earth we must so live as to approve ourselves good, obedient children, who do not obey the flesh, but who, for the sake of this dominion, endure whatever befalls them or causes pain to the flesh. If we do this, then we may well comfort ourselves and with reason rejoice and glory in the fact the apostle declares, that "*as many as are led by the Spirit of God,*" and do not obey the promptings of the flesh, "*these are the sons of God.*"

²⁹ O how noble it is in a man not to obey his lusts, but to resist them with a strong faith, even though he suffer for it! To be the child of a mighty and renowned king or emperor means to possess nobility, honor and glory on earth. How much more glorious it would be, could a man truthfully boast that he is the son of one of the highest of the angels! Yet what would be all that compared with one who is named and chosen by God himself, and called his son, the heir of exalted divine majesty? Such sonship and heritage must assuredly imply great and unspeakable glory and riches, and power and honor, above all else that is in heaven or in earth. This very honor, even though we had nothing but the name and fame of it, ought to move us to become the enemies of this sinful life on earth and to strive against it with all our powers, notwithstanding we should have to surrender all for its sake and suffer all things possible for a human being to suffer. But the human heart cannot grasp the greatness of the honor and glory to which we shall be exalted with Christ. It is altogether above our comprehension or imagination. This Paul declares in what follows, in verse 18, where he says: "*I*

reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward,” as we have heard in the text for the fifth Sunday after Trinity.

History

The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise (1463-1525), requested that Martin Luther write a collection of sermons for each Sunday of the year for the benefit of ministers and the common people—those that have the Spirit—to exhort them in sound doctrine but also to convict the gainsayers who oppose the Word and true faith.

This sermon originates from what is commonly called Luther’s *Church Postil* collection. He wrote most of the sermons between 1521 and 1527, then supervised editorial assistance with Stephan Roth (1492-1546) until 1535 and Caspar Creuziger (1504-1548) until 1544. During that entire period over seventy-five editions of the collection were published. Many more editions were published after Luther’s death in 1546. This sermon can be found in the 12th volume of the Walch and St. Louis Walch editions and in the 9th volume of the Erlangen edition of Luther’s works. It was translated into English by Joseph Stump (1866-1935) and edited by John Nicholas Lenker (1858-1929) and published in 1909. Except for his catechisms, Luther’s postils were his most influential writings for believers. |

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