

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 24, 2016

WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST

Romans 8:12-17

In case you missed it or may have forgotten, we talked last Sunday about how we need Jesus not to brainwash us, but to wash our brains and hearts, how we need to have our minds and hearts re-set on the Holy Spirit and not on the spirit of this world or the desires of our sinful nature.

We saw the contrast Paul makes between two kinds of people (those whose minds are set on the “flesh,” which is Paul’s way of speaking about our selfish, sinful nature that is opposed to God and His will for our lives, and those whose minds are set on the Holy Spirit). Along with these two kinds of people, we noted the two mindsets that characterize them, two different roads you can take in life, two kinds of fruit your life can produce, two foundations on which you can build your life, and two outcomes. One outcome, says Paul, is life and peace (Romans 8:6). This is the outcome of a life lived in harmony with the Holy Spirit. The other outcome – the outcome of a life centered on self and the desires of the fleshly nature – is death. Not physical death, which is the destiny of us all, but the spiritual death of separation from God.

I tried to press home the point that if you are truly a believer in Jesus Christ, if you belong to Him by faith, you have the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not merely *beside* you or somewhere *around* you. He is not just *with* you. The Holy Spirit is *in* you. The Holy Spirit *resides* in you. The Holy Spirit is *alive* in you. Because the Holy Spirit is alive in you, you must no longer live to satisfy the desires of your sinful nature. You must live like a believer. How? Through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who is able and more than able to enable you to do it. If you are a believer in Jesus, if you profess that He is the Savior and Lord of your life, you have a high and holy calling to live like a believer. You can’t do it by yourself. It is not the result of hard work in your own strength. It is the Holy Spirit at work in you who makes it possible. It is the Holy Spirit who makes it happen.

That is a brief review of what we saw last Sunday in Romans 8:5-11.

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OUR OBLIGATION

Moving on from there, we see in verse 12 and 13 that Paul speaks of an obligation incumbent on us all as followers of the Lord Jesus.

Life is full of obligations. If you have a mortgage on your home, you are obligated to make a payment on it every month. If you rent your home, you have a similar obligation to pay your rent in a timely fashion each month. If you are employed, you have an obligation to your employer to do your job and to do it well. We all have obligations to our families that require

us to sacrifice our own desires from time to time. As Americans, we are obligated to pay taxes to the government. In addition, we have a civic duty or obligation to contribute to the well-being of our community and nation by our adherence to the rule of law and by our compassionate and loving concern for other members of our community, especially those who are most vulnerable. In Romans 13:8, Paul speaks of our continuing debt or obligation to love one another. Being a church member involves obligations to one another for the good of the body of Christ as well as certain privileges and blessings.

In verse 12, Paul has a particular spiritual obligation in mind. Lest there be any confusion, he makes it clear what this obligation is not: It is “not to the sinful nature, to live according to it.” Regardless of how the enemy of our souls may attempt to deceive you or lead you astray, you are never under any obligation to satisfy, to please or appease the desires and inclinations of your sinful nature. In fact, you are obligated to *not* do so. Our obligation is not to our fleshly nature and desires, but to the Holy Spirit and His holy desires for our lives. As a result of the gospel message that has taken root in our hearts, and because of the Holy Spirit who has come to take up residence in our lives, our obligation before God is to live like believers. Our obligation is to live a righteous life through the grace and guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. Our obligation is to God – to live a life that reflects our faith and hope in Him, our love for Him, our gratitude to Him, and our willing surrender to Him and His Lordship in our lives. A life lived in His strength and for His glory.

Do you see that?

Paul goes on to say in verse 13 that this is a matter of life and death. “If you live according to the sinful nature,” he says, “you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” Once again, he is talking primarily about spiritual death, which is the result of being cut off from God and His blessings.

A matter of life and death. It is reminiscent of what Moses said in Deuteronomy 30 about the choice that lay before the people of Israel: “life and prosperity” on the one hand, or “death and destruction” on the other (Deut. 30:15). The same choice is echoed in Jeremiah 21:8, where the Lord instructs Jeremiah to say to the leaders and people of Judah: “This is what the Lord says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.” The choices you make in life have consequences.

As John Stott has written: “There is a kind of life that leads to death, and a kind of death that leads to life” (*The Message of Romans*, 228). The kind of death that leads to life involves putting to death anything and everything that contradicts or threatens the well-being of our life in the Spirit – our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and Sovereign. It involves crucifying our fallen, fleshly nature with all its selfish, sinful desires. It involves denying ourselves in order to follow Jesus.

Paul spells out what he means in greater detail in Colossians 3, where he says: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly (sinful) nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But

now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:5-10).

OUR TRUE IDENTITY

The old way of life – characterized by gratifying the desires of the sinful nature – is incompatible with our new identity and status as the beloved children of God (Romans 8:14-17). So, we are to “put to death” everything that belongs to our sinful nature and, as Paul says in Colossians 3:1-2, we are to set our hearts and minds on the things of God. Why? Because of all that God has done for us in Christ. Why? Because we belong not to ourselves but to Him. Why? Because of our new identity and status as God’s children.

Listen again to what Paul says, beginning in verse 14: “(T)hose who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship (or adoption). And by Him we cry, ‘*Abba*, Father.’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory” (Romans 8:14-17).

The first thing to notice here is that the word *Abba* does not refer to the famous Swedish group whose music was adapted for the Broadway hit musical *Mamma Mia!* (You knew that.) *Abba* is the Aramaic word for “Father.” It is a term of endearment and affection children use in addressing their father. It is really more like “Daddy” or “Papa.” Because of the love God has shown us in the saving work of His Son, because of His free and sovereign and loving choice to adopt us as His sons and daughters, we now have the privilege of calling Him “*Abba*, Father.”

You see, not everyone is a child of God. In the sense that we are all creatures of God – created by Him in His own image – we are all, as Paul says in Acts 17, God’s “offspring.” But not every person is a member of God’s family. Only those who trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ are God’s children. God’s *adopted* children. Chosen by God – predestined in love, as Paul says in Ephesians 1:4-6, “to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will, to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves.”

Some people are put off by Paul’s choice of language in both Romans 8 and Ephesians 1. It strikes us as being sexist and politically incorrect. It is not gender inclusive. Instead of “sons of God,” shouldn’t we speak of “sons and daughters of God”? Yes, perhaps, except to do so misses the point. Timothy Keller explains it through the eyes of a woman who was raised in a non-Western family from a very traditional culture. There was only one son in her family, and it was understood in her culture that he would receive most of the family’s wealth and honor. The son had a special status. It is just the way it was.

As this woman was studying a passage on adoption in one of Paul's letters, she came to see that the apostle is making a revolutionary claim. Paul lived in a traditional culture just as she did. He lived in a culture where daughters were second-class citizens. When, out of his own traditional culture, Paul said that we are all sons of God in Christ, he was saying that there are no second-class citizens in God's family.

Do you hear that? *There are no second-class citizens in God's family.* When you give your life to Christ and become a Christian, you receive all the benefits a son enjoys in a traditional culture. As Keller observes, it demonstrates "all the beauty of God's subversive and revolutionary promise that raises us to the highest honor by adopting us as His sons" (From Tim Keller, "The Christian's Happiness," <http://www.preachingtoday.com>. Accessed 7.21.16)

Male or female, man or woman, boy or girl, young or old, black or white or brown or yellow or any other color under the sun, our identity and status are exactly the same as adopted children of our Heavenly Father. As Paul uses it, "sons" is really a generic term that includes both sexes. It is interchangeable with "children" – except for the special significance of the rights of honor and inheritance attached to the word "son" or "sons." As Paul says in Galatians 3:26-28: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Male or female, if you know Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life, you have been adopted into God's family. And you will belong to His family forever.

Using this language of sonship, Ray Stedman said: "If you are a Christian, you are a son of the living God, adopted and born into His family. Because you are His son (child), God loves you, God protects you, God provides for you, God plans for you, God hears you, God claims you and openly acknowledges you. He chastens and corrects you, and He honors you. All of this is true because you are His son" (Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory, Vol. 1*, 273). All of this is true because you and I are God's beloved children, and He will never, ever stop loving us.

So, what have we to fear from God? Absolutely nothing. We don't need to fear anything from God precisely because we are God's children, the objects of His love. And the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a confirmation of His love.

Adoption can be a beautiful, blessed thing. Let me tell you one adoption story. In 1955, the year in which I was born, an unmarried young woman named Joanne Simpson gave birth to a baby boy in San Francisco. Joanne was a graduate student at the time and had concluded that her life was just too hectic to raise a child. We don't know all that went through her mind, but we do know that given a similar set of circumstances, many pregnant women today choose a different alternative, choosing either to have an abortion or to give birth and do their best to raise the child. Joanne, praise God, chose life for her child, and she also chose to put him up for adoption in order to provide a loving home for him.

The baby, named Stephen, was adopted and raised by a machinist named Paul and an accountant named Clara. No one (except God) knew what Stephen would become. He dropped out of college after just one semester and eventually went to work for the video game giant Atari before starting a new computer venture with two friends, a little company they named Apple.

Steve Jobs' birth mother, Joanne Simpson, chose to put him up for adoption, which is sometimes the most loving thing a parent can do. Steve Jobs' adoptive parents, Paul and Clara Jobs, chose him and loved him as their own. Which he was.

Not every adoption story has a happy ending. But the story of God's love for us – the story of God's decision to adopt sin-stained orphans clothed in the filthy, stinky rags of unrighteousness and to shower us with the blessings of His unconditional, unfailing love along with the promise of a heavenly inheritance as His beloved sons and daughters – is really the greatest story ever told.

No matter what the world or anybody thinks of you, if you know Jesus Christ as the Savior and Lord of your life, if you have peace with God through the Holy Spirit who dwells in you, then you are a chosen, adopted, and dearly loved child of God. It is who you are in Christ.

Your true identity is not defined by your sexuality. A few weeks ago I shared with you the story of Christopher Yuan and how God brought him “out of a far country” of homosexuality, drugs, and unbelief. By God's grace he came to understand that his identity was not “gay” or “homosexual,” or even “heterosexual,” for that matter. Rather, he discovered that his identity as a child of God had to be found in Jesus Christ alone (Christopher Yuan, *Out of a Far Country*, 187).

Your identity is not defined by your sexual orientation or your politics, the color of your skin, your native language, your resume, your skill-set, your income, or any other circumstance in your life. Your identity is defined by your relationship with God. Your identity is defined by who you are in relation to Jesus Christ our Lord. Your identity is defined by who you are in Christ.

The good news of the gospel is that if you belong to God, then the Holy Spirit lives in you. The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we really are God's chosen, adopted, beloved children (8:16). And so it will always be. And it is the Spirit who enables us to live like believers, to live like the sons and daughters of God that we are.

Lord, let it be so in us. And help us never to forget who we are in Christ. Amen.