

Embodying Grace & Peace | How to Be the Church

“The Fight With Sin and Selfishness”

Romans 8.1-13

4.24.22

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 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, ⁴ 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. 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. ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷ 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, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 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 through His Spirit who dwells in you.

¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh -- 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.

If you're new to this church or just need a refresher, we normally divide the church-year into three parts. We've just come through “the season of the S-o-n” (between Christmas and Easter where we look at the Son of God in the *Four Gospels*. This year Matthew CHs 5-7) and NOW the months after Easter and into Pentecost (June 5), the Season of the Spirit.

We look at the Work of the Holy Spirit in the Church (the third division in the creeds) *and*, this year, *that brings us to Romans CH 8 and CH 12 in a series we're calling*, “Embodying Grace & Peace: How to Be the Church.”

Romans CH 8 is a favorite chapter for many Bible-readers. It addresses a key subject, very significant in our age and that is – security.

The word comes up a lot in our time and place – security system, security guard, internet security, Homeland Security, Social Security... And not ONLY is there a kind of “post 9-11” and “post-COVID” obsession with that word *in a world that's INsecure and vulnerable* to terrorism

and viruses and *various* dangers but ALSO, philosophically and psychologically, MODERN HUMANITY faces its own insecurity. Men and women and children are facing the existential dilemma...the desire for security.

I have two GRAMMAR-QUESTION points today in this dense passage and then one final answer:

1) Grammar Q1: Isn't that SPATIAL?!

2) Grammar Q2: Whodunit?

3) The Answer of Agency

After the Age of Enlightenment, at the start of the Modern Era after the American and French Revolutions and at the start of the Industrial Revolution, philosophers become very focused on the existential dilemma – we have freedom to choose BUT it's a terrifying responsibility.

Kierkegaard writes about "the sickness unto death" – a sense of despair in the heart of people. Ernest Becker, wrote a chilling book (won the Pulitzer prize mid '70s) called *The Denial of Death* – basically says the only way we can be psychologically healthy is to live in constant denial that we're all going to die. And if we can't achieve that denial we'll live in perpetual insecurity and emotional anxiety.

Maybe it's due to our affluence (maybe we're bored) but people even very young people are *insecure* about their identity ("Who am I and *how can I be true to who I am?*"). There's a quest for liberation, to be loved, valued, significant, approved, to know one's purpose...and all of this is a quest for certainty and for... security.

This passage gets at this question of security largely by the use of prepositions... this is the part of the sermon where you tune out... because WHAT IS A PREPOSITION? And the answer (that's a lot more exciting than you might think): prepositions are words that typically express a spatial, temporal, or other relationship, like in, on, by, to, since.

Thus my question: isn't that SPATIAL?

This passage is loaded with prepositions indicating spatial relationships. Starting in v 1 we find "those who are IN Christ..." (again in v. 2); in v. 3 "what the Law could not do weak as it was THROUGH the flesh", in v. 4 "who do not walk ACCORDING to the flesh but ACCORDING to the Spirit" and on to the end "the mind set ON the Spirit is life and peace"; "IN the flesh"; "IN the Spirit"; v. 10 "Christ is IN you"

So those are grammatically very significant – Isn't that SPATIAL?!

For the writers of the Bible, humans were made FOR significance (Ps 8.5)...made FOR glory (kabod=weight) and we can only realize that purpose if we live IN relationship WITH God and IN

that way, we were made to relate TO Him. We find our freedom, fulfillment and significance IN that space or realm.

Here's my old illustration originally stolen FROM Tim Keller (but now it's *MINE*): a Blue Whale is an amazing creature. People pay huge sums to see whales in their natural habitat or realm. When we see them there, we're stunned by their power and majesty and size and freedom. BUT we wouldn't be so impressed to see a full-grown Blue Whale in the Sahara Desert... or in a gymnasium or on I-95... It would be the end of freedom...because it's NOT the habitat or realm or space that's suited to the whale's nature.

We're made to respond to God as a subject responds to a king...a King who's also "our Father." BUT we're out of our element and unable to live in a state of love and freedom... IN FACT, *the realm into which we're born*, is the realm of the sinful nature; Paul calls it "IN the flesh".

And as long as we remain in this unnatural habitat, we cannot fulfill our purpose... (v.8) *"and those who are IN the flesh cannot please God."*

We're made to delight God... and to delight IN God...made to reflect His image and be like Him...trust Him and walk with Him as beloved children with a Perfect Father... But instead, like beached whales in the wrong realm, our obedience is grotesque and ugly...just like a Blue Whale moving its giant fluke and surging through the deep...but that same motion in the desert would just be horrific to watch.

IN the realm INTO which we're all born, our efforts to obey are self-serving and motivated by fear and pride and competition and a kind of negotiating attitude that says, "I'll do it – but what do I get in return?" (NT = "Elementary Principles"; SotM)

Here, Paul refers to this kind of obedience as living "under the Law". We know somehow that we were made for obedience but our obedience is all wrong and it's weird and unnatural and awkward and graceless. We learn, for instance, to carry out the technical requirements of God's commands and yet miss the whole intention of those very commands.

The wife says, "You never bring me flowers anymore" and the husband responds with flowers... AND an attitude as if to say "There! Are you happy now?!" The letter of the law is followed but the attitude of the heart is absent (again SotM).

And all the while we strive to obey... flapping our flukes like a whale on a sand dune... we are wondering, "Am I doing enough?" (Imagine IF that giant whale could talk and he stops his thrashing long enough to ask you, "Am I doing enough?... Am I? Should I... keep going...faster? More?" – What could you say? Nothing! He's in the wrong habitat and all his work is just weird.)

We wonder if we're being good enough...and we figure, *ONE way to KNOW* is to compare ourselves with other people. If I'm better than MOST people then I...guess...I'm...doing enough...obeying enough ...right?!

This is obedience...in the realm of the flesh... living under the Law... and it leaves us deeply insecure emotionally, psychologically, relationally and most of all spiritually. We feel absurd. We feel "out of our element" and there are times – moments of existential angst, when we just can't deny it and we feel it acutely – moments of deep, deep insecurity.

And that brings up GRAMMAR Q:2" – Whodunit? This question has to do with verbal moods - The Five Grammatical Moods Indicative Mood, Imperative Mood, Interrogative, Conditional, Subjunctive Mood.

In a few weeks we'll jump over CHs 9-11 and go to CH 12 that's full of IMPERATIVE MOOD verbs i.e. they tell you to do something: shut the door; catch the ball; love one another – these are all imperative mood verbs (shut, catch, love).

But here in today's passage there are no imperative mood verbs... mainly verbs in the INDICATIVE MOOD. A verb in the indicative expresses an action as a statement of fact. So when we ask, "Whodunit?" the answer is NOT "I dunnit...or I must do it... I'll try to do it... I'll do my best to do it... it's up to me..." but instead, v. 3, *"What the Law could NOT do, weak as it was through the flesh, GOD DID sending His own Son in the likeness of human flesh."*

In other words, this is pure, undiluted, "straight no chaser", grace from God to which we add nothing. Whodunit? – God done it!

Into this absurdity of weird human obedience – as odd as a Blue Whale in the Sahara Desert – God sends His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. God made US in His image and then God made Himself in OUR image to rescue us. Jesus Christ comes, looking like us in every way, but without a bent heart, without a sinful nature... born into the right realm.

For Him, obedience is NOT weird, but graceful and natural like a Blue Whale gliding through deep water. And this Man, Jesus Christ, obeys the way we were MEANT TO OBEY...but none of us ever did. He meets the requirement of God's commands on behalf of a new humanity – He obeyed IN MY PLACE!

And His obedience is freely credited to me as if I was the obey-er, as if I had obeyed in that natural, free, whole-hearted, graceful, beautiful way...instead of my awkward, corrupt, forced, fearful, heartless way THAT IS "in the flesh" and "under the law".

And now, given His verdict, I have no reason to be insecure or afraid. I can stop asking, "Am I doing enough? Am I better than my co-workers or my siblings or my classmates or pew-mates?"

I don't have to live in that angst and dread of a student awaiting a grade. The report card is IN! Jesus Christ's grade goes to me! The requirements of the Law have been met ON MY BEHALF! What I could not do, (v.3) "God did! Sending His own Son..."

NOW I have a new mindset...obeying, NOT out of a merely reward/punishment motive...I've been put into the right habitat – a whale back in the ocean (v.6). *"For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the [new realm of the] Spirit is life and peace" ... You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.*" (v.9) Obedience is becoming natural to me...like swimming to a whale.

I've been indwelt by the Spirit of God and my habitat is changed. I WAS in the realm of condemnation where the sinful nature was all I had...obedience was forced and self-self focused and ridiculous...but that changed. There is now NO condemnation! God transferred me to the realm where I can actually realize my purpose, *"the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death"* (v.2) Obedience can become like a whale cutting through the water.

I have a new destiny. As Jesus Christ was raised, I too will be raised, *"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."* (v.11) Life is not absurd and I don't have to live in denial.

After those questions – we find the ANSWER OF AGENCY. God is the Agent, the Doer and I am the receiver. As I walk into this new state of life and peace IN THE SPIRIT, I am depending on the Agent, God the Doer – the Father who planned it, the Son who carried it out and the Spirit who applies it to my daily life and experience. Three ways the Agent helps:

#1) Even when we've been transferred from one habitat/category/space to the Other – from being under law and in the flesh to being under grace and in the Spirit – we still face a tremendous battle.

To go back to my Blue Whale illustration – it's like we really got used to living on that sand dune and we still think that's how it ought to be. So our new way of obeying...is not always graceful and glorious.

C.S. Lewis really helped me with this. In fact I'll just read his quote from Mere Christianity: God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better humans of the old kind but to produce a new kind of human. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature. Of course, once it has got its wings, it will soar over fences which could never have been jumped and thus beat the natural horse at its own game. But there may be a period, while the wings are just beginning to grow, when it

cannot do so: and at that stage the lumps on the shoulders — no one could tell by looking at them that they are going to be wings — may even give it an awkward appearance. (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*; 1952; Harper Collins: 2001; pp. 215-216)

See, while we're in this life... and our wings are only lumps on the shoulders of the horse, we live with these two natures — part New Creation, part old.

In fact we still try to impress people (and we're utterly convinced that we stopped that years ago!) and we're often still deeply insecure because we're not believing that the no-condemnation-verdict really, depends on the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We regularly wonder if "no condemnation" and really, truly applies to me. Grace seems too good to be true.

As long as we live on this side, the flesh and Spirit will be at odds, everyday. And this may explain some of our awkwardness.

2) The passage ends (v.13) emphasizing THE AGENT of daily life for the Christian. Whereas you once lived as if YOU were the only agent, as if it all depended on YOU — NOW: *"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."*

We can't put our sin to death by reputation...by fear of getting caught... or fear of getting a disease... or by sheer willpower... or because, "I'm just better than that!" ... or by having demons cast out of us...or by rituals...OR by using our insecurities "if you don't shape up, God is going to strike you...people won't like you...you won't get married."

"If BY THE SPIRIT you put to death the deeds of sin you will live." I get the Spirit by coming with open, honest, no excuses TRUST before God and simply saying, "Father, I keep sinning and I know You hate sin (it destroys and ruins everything) but I look again to Him who loved me and gave Himself for me... I trust what Jesus did ...who lived for me, died and rose for me and who won the Spirit for me. The Spirit who will give life to my dead body as he also raised Jesus, my older Brother."

Believing the Gospel daily...EVERYDAY...is how we get the Spirit (Gal 3.1-5) *and His influence* and how we overcome our junk and actually change and how we walk according to the Spirit...everyday.

Last, why do we need each other in this whole process? Well, that's a big topic, which we plan to explore in coming weeks — the Spirit's work in the Body. But I will say: He does work in the Body (the church) and in real relationships here...but BEFORE the imperatives (which are good and they give opportunity to express our new freedom by love) but FIRST, the indicatives. If you are trusting Christ, you are a recipient of the Life-giving Spirit — you're NOT alone...it no longer depends on YOU but on the Agent of Holiness — the Spirit of Love (Gal 5.22-23).