

Life in the Spirit
A Sermon for July 16, 2017
Romans 8:1-11
Lansdowne UMC

How do you form a child who will live a good, moral life? I imagine that the vast majority of parents at some point ask themselves this question. What can you do? Well, there is obviously a place for rules. Black and white look a lot more gray up close than they do from a safe distance. In the heat of the moment, rules can be an essential tool to help a child to know and to do what is right.

But we ultimately all know that rules fall short. At best they're guardrails that help us to stay on track. At worst, they taunt us by making us question the wisdom of the rules and the goodness of the rule-giver. I made what I hope was a minor parenting error the other day. When one of my rules was questioned, rather than go through a detailed explanation of the wisdom of the rule, I just said, "Hey, I don't *make* the rules" to which my son declares, "I'm the rule-maker!"

I'm reminded of the last verse in the book of Judges. "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." When there is no obvious leader, everyone considers themselves to be their own master.

Rules can only go so far. As a parent what I most desire is to win the heart of my children. I want them to love me freely and I want them to love doing things that make me happy.

Do you know the lengths that God will go to to win your heart? That's what I'd like for us to think about today as we continue our series on the book of Romans, arriving in Romans chapter 8. It's like the apostle Paul, who wrote the book, has been leading us on a journey to the top of high mountain. Now that we've finally arrived at the summit, we can survey the land around us, seeing how far we've come. It'll take Paul a whole chapter to describe the picture that he sees, and it'll take us three weeks to unpack it. But having come this far, we wouldn't want to turn back without making sure we've had a good look around.

Looking back at the territory we've covered, we see Romans 7, where we journeyed just last week. We see the doom and gloom back in verse 14 of a person "of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin" and (rightly) convinced that he was under God's condemnation. This is a person who has not been justified, or to use a piece of language that Paul doesn't use, this is a person who hasn't been converted. They have the power of Sin dwelling inside of them so that whenever they try to do good, they find evil right there corrupting their motives, bending them away from anything good and pure and twisting them toward selfish gain.

This is the person that thinks in their minds that they want to please God, but God doesn't really have their hearts. Their hearts are divided between doing what pleases God and doing what pleases themselves.

What a stark contrast it is between the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8. We leap into the life of someone who has been justified-- someone who has been converted. To be justified is to not be condemned. And that's why Paul says "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Then he's got this

dense phrase to explain in another way why that is: For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.

The law of sin and death is the law of Moses, the Torah. It's the rules that the God the Father gave to his children, the people of Israel. It's not that God's commandments were bad-- Paul says back in Romans 7 that the Law is holy, just, and good. But God's commandments get twisted by Sin. Their purpose was to bring life. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is telling the story of how God gave Israel the Law. The people are on the cusp of entering the promised land, and so he warns them about the importance of keeping the Law. He sums up his plea that they keep the law by saying "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him." In Moses' view, obedience to God's commandments was life. But disobedience meant death. It's not a threat so much as it is a matter-of-fact statement of what it means to live in the promised land. It's sort of like me saying to my boy, "if you want to be in the kitchen, you can't touch the hot stove."

But here's the problem. Sin came in and corrupted the law so all it did was heighten awareness of sin and condemn people. Somehow saying "don't touch the stove" is intriguing to some children. Here's another example. Last night Katie and I were walking by the Lakefront in Columbia. It was a beautiful night. There was a slight breeze. The water was calm. There was a mommy and daddy duck with their adorable little babies. We walk along and we see a sign: "Don't feed the waterfowl."

Now, this hadn't even entered into my mind. But you know what I now wanted to do? I wanted to feed those ducks!

That's what Sin does to God's law. The boundaries simply become temptations. They're supposed to draw us towards holiness and faithfulness, but instead it urges us to push the boundaries. From there, "Sin takes us farther than we wanted to go, keeps us longer than we wanted to stay, and costs us more than we wanted to pay."

But Paul says, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free" from that law. This is one way of looking at the wonderful way that God is winning our hearts.

To explain this, let's flash back to the day of Pentecost-- the day when the Father delivers on the promise of Jesus to send another advocate who would be with the disciples forever. God finally makes true the words of John the Baptist-- "I baptize you with water, but the one who comes after me [that's Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

When we talk about Pentecost, it's almost always a shorthand way of talking about Acts chapter 2, the day that the Holy Spirit first fell on the church. But actually that wasn't the first Pentecost.

Pentecost was the greek name given to the Jewish festival of weeks-- it was a festival where everyone would bring the first fruits of the wheat harvest as an offering to God. It's something you can read about in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. But after the exile in Babylon, the feast of weeks took on an additional meaning: it was the celebration of God's giving the law to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. The Israelites had

escaped slavery in Egypt by crossing over the Red Sea on dry ground. With their new-found freedom, God gives them an Instruction that will allow them to live in the land that God is giving to them. And so the day of Pentecost becomes the day that Israel would celebrate this important occasion in their history.

So check this out: of all the days that God could have chosen to send the Spirit, God chooses the day commemorating the law of Moses. Why? Because God is again giving the law to his people. It's not the written law, which brings death, it's the law of the Spirit of life.

Through Jesus, God brings about the new covenant announced through Jeremiah 31:33, which says "this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." God is winning our hearts by putting a knowledge and desire of the things that please God straight into our hearts.

God is also fulfilling the promises made through Ezekiel in chapter 36: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, [Sounds a lot like baptism] and from all your idols I will cleanse you. [Sounds like the power of Sin that Paul has been talking about] 26 A ***new heart*** I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you..."

We've got these hearts that have been hardened against God. And so melts our hearts, and gives us new hearts that are eager to serve God. That's the law of the Spirit-- the heart-winning good news that in Christ, we are new creation.

Romans 8:3 tells us how far God will go to win your heart. God himself has done what the Torah could not do. God taken away the condemnation by sending his own Son to be a sin offering (that's the best translation). On the cross Jesus took all my sin, all your sin-- every time we've deliberately crossed the line, and every time we've accidentally crossed the line-- and he bore the condemnation of our sin on the cross. Paul says God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus. And because God has done this, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. They have already died together with Christ.

Paul says that God condemned sin, verse 4, *so that* the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. In other words, God dealt with our disobedience himself not just so that we could be forgiven, but that we will become like Jesus by the power of God's indwelling spirit.

And so Paul again sets up these two spheres of existence. You can either be in the flesh, or in the Spirit, Paul says. When Paul says "flesh," he's not talking about the meat that covers our bones. He's talking about the person under the power of Sin-- fallen, unredeemed, selfish human nature. And when Paul talks about the Spirit, he's talking about the Holy Spirit-- the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, who comes to dwell in the hearts of believers. And so he says

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not

submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Paul is pointing out that there are essentially two types of people-- people who have had their hearts won by God and people who haven't. He's pointing out that we think about the things that we love. If we love sin, we think about sin all the time-- but that brings death. But if we love God, we think about God and God's purposes all the time-- and that's life and peace.

We can try to love God, but Paul says that it's deeper than that. "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God," he says. They haven't let God win their hearts. Paul is saying that we have to have God's Spirit indwelling us, or to use the language of John, we have to be born of the Spirit.

God looks at the human heart and sees that it's all corrupted and tainted. It's like an apartment that hasn't been cleaned in years. It stinks. There's trash and dirty clothes everywhere. The bathrooms are nasty. The kitchen is piles upon piles of crusty old dirty dishes.

But this is this is how much God loves you. If you want, you can invite Jesus into your heart, and God's own Spirit will come to live in the mess that is you and me. The initial rush of wind upon the Spirit's entry gets rid of the stench of sin. It blows all the trash into the dumpster outside the window. And then the Spirit just starts cleaning. "Hey you know it's still pretty nasty over here in the kitchen," the Spirit says. Next thing you know the Spirit is getting you to scrub all those dishes and take care of

that dirty laundry. And whenever you make progress, the Spirit is so pleased with you.

Do you know how much God wants to come clean you up? He wants your heart so much. Jesus is in hot pursuit of all of you. Will you have him?

Probably some of you here have invited him in, but you're keeping him in the well-kept living room of your heart. But God wants your whole heart. If there is some place in your heart where you say, "anywhere but there, Jesus!" then that's exactly the place where you need to let Jesus first. If you're realizing that there is an area of your life that you don't want Jesus to know about, that realization itself is the Holy Spirit's way of telling you that he knows about it already. He wants in anyway. He wants to come in and heal you.

The Spirit doesn't want to just visit you from time to time. The Spirit wants to *indwell* you. Until we let Jesus past the front door, and past the well-kept living room, we can't really say that Jesus lives in our hearts. We can't really say that we are indwelt by the Spirit. Do you want God's Spirit to live in you? Will you let God win your heart?