

Sermon Series: *The Person & Work of the Holy Spirit*

Father's Day

All Who Are Led By the Spirit of God Are Sons of God

Romans 8:12-17

12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

This past Monday evening while my son was at soccer practice I went running. As I was running, I was praying. There are three remaining aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit about which I feel led to preach. I was asking the Lord which one is for this week.

The first thing that came to mind was that this Sunday is Father's Day, which depending upon your relationship with your father, can be either a source of joy or pain. [This past Thursday (16 June) was the one year anniversary of my father's death.] I wondered if there was a way to make a connection with the work of the Holy Spirit and Father's Day. As I ran (along Lowell Road in Concord) I kept praying and asking the Lord for help.

One of the remaining aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit that I feel led to preach on is assurance of salvation. The verse that kept coming to mind was, "*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God,*" but I could not remember where that was found. So I stopped running and did a quick word search and I discovered that this verse was in Romans 8. I read the chapter and in my heart I sensed that this might very well be that passage that the Lord would have me preach on. As I continued to pray about this the Lord confirmed it in my heart.

This passage hits several themes that are important for us in understanding the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The theme of sonship, the leading of the Spirit, and the inner witness or testimony of the Spirit. I think the best way to get at these themes is by asking questions.

The Leading of the Holy Spirit

This is one of the key texts from which we understand that part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to lead. We learn from the gospels (eg. Mt 4:1; Lk 4:1-2) that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where He was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus also teaches us that the Holy Spirit will guide the disciples into truth (Jn 16:13). However, the contexts of these two passages are different from the present context.

The only other mention of the leading of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament¹ is **Galatians 5:18** which does have a very similar grammatical construction. In that verse, Paul writes, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” These three passages, along with Romans 8:14 comprise the whole teaching of the NT on the topic of the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Much is taught claimed about the leading of the Holy Spirit from only a few verses. It behooves to understand all that this means and how this affects our lives.²

Whom Does the Holy Spirit Lead?

The first question is “Whom does the Holy Spirit lead?” Verse 14 answers the question for us. The Holy Spirit leads only those who are **sons**.

Romans 8:14 (ESV)

For all who are led by the Spirit are sons of God.

This verse clearly indicates that only those who are **led by the Spirit of God** are **sons of God**. The word “sons” (Greek *huios*) means “a child mature enough to take on adult family privileges and responsibilities.”³ The word is intended to include both men and women for the main point is that **all** who are “led by the Spirit” enjoy a familial relationship with God the Father. Anyone who is led by the Spirit of God is a “son” of God. I memorized this verse in the King James Version.

Romans 8:14 (KJV)

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

This in effect gives us a definition of who the sons of God are. The sons of God are the ones who are being led by the Spirit of God. B.B. Warfield has written,

“Thus, the leading of the Spirit is presented as the very characteristic of the children of God. This is what differentiates them from all others. All who are led by the Spirit of God are thereby constituted the sons of God, and none can claim the high title of sons of God who are not led by the Spirit of God. The leading of the Spirit thus appears as the constitutive fact of sonship.”⁴

The Introduction of a New Theme

This verses introduces for the first time the in the letter to the Romans the idea of sonship—that Christians are the children of God of the Father. This idea has not shown up at all up to this point in Paul’s letter. However, it suddenly becomes the dominate theme all the way through verse 21. Paul refers to this idea—that believers are sons of God or children of God—in every verse in this paragraph before us this morning (i.e. Rom 8:12-17).

¹ Being “led” by the Spirit of God is mentioned in Is 63:14 where the Spirit is said to have led Israel by a strong arm out of Egypt and into the wilderness. See also Hosea 4:12 where Israel was “led astray by a spirit of whoredom.”

² We might also include Acts 16:6-10 where the Holy Spirit may be said to have led Paul and company were directed to preach the gospel in Macedonia though the word “led” is not used but the word “called” is.

³ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-), Ro 8:12–14.

⁴ B.B. Warfield, “The Leading of the Spirit.” This article first appeared in *The Power of God unto Salvation*, published by the Presbyterian Board of Publication in 1903. The author was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. He provides his own translations, usually following the RV. Reprinted from New Horizons, June 2001. Source http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH01/06c.html accessed 17 Jun 2011.

For some reason this is incredibly important to Paul and he labors to illustrate this and make this clear. Paul wants us to pay attention to this. He wants us to understand the deepest truths about the relationship of God the Father with all who are His children. There is something very significant here for us. (Father, please don't let us miss what Paul is saying here. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the truth You for us in these few verses.)

All People Are Not Sons of God

The reason this is significant is because all people are **not** sons of God in this sense because not all people are **led by the Spirit of God**. This terminology is sometimes employed in common parlance, but in the sense of this passage this is not true. The phrase "sons of God" here includes a very personal, legal, and familial relationship to God the Father.

We're All God's Children, Right?

I remember a conversation in college with a classmate who said, "We're all God's children, right?" At the time I agreed with her, but something did not sit well with me. So I went and grabbed my Bible and started reading. I came across a conversation Jesus had with some Jews who claimed God as their Father.

John 8:41b-44 (ESV)

"We have one Father—even God." 42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I came from God and I am here. I am not of my own accord, but He sent Me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear My word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."

Simply claiming God as your Father does not necessarily mean you are actually a member of His family. These people were claiming God to be their Father when actually their father was the devil. Some who claim God as their Father are actually sons of the devil. How do we tell the difference between the two? The difference is whom they obey. The sons of the devil obey the devil. Jesus says, "your will is to do your father's desires." This difference between the sons of God and the sons of the devil is revealed by whom they obey.

What my classmate meant was that we were all created by God. In that, she was correct. We are all created by God. However, being created by God does not automatically make you a son of God. The natural disposition of all humanity is not one of loving sonship. The natural disposition of all humanity is one of spiritual deadness because of sin that results in disobedience which places one under God's wrath.

Ephesians 2:1-3 (ESV)

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Humanity is not by nature members of God's family. We are by nature rebelliously disobedient to God. Notice how Paul describes the former life before receiving Jesus.

- dead in trespasses and sins
- following the course of this world

- following the prince of the power of the air—i.e. the devil, the evil spirit that is now at work in the...
- sons of disobedience
- living in (i.e. obeying) the passions of the flesh
- carrying out the desires of the body and the mind
- by nature children of wrath, just like the rest of mankind

Notice that both the sons of God and the sons of disobedience are being led. However, each group of people have entirely different leaders. In Romans 8 Paul described the life of the **sons of God** as one of being **led by the Spirit**. In Ephesians 2 the **sons of disobedience** are those who are led by the devil, who “follow the prince of the power of the air.” The “sons of disobedience” as those who are also being led, but not “by the Spirit.” Life apart from is God is one of being led by the devil, “following the course of this world,” “following the prince of the power of the air,” and obeying the sinful passions and the desires of the flesh (i.e. sinful nature).

The question we need to ask is, “Whose leading are you following?”

The key to understanding who the sons are is found in the word **led**. The word (Rom 8:14) is in the present tense so another way to translate this is “are being led” (NASB). This word does not refer to the leading that results in an understanding of God’s will and purpose in the everyday details of life. It is true that the Spirit of God leads in the every day details of life, but this is not the meaning of the word in this context.

The word translated led (ἄγονται [ἄγω] *agontai*) means “to so influence others as to cause them to follow a recommended course of action—‘to guide, to direct, to lead.’”⁵ According to James Strong it means “to lead by laying hold of, and this way to bring to the point of destination.”⁶ It refers to being ‘controlled by’ or ‘governed by’ the Spirit.⁷

A parallel verse is **Galatians 5:18** which says, “if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” To be “under the law” is to be governed by the authority of the law. Similarly, to be “led by the Spirit” is to be governed by the authority of the Spirit.

Where Does the Spirit Lead?

What will help us understand this is by asking the question, “Where does the Spirit lead? In what way is He leading?” In what “course of action” is He leading? Down what path does the Spirit take the **sons** whom He is leading? To what destination is He leading the sons of God?

Verse 14 begins with the word “for” which usually indicates causation or explanation. In this case it is explanation. This word tells us that Paul is now explaining what he has previously written. If we go back to verse 13 we see that it also begins with the word “for.” This verse is then an explanation of verse 12. Verse 12 begins with “so then” (ESV, NASB, ASV, YLT) or “therefore” (NIV, KJV). Paul has

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

⁶ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996).

⁷ Thomas Schreiner, *The Baker Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 6: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 422.

reached a conclusion in verse 12 which he then goes on to explain and support in verses 13,14, &15. Verse 12 is the foundation for the following three verses (13, 14, & 15). Verse 13 further explains verse 12. So what is the conclusion of verse 12? Lets read it.

Romans 8:12 (ESV)

So then, brothers (or brothers and sisters), we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

No Longer Indebted to the Flesh

Something amazing has happened. The indebtedness to the flesh (i.e. the sinful nature) has been removed. Or as the NASB puts it, “*We are no longer obligated to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.*” The authority and claim that the flesh once had has now been removed. The flesh no longer has any teeth to enforce its will. We are no longer living under the dominating influence of the flesh. We have been freed from the governing tyranny of the flesh and all of its sinful desires. You are no longer obligated to follow the sinful impulses of fleshly desires. Though temptation will still come with compelling attraction, there now exists the freedom not to give in! The dominating power of sin has been broken.

If you hear me say this and you thinking about that sin you repeatedly give in to and you’re thinking, “No way. That sin is too powerful and too strong for me.” If you’re thinking that, then you need to know that is a lie. Whatever sin you’re thinking of and however powerful it may be, the truth is that you are no longer indebted to that sin. You do not have to obey that desire. You are not obligated to give in to it.

What is the difference? What exactly has brought the power to overcome the sinful desires of the flesh? How is it that the indebtedness to the flesh has been removed?

Romans 8:13 (ESV)

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

The difference is the presence of the Holy Spirit. “... *if **by the Spirit** you put to death the deeds of the body, then you will live.*” The powerful attraction of the sinful deeds of the flesh have been overcome by an even greater power—**by the power of the Spirit**. The putting to death the deeds of the flesh is only possible by those who have been indwelt by the powerful presence of the personal Holy Spirit. It is by the power of the Spirit that *all*, every single one, sinful deeds can be put to death.

Summary: Where Does the Spirit Lead?

So we return to the question we asked a few minutes ago, “Where does the Spirit lead?” The answer is that the Spirit leads the **sons of God** to put to death the sinful deeds of the flesh. This is the path of the leading of the Spirit. The destination to which the Spirit is leading is to the place of holiness. This is what theologians would call sanctification—the process by which we, in cooperation with the inner working of the Holy Spirit, become ever increasingly more practically holy in every area of our lives. This is the way in which the Holy Spirit leads. He is the *Holy Spirit*, therefore He will lead the sons of God down the pathway of holiness.

He Leads Us To Look Like Him

In other words, the Holy Spirit leads the sons of God into greater and greater conformity with the character of God. God is holy. In fact, we may say that holiness defines the character of God more than any other characteristic. Holiness is the only characteristic of God that is thrice repeated. Again and again in Scripture we are told that God is “holy, holy, holy!” We are told in Scripture that God is love, but we are never told that God is “love, love, love,” or that He is “grace, grace, grace.” His mercies are new every morning, but we are never told that He is “mercy, mercy, mercy.” The Holy Spirit leads the sons of God to look more and more like God the father.

It is often true that children look like their parents. This pleases us doesn't it? Isn't it a source of joy when we can say that our children look like or act like us (in ways that are commendable)? For the longest time I did not think I looked like either of my parents.

There are also some ways in which it is good to be like our earthly parents. I wanted to be like my father. He was strong and I was not. I always hoped that I would grow up to be as strong as him. It does not look like that will ever happen.

Today is Father's Day. And this past Thursday was the one year anniversary of the death of my father. So in recognition of Father's Day and in honor of my father, let me tell you a little story.

Once I went with my father to a his union meeting. [He was a Pipefitter.] My father was known for his grip. He had the most powerful grip of anyone I have ever met and all of his coworkers respected him for this. At the union meeting he was introducing me to his friends and coworkers. One man was approaching us from a distance. As the man approached my father warned me under his breath that this man also had a powerful handshake and that I should be prepared to grasp his hand with all my strength. So I readied myself.

As my father introduced me, we shook hands. I grabbed that man's hand and squeezed with all my heart and soul. To my amazement, this man had **no** grip whatsoever. I could feel his knuckles pop together as I squeezed. He slightly grimaced and then smiled and said, “Well, Jabe he's just like you. He's got your handshake!” As he walked away, I realized what my father had done and we both had a great laugh.

The defining characteristic of my father was his physical strength. I most wanted to be like him in that way. I so longed to be like him in that way that for years I worked out two or three hours every other day. But I simply am not built like him. I will never be as physically strong as he was.

The defining characteristic of my heavenly Father is His holiness. Do I yearn for the holiness of my heavenly Father as much as I yearned for the strength of my earthly father? I was willing to put a lot of time and effort and many, many hours into being physically strong. How much time and effort am I willing to put forth in order to be holy like my heavenly father?

The major difference is of course is that my father was not able to put his spirit within me. He was not about to give me his ability or his heart. My heavenly Father is different. He *has* put His Spirit within me. I am not left to myself to work up holiness within me. It is His Holy Spirit within me who works the very holiness that He expects and commands.

The verb “led” in verse 14 is passive. This “is significant, in that it suggests that the Spirit is the primary agent in Christian obedience, that it is His work in believers that accounts for their obedience.”⁸ This does not mean that we are no longer to will to obey. Of course, we are still to obey.

Knowing that God’s Holy Spirit is at work within me does not absolve me from “putting to death the sinful deeds of the fleshly desires.” The Spirit’s power and work within *enables* it to actually happen. Andrew Murray put it this way, “The believer’s once-for-all death to the law and to sin does not free him from the necessity of mortifying sin in his members; it makes it *necessary* and *possible* for him to do so.”⁹

How Does the Spirit Lead?

How? How is it possible to obediently follow the Spirit’s leading us in putting to death sinful deeds? The answer lies in the way in which the Spirit leads. How does the Spirit lead?

Romans 8:15 (ESV)

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as son, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

We are able to obediently follow the inner, sin-killing, holy leading of the Holy Spirit because He does not work within slaves, but sons. The Holy Spirit does not come to you and say, “Slave, I demand that you clean up your life. Now get on with it! And if you fail, I will skin you alive!” That is not how the Holy Spirit works. He does not work through those kind of fear tactics. The Holy Spirit works within us in an entirely different way.

He Works In Sons, Not Slaves

His power is manifested in the lives of sons, not slaves. Paul says, “You have received the Spirit of adoption as a son.” Let’s mention a couple of observations.

Receiving the Holy Spirit At Conversion

First of all, Paul says the Holy Spirit is **received**. This clearly points to conversion. This points to the time when you believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit.

John 1:12-13 (ESV)

12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God **13** who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Receiving the right to become the children of God happens when you believe in the name of Jesus. When you trust in Jesus and look to Him for salvation, it is in that moment when you receive the gift of His Holy Spirit. All who look to Jesus in faith for salvation receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not received apart from faith in Jesus. Jesus earned the right for us the right to become children of God. Apart from the work of Jesus, no one has the right to become a child of God! Jesus is the doorway to a living relationship with God the Father.

⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 422.

⁹ Ibid. 420.

Sons Cry “Abba!” Not Slaves

Then, when Holy Spirit enters your life, He comes in as the Spirit of adoption. He comes in and makes you a son not a slave. How? Because He comes into our hearts and it is by Him that we are able to cry out, “Abba! Father!” It is through the entrance of the Holy Spirit into our lives that we are able to cry out to God the Father with the affection of a son and not the fear of a slave. The inner work of the Holy Spirit enables us to relate to God as *Father*, and not cruel task master. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we can go to God as *Father* and not as Domineering Master. Through the Holy Spirit we can approach God as *Father*, not as Uncaring Owner.

The term “abba” is an Aramaic term and Jesus used this term when praying to God in the garden of Gethsemane (Mk 14:36). The only other place it appears in Scripture is in **Galatians 4:6**, where Paul says, “*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”*”

Abba is an affectionate term used by children to address their fathers. Evidently the disciples heard Jesus praying in this way and they picked it up. Jesus may have even taught the disciples to pray in this way.

“The fact that this [word] made its way into the worshipping vocabulary of the Gentile churches is best explained by Jesus’ characteristic use of it.”¹⁰

It is noteworthy that Paul takes it for granted that this invocation was as familiar to the Roman Christians, who were not his converts, as it was to the Galatian Christians, who were.”¹¹

“This is but a little word, and yet notwithstanding it comprehendeth all things. The mouth speaketh not, but the affection of the hearth speaketh after this manner. Although I be oppressed with anguish and terror on every side, and seem to be forsaken and utterly cast away from thy presence, yet I am thy child, an thou art my Father for Christ’s sake; I am beloved because of the Beloved. Wherefore this little word, Abba, conceived effectually in the hearth, passeth all the eloquence of Demonsthenes, Cicero, and the most eloquent rhetoricians that ever were in the world.”¹²

God gives the Holy Spirit to all who believe in Jesus. When the Holy Spirit is received into our hearts, He enables us then to cry out to God as Father, Abba. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we are able to relate to God as Father. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we are able to pray to God in those hours of deepest temptation and have no fear that He will treat us like slaves but absolute confidence that He will treat us as sons—as His children.

How can we know this? How can we so confidently come to this wonderful God who created the entire universe? Because of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:16 (ESV)

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God...

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 157.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 158.

The Holy Spirit sees to it that deep within the core of our being we are able to know that we know that we are the children of God. He is able to communicate, in a way that is beyond description, to our spirits that it is an unshakable fact that we belong to God and that nothing will ever change that.

This knowledge is the foundation for the fight against sin. We will never be successful in fighting temptation and sin until we know that we are His children and that nothing in all of heaven and earth will be able to separate us from Him (Rom 8:35-39).

The Father's command "to put to death the sinful deeds of the flesh" is not a command to keep you from enjoying something fun. That command is an invitation to experience a greater joy. The Father who says, "Follow Me," will lead you into a place of inner rest of soul that no sin will ever be able to deliver. This is the place to which the Holy Spirit is leading.

The invitation today is: follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and by His power (not your own) you are able to put to death the sinful deeds which wage war against your soul, but the reward that is promised is beyond imagination.

Romans 8:17 (ESV)

17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Being the heir of an millionaire's estate is pleasant thought. However, that thought is nothing compared to the inheritance promised in this verse.

"...if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ

Heirs of God" means that the inheritance we receive is God Himself! "Heirs of an estate" receive the estate. "Heirs of God" receive God Himself. God gives Himself to His children who are fellow heirs with Christ. That means we will receive all that Christ received.

The road to the reception of this wonderful inheritance is one of suffering. The sinful nature will not die easily. Yet if we would follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and joyfully surrender and submit to Him, then He will give us the power to put to death the sinful deeds of the flesh. He will enable you to fight this fight in faith and not in fear. And the end, you will look like your heavenly Father.

Do you know you are a child of the Father this morning?

Look to Jesus who made it possible to become children of God. Receive Jesus. Rest in Jesus.