



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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**Volume 21 Issue 11**

**March 13, 2022**

## A New Priority

Romans 8:1-27

The tendency in parenting is to focus on conduct- outward conformity. Yet, Biblical parenting places the focus on character development which necessarily involves the shaping of a child's priorities. See, we are all predisposed toward worldliness, selfishness, and sin- and children are no exception...

Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

This is the condition of all men. As such, Solomon wrote when it comes to our children...

Proverbs 22:15a: "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child..."

Accordingly, God gives this warning to parents...

Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go [literally 'in his own way'], even when he is old he will not depart from it."

Truly, a child can receive the best care money can buy, be the heir of a solid and thoroughly Biblical education, have the best mentors, teachers, and friends... yet if their heart is not addressed, it will all be for naught!

That is why the parenting that addresses the affections of a child — their sense of priority, goals, and obligation to God as His child- is the parenting which ultimately produces life-long blessing!

The same holds true in our walks with God. After all, are we not children of God! As such, if we are going to grow in Christ it will NOT be as we focus on the outside of the cup- what we do, how we look, etc- it will be as we focus on the issue of the heart!

Truly, one of the challenges facing each one of us is acquiring Biblical expectations or priorities as God's people. We want to be a people who DON'T just conform to the external calling of God. RATHER we want to be a people who are "obedient from the heart" (Romans 6:17).

The good news is that Biblical priorities are NOT reserved only for the spiritual elite. RATHER, as they are a benefit that flows from the cross of Christ, they are available to us all!

That's the message of Romans 8. Paul has been discussing the benefits that flow from Christ.

- No Condemnation, Romans 8:1-4a.
- Fellowship With God, Romans 8:4b-8.
- A Transformed Life, Romans 8:9-11.

We are now looking at a fourth benefit, "A New Priority".

[Obligation to the Spirit of God, v. 12a.](#)

Romans 8:12a, "So then, brethren..."

The nuance is, “based on what I just said”! Paul begins with a reference to what we saw last week in vv. 9-11, namely that in Christ we receive the benefit of a transformed life. Based on this, it naturally follows that the person who engages in this transformed life will also live according to a new set of priorities- identified here with the phrase.

Romans 8:12b, “So then, brethren, we are under obligation...”

ὀφειλέτης (*opheiletēs*); literally we are indebted. The word refers to one who owes something to another and was used to refer to an obligation that needed to be discharged.

In the Bible debt, generically speaking, is NOT sin, YET it is NOT advisable. Accordingly, if a debt is incurred, the priority was the paying of the debt. And so, we read this:

Romans 13:8a, “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another...”

The word for “owe” is a present tense which implies a lifestyle of debt. We could translate it as, “Don’t keep owing...” In other words, as a child we don’t want to be in debt such that the paying of the debt is of utmost importance! And so, in our text for Paul to say that “we are under obligation” is to describe a condition of debt which all Christians, as a top priority, are to endeavor to discharge! And what specifically is that debt? In answering this, Paul begins first by stating what we are NOT indebted to the flesh.

Romans 8:12c, “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh...”

In other words, our priority as a child of God no longer is to this fallen world system, our sin nature, or that which lies outside of the dominion of God. That is what it used to be!

As non-Christians we were enslaved to Satan and so enslaved to self. In fact, it is this slavery which eventually “outs” the false believer. Peter speaking of the false Christian wrote this:

2 Peter 2:12-15, “But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; forsaking the right way they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the *son* of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.”

If there is anything which characterizes non-Christians, it is their slavery to their fleshly wants and desires! Recall the description Paul gave in Ephesians speaking of the non-Christians.

Ephesians 2:3, “Among them we too all formerly lived in [or under control of] the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.”

Such is the “obligation” of the non-Christian. Their chief priority is satisfying their flesh. They can do nothing else!

Yet in Christ, this no longer is our “obligation” or priority! When a child of God enters into the kingdom of God, their “obligation” to the flesh ends — they are freed from the power of sin (Romans 6:12-14). And thus, the priority that sin formerly held in their lives is overturned. They are under a new obligation!

What is that obligation? Paul does NOT directly say here. In fact, as we read further in this text, you will notice that Paul never completes his thought here. Yet that is NOT to say that it isn’t abundantly clear the whole of this chapter contains a contrast between the “flesh” and the “Spirit of God.”

Romans 8:5, “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.”

Romans 8:6. “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”

Romans 8:9a, “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit...”

Romans 8:11, “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 [your flesh] through His Spirit who indwells you.”

Truly, much of what we already have seen thus far in this chapter is a contrast between the “flesh” and the “Spirit of God.”

That is why when we come to our text and note that

- (1) Paul once again is speaking by way of contrast BUT
- (2) Does NOT identify that which he is contrasting with “the flesh,” we are on safe grounds as exegetes to posit that the contrast must be determined by the context. And when we look at the context- as we just did- we note that it contains an ongoing contrast between “the flesh” and “the Spirit of God”! In

fact, Paul even hints at this in the next verse...

Romans 8:13, “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 [flesh], you will live.”

From this we conclude that the New Priority which rests upon the child of God is the paying of our debt to the Spirit of God! That means that the things of the Spirit now must be our focus- His will! His goals! His desires! His movings! His pleasure! His leadings!

Yet that is somewhat abstract — which raises the question: what will this look like in the life of the child of God? The answer is found in Paul’s next point, putting to death the deeds of the body.

Putting to Death the Deeds of the Body, vv. 12b-13.

Romans 8:12b, “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.”

This explains what it would look like if we were obligated to the flesh. If a person were so obligated, there would be a predictability to his living. He would live so as to serve his flesh, honor its desires, and so endeavor to fulfill them. In contrast, to be “under obligation to the Spirit” involves a life that is lived “according to the Spirit” such that our focus and objective is to do the things that the Spirit desires!

Now, what in this text is the Spirit’s desire? From the rest of Scripture, we would mention such things as convicting us of sin (Jn. 16:8), the use of our gifts (cf. 1 Corinthians 12), or serving the saints (Acts 4:29; 2 Timothy 1:7). So, there are many things we could suggest. Yet here Paul gave a specific example of what the Spirit’s desire is for us.

Romans 8:13a, “For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die...”

We are going to return to this statement in the next point so I’m not going to explain it here. Yet notice that this statement is written in contrast to the next:

Romans 8:13b, “...but if [by implication, ‘you are living according to’ or ‘driven by’ ...] the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live”

So, what is a tangible result of being Spirit-driven? Practical holiness: “Putting to death the deeds of the body”- literally “mortifying” the body. The word is in the present tense which denotes the idea of a moment-by-moment activity which ought therefore to characterize us and so continue throughout our lives! What practically does this look like? We see it in Paul’s own life.

1 Corinthians 9:26-27, "Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified."

Paul understood that a large part of the Christian life is warfare, warfare against the flesh/our fallen humanness- its inclination, desires, will, pleasures, gratification, etc.

Now don't miss what Paul is saying here. He is NOT saying that when his flesh sought to sin that he said, "No!" That's obvious. RATHER Paul is saying that any time and every time his flesh expressed a desire- not even a sinful desire- he endeavored to be in command and so oft-times said "No!" This is what he is getting at in...

Romans 13:14b, "...make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts."

This is huge. Buffeting one's body occurs NOT at the time of attack, BUT way before! Victory on Friday is determined by what we do the previous six days, what we give ourselves to and what we allow! John Owen, speaking of this calling, put it this way: "Always be killing sin, or it will be killing you."

This constitutes our new priority: Serving and so following the Spirit of God as He wages war against our flesh!

And yet, where does the resolve come from when it comes to this battle? The previous three benefits: The knowledge of no condemnation, the fellowship we have with God, the life transformed by grace! In fact, if we combined all three of these benefits into one thought, we would articulate it as did Paul in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15, "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves [in the service of the flesh], but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf."

Family of God, the three prior benefits are all housed under love — God's love for us and our love for God! Sew to this! For as this becomes our chief passion, we will make headway in the new priority of "battling against our flesh"! Dr. Chapell, commenting on this verse wrote this:

Why do sins tempt us? Because we love them. Consider this: if a sin did not attract you, then it would have absolutely no power in your life. Our sins control us by our love for them.

What can displace such controlling love for sin? The answer: a greater love.

When our love for Christ is the top priority in our lives, it drives out our love for sin and encourages our devotion to Him. Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers once described this process as the ‘expulsive power of new affection.’ He understood that our behaviors change as our affections change. We will most do as we most love.

We conquer sinful passions when our greatest desire is to please the One who died and was raised for us. This doesn’t mean that battling sin will never require intense spiritual warfare, but victory lies in intense affection for our Lord.”

So Christian, let us take seriously the Priority of serving the Spirit as He battles against the flesh. But let everything we do be the overflow of love for Christ rather than a love for discipline or duty!

With that, Paul closes this section with a word of encouragement. The pursuit of holiness (or for that matter any Priority of the Spirit) is NOT easy. So, how do we do it? Notice v. 13 again.

#### The Life of Christ Enjoyed

Romans 8:13, “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.”

There is an obvious contrast here. As a Christian, to live according to the priority of the flesh is to reap death as a Christian. BUT to live according to the priority of the Spirit is to reap life. What does this mean? By “death” and “life” Paul is NOT talking about heaven or hell, BUT spiritual degradation vs. spiritual growth. For example, speaking of a Christian woman now widowed, Paul warned:

1 Timothy 5:6. “But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives.”- it is possible for a child of God to live a life that is considered to be little more than death! To live for “wanton pleasure” is NOT to forfeit one’s salvation, BUT its well-being- as in its joy, peace, contentment, and the like!

And so, rather than enjoying the Fruit of the Spirit in our lives, if we give into our flesh and feed it, we will reap the consequences of sin in our lives — such things as “...sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these...” (Galatians 5:20b-21). Such is the “stench of death” that comes when we neglect our New Priority. Do you remember the Galatian churches? As they abandoned the New Priority of Living According to the Spirit, they reaped in their body life death

Galatians 5:15-16, “But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit [our New Priority], and

you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” (cf. also 1 Timothy 6:19 and the result of walking by the Spirit)

And that is what Paul is talking about here. V. 13 is NOT a commentary on our position in Christ (our salvation), BUT the benefits that flow from that position! Paul is talking about the degree to which we *EXPERIENCE* the life of the Spirit in our person in the here and now!

All that being said, to stop with this is potentially misleading. Accordingly, Paul added a very important statement in v. 13b.

Romans 8:13b, “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.”

From this we conclude that the blessings of the new life as children of God can only be enjoyed as “we live by the Spirit”.

What does that mean? THE passage in the New Testament to which we turn when it comes to detailing what it means to “live by the Spirit” is Ephesians 5.

Ephesians 5:17-18, “So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [This is one of six statements in the New Testament which explicitly states God’s will for His children. And what specifically is God’s will as referenced in this text? That we...] And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.”

The word for “filled” is a maritime word, which means it comes from sailing. It was used of the sail when the wind “filled it” and so drove the ship to its destination. Accordingly, the call is for us to be Spirit-driven. And what does that mean? The answer is found in a parallel passage written by Paul around the same time he wrote the book of Ephesians.

Colossians 3:16-17: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”

What is meant by having the word of Christ “richly dwell within you”? It speaks of being men and women who NOT only are in the word BUT the word of God is in them — driving them, compelling them, determining their wants, desires, goals, and objectives.

Now when this happens, what is the result? The believer will respond with “teaching... one another”, “singing”, and “gratefulness”- the very things which Paul says flow from being “Spirit-driven” in Ephesians.



Ephesians 5:128b-20, "...be filled with the Spirit, speaking [and so teaching] to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father."

From this we conclude that to be Spirit driven is one and the same as being Word driven — which only makes sense since the Spirit of God is the one responsible for the revelation of God's word! So, what is there to encourage us when it comes to the priority of serving the Spirit as He works through us to "put to death the deeds of the flesh"? The word of God!

I'd love to stop here, but our performance driven flesh will undoubtedly take what I just said and corrupt it. Let me explain, following the word of God will NOT grant us victory over the flesh. Paul could NOT have been clearer on this point.

Galatians 3:21b, "...if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law."

In other words, the law of God/the Word of God is wonderful, righteous, holy, and something that ought to be followed indeed (Romans 7:12)! Yet we must realize that no matter how committed we may be to law-keeping — and we should be — law-keeping cannot produce life!

The favorite tool of our flesh when it comes to fulfilling its wants and when it comes to sinning...

Romans 7:7-8, "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin [Paul is talking here about our flesh], taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead."

The favorite tool of our flesh is God's word! It loves it for it takes it and uses it to satisfy its fleshly desires!

You say, "*I'm confused! I thought being Word-driven and Spirit-driven were one and the same and therefore something we all should aspire to?*" And that is correct! But what is the chief end of God's word? It is NOT our compliance! God did NOT give us His word that we might be good pharisees! Why did God give us His word? That we might fellowship with Him. This is the Law of the King,

Deuteronomy 17:18-19a, "Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of

his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, THAT..."

The word of God is so important to us as children of God that the Lord wants us to be in it every day! Why? So that we might prove ourselves perfect? As we just saw... it will never happen. Then why call us to read the Bible and endeavor to follow it?

Deuteronomy 17:18-19b, "Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God..."

Do you understand why God calls His children to be in the word? It is so that by it we might fellowship with God, grow in our understanding of who He is, and so cultivate a life of communion in which His love controls us! From this flow all acts of and desires for obedience! Jack Miller put it this way:

"Fellowship is the priority in the Christian life- not doing things for God, but being with God." (Sermon preached on Luke. 11:3)

So let us endeavor to walk by the Spirit of God by which we dive into the word of God. But let our passion NOT be external conformity to the Law of God — law keeping for the sake of law keeping. RATHER, let our passion be knowing the Lord and so fellowshiping with Him, loving Him above all things, and so serving Him as He instructs us from His word. That is how we make good on the new priority that flows from the cross of Christ!