

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, September 21, 2008

Last week, I spoke about “following the Holy Spirit” in our daily lives. We learned from Paul’s letter to the Galatians that sin lives within us, that is, in our flesh (our humanity) and exerts a powerful influence for negativity and destruction. Our only remedy must come from *outside* of ourselves — from God — but must not *remain* outside of ourselves. God has sent His Spirit to move in, take up residence within us, to convert our heart from a sin factory to a righteousness factory. That’s good news!

But, how does He do it? What is my role in this conversion? How can I cooperate?

To answer these questions, let’s turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter eight. This particular passage immediately follows Paul’s struggle to understand why he behaves as he does. Why, when he wants to avoid doing wrong, he tends to do it anyway. And why, when he wants to do the right thing, he tends to do wrong anyway. It is a lamentable condition, with which every honest person in this room is too familiar.

He concludes with a desperate cry: “Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?” (Romans 7:24)

The answer he found and offers to us is that our Lord Jesus Christ is also our Liberator. Then, he begins to unfold how that works...

No Condemnation

Romans 8:1 *So now there is **no condemnation** for those who belong to Christ Jesus (who do not follow their sinful nature, but follow the Spirit).*

The platform for life in the Spirit is found right here: “So now there is no condemnation.” “So” refers back to the victorious deliverance Jesus has accomplished for each of us through His sacrifice on the cross. Because of His triumph, we can have life in the Spirit.

“Now” reminds us that life in the Spirit is present tense. It is here and it is now. He works in each present moment to free us, guide us, empower us, and use us for the honor of the Son, Jesus Christ.

“No condemnation” means none. The devil may whisper condemnation, other people may hurl condemnation, your own conscience may condemn you, but God does not. And when God says, “Neither do I condemn you,” what does it matter what anyone else thinks or says? He reproves our sins, He corrects our errors, but He also forgives us and never condemns us.

The cross of Jesus Christ has suspended judgment for the human race, while God’s grace holds open the gate to eternal life. For “now,” there is no condemnation.

And all of this is true, if you belong to Jesus Christ. No other reason. You have not deserved it. You cannot earn it. But Jesus has earned it for you. He took the stroke of judgment that was due you (and me) and carried away our guilt and shame.

In Jesus' name, look at yourself in the mirror and say, "You are not condemned; you are forgiven." You may have to face consequences for your behaviors, but it is good to know that God has declared you righteous (uncondemned) and forgiven all your sins!

And there's more...!

Freed from the Power of Sin

Romans 8:2 And because you belong to him, **the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.** ³ The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared **an end to sin's control over us** by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

The freedom Christ has obtained for us extends beyond our guiltiness and feelings of shame; He has freed us from sin's power and control, too.

He has not extinguished sin's power (so as to render it powerless), but he has set us free from obligation to it (given us power over temptation and sin). Sin is no longer the controlling force in your life, if you belong to Jesus Christ.

Knowing right from wrong (the Law) could not achieve this for us, because of the weakness of our flesh. We could know the right thing to do, yet lack the power to actually do it. Many have been misled by the notion that *knowing* what is right is equivalent to *doing* what is right, but James argues this notion away (James 1:22).

In view of our struggle to do what God says is right and avoid what God says is wrong, and the times we have failed to follow God's lead, we must learn and practice this truth: we are not obligated (as slaves, who have no choice) to follow the path of sin. Sin does not control us! Once it did, but no longer, because of what Jesus has done for us. Tempt us sin will, pressure us sin may, but it does not control us, if we belong to Jesus.

And that's not all...!

Freed to Follow the Spirit

Romans 8:4 He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead **follow the Spirit.**

⁵ Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but **those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit.**

Freed from the control of sin, we may now follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. We *can* say "no" to our sinful nature and "yes" to the Spirit of God. And every time we do, His power becomes available to us.

Who controls you? Who dominates your thinking? For it is between your ears (in your mind) that control is exercised and embraced. This is where the most significant battles take place, and where the solid victories are won.

Let the Spirit Control (Your Mind)

Romans 8:6 So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But **letting the Spirit control your mind** leads to life and peace.⁷ For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will.⁸ That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

⁹ But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.)

How does the Spirit control our mind? Is Paul referencing a transcendental state of consciousness that results from intentional meditation, clearing our mind of all thoughts? Actually, it is *nothing* like that. To the contrary, Paul's emphasis is not what we empty our minds of, but what we *fill* our minds with.

How can we fill our minds with the things that please the Spirit of God? If we do this, there will be no room left for the thoughts and imaginations of sin.

Practical Steps

What do you think about?

Certainly, there are things you may engage or observe or do that throw open the doors of your mind to particular themes of thought. Avoiding some of these will reduce the likelihood of certain temptations. But, beyond that, we can do little to prevent random tempting thoughts and imaginations that pop into our heads. You cannot prevent birds from flying over your garden, but you can prevent them from stopping to eat or building their nests there.

Some thoughts or mental images are persistent. For these, you must take an assertive step: "cast them down." This method is described in 2 Corinthians 10:5. When these rebellious arguments originate with others, we may undo them by Biblical debate. But when they penetrate our own head — insidious and insistent as they are — we must take immediate and firm action, not to reason with them, but to cast them down (as worthless and unwanted). I will actually say aloud, "I cast down that thought in the name of Jesus Christ!" Such an authoritative declaration breaks the spell of attraction and short-circuits the thought's development.

What do you follow?

Another step in controlling your thoughts is to engage your freedom. You are not obligated to dwell on a thought or a particular line of thinking just because it popped into your head. You have been freed from the deadly power of sin. You are free to choose what line of thinking you will entertain. Your mind is your own house. Every visitor who rings the doorbell is *not* a welcome guest! You can put them outside and close the door.

Determine to follow Jesus Christ — in your thinking, as well as your behavior — by asking yourself questions: How did Jesus respond? What would Jesus do or say? Instead of, "What would I want or prefer?" ask, "What would honor Jesus?"

Follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit — and they may be gentle and easily ignored or pushed aside. The Holy Spirit leads, He doesn't drive. If you're feeling strong pressure (or panic) to make a decision or act, you'd best put it on hold until the pressure subsides and you can clearly hear the

voice of the Spirit. The suggestion that “There is no time!” is usually a lie. As a Christian, who has eternal life, time, which is under God’s control, is on your side. No excuse for procrastination here, but in doing the will of God, time is your friend, not your enemy.

Follow the Spirit, for where the Spirit leads, He also provides the grace (and every other provision) necessary for the task.

What do you focus on?

A third step in Biblical “thought control” is to intentionally engage good thoughts. “*Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.*” (Colossians 3:2)

- Think about the creative power of God. Take time to smell the roses and gaze at the sunset. Appreciate His handiwork. If He can operate so well on the grand scale, He can also manage your life situations.
- Think about the faithfulness of God over time. Think of the story of His faithfulness in Scripture. Think about your own experiences of His faithfulness, especially in the times when you deserved just the opposite. Consider how He turned what, at first, seemed bad into something good and beautiful.
- Think about the love of God demonstrated by Jesus. There is no greater depiction of God’s love for you than in the acts of Jesus Christ on your behalf. Consider them well and often.

Paul urges the Philippians to establish a Spirit-led perspective by focusing their thinking on specific themes:

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

I encourage you to write these eight themes on a large sheet of paper and under each one list the corresponding things from your own life. Then, make these your conscious focus for meditation from day to day. It will change your world!

What have you been thinking about most of the time? A simple test is to listen to what you say!

Luke 6:45 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

The theme of your speech reveals the primary (overflowing) content of your heart and mind. What have you been filling your mind with? What would you prefer your mind to be full of?

- Focus on Scripture.

Read the Bible regularly. Find or create a small group of people who want to do the same, so you can discuss what you’re reading. Instead of just shooting the breeze with Christian friends, make a point of asking each other about what you’ve been reading and what theme the Holy Spirit seems to be highlighting for you.

Commit verses to memory. The things you intentionally save (memorize) are stronger than those passing thoughts and provide a ready haven for your distracted mind. And a steady diet of the Word of God will increase your mental health, clarity, and wisdom.

Conclusion

Life in the Spirit is a life of freedom. Not unmitigated freedom to pursue every inclination and whim of the flesh, but freedom to pursue God, freedom to do the right thing even when you want to do the wrong thing, freedom to love even when you feel bitter or vindictive. The freedom that Jesus Christ gives is the freedom to live — truly live, fully live — accepting the bad with the good, and trusting God to turn *everything* to good for you in the end.