

Called to Life in the Spirit

Spring Quarter: Discipleship and Mission

Unit 3: Call to Life in Christ

Sunday school lesson for the week of May 12, 2019

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Lesson Scripture: Romans 8:1-14

Key Verse: Romans 8:1

Lesson Aim

1. To grasp what it means to live in the Spirit.

In recent years, researchers have detected an increase in spiritual interest among people. At the same time, they have detected no increases in church affiliation or attendance. Some identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). These people usually have personal beliefs and practices that could be understood as spiritual, but have no desire to participate with what they see as “institutional religion.”

As we understand, some SBNR folks desire their own religious world apart from a church. However, this desire is not necessarily Christian in orientation. It often borrows spiritual practices from Eastern religions, Native American traditional religions, or ancient pagan sources. The good news is that people are spiritually hungry while the bad news is that the church is not being seen as a source for quenching that thirst.

Thus, the insights of the apostle Paul are important and decisive in overturning this outlook in today’s lesson.

In Romans 6-8, Paul discusses what it means to live in the Spirit, to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

In Romans 6, Paul discusses new life in Christ as it relates to the problem of sin. Verse 23 reads, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul warned that while we are no longer slaves to sin because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, we are not free to sin at will.

In Romans 7, Paul expanded his discussion of the Law. Paul made numerous statements that suggest we are no longer under the Law (6:14; 7:5-6). However, Paul was crystal clear that we should not ignore the Law (6:15). As far as Paul was concerned, the Law has two primary functions: It reveals God’s general will for our lives, teaching us what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. It also convicts us of sin, reveals to us our need for God’s forgiveness, and makes us realize our need to change our lives.

And in Romans 8 (our text for today) Paul directly addresses the issue of living in the Spirit, that is living daily under the guidance of the indwelling presence of God. This concept is crucial for Paul. Our existence is different after we put our lives in the hands of Jesus Christ. We are no longer slaves to sin but rather slaves to God, and it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can overcome our sinful nature.

Law of the Spirit (Romans 8:1-4)

As Paul stated it, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” No condemnation! Not partial condemnation! Not appropriate condemnation! No condemnation! There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set us free from the law of sin and death. Undoubtedly, this is one of God’s greatest promises to Christian believers. Because we are justified by faith in conjunction with our union with Christ, we escape the sentence of spiritual death that our sins have justly earned. Transferred into this new realm of life, we no longer fear that our sins will ever condemn us.

Paul really has no argument with the integrity of the Jewish law itself. He has said that it is good and holy (Romans 7:12). However, the weak link is our keeping of “the law.” Our fleshly nature presents a problem not because it is inherently evil, but because it is weak. Our weakness negates any sort of saving power the lesson might represent (compare 7:18-19).

God’s remedy for this weakness was to send his own Son. Our situation was dire and hopeless. The law can only condemn. No human being can overcome sin. So God provided one “who condemned sin in the flesh,” one who could live a victorious, sinless life.

This is the act of the incarnation, the Son of God assuming human form (“in the likeness of sinful humankind”).

Jesus had full awareness that his mission included his death as a sacrifice for sin, paying the price for our salvation (Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6). This price could not be paid unless Jesus died as a human (Hebrews 2:14,17).

The righteous requirements of the law mentioned in verse 4 are not discarded but “fully met” through Christ. This fulfillment finds its expression “in us” because we are the beneficiaries of being justified (counted as righteous). The law maintains its righteousness without compromise while losing its power to condemn. The difference between those who live “according to the Spirit” and those who do not comes next.

Life in the Spirit against Death in the Flesh (Romans 8:5-8)

At the end of verse 4, Paul presents a contrast that governs these next four verses: “the sinful nature” versus the Spirit. Sinful nature (flesh) refers here to the sinful tendencies of human beings.

In verse 5-8, Paul notes a series of contrasts between flesh and Spirit. His overall intention is clear: to show that flesh (sinful nature) brings death while the Spirit brings life (v.6).

Paul leads us in this key claim by tracing people’s manner of life to their underlying way of thinking. The lifestyle of the flesh flows from a mind oriented to the flesh, whereas the lifestyle of the Spirit comes from a mind oriented to the Spirit. And the mind of the flesh is death whereas the mind of the Spirit produces life and peace.

Romans 8:7-8 offers explanations as to why “the mind of the flesh” brings death. The orientation of the will reflects the values of this world, and that is always “hostile to God.”

William Barclay states, “To allow the things of this world completely to dominate life is self-extinction; it is spiritual suicide; it is, again in the most literal sense, soul destroying. By living it a person is making himself/herself totally unfit ever to stand in the presence of God. He/She is hostile to God.”

Paul’s letting the church know in no uncertain terms that anything that the flesh generates is not acceptable to God. And that “will” cannot obey God’s law. Therefore, people who are in the flesh, controlled by the sinful nature, cannot please God.

You are God’s Home (Romans 8:9-11)

Paul saw two kinds of people in the world: those who live in the Spirit and those who don’t. Those who don’t simply exist with a purposeless hunger for the things of this world. However, those who live in the Spirit live in covenant relationship with God and God’s people. As has been noted, we are part of the church; and God is at work within us, shaping us, teaching us, empowering us, and molding us in the divine image. Essentially, living in the Spirit means the Spirit living in us.

E. Stanley Jones, missionary and author, once said, “The great secret of the Christian faith is summed up in two words: in Christ.” Live in Christ. Let Christ live in you.” The key here is surrender!

Important notation! Paul calls God’s Spirit the Spirit of Christ. This is not a different person. The Holy Spirit is God’s Spirit and Christ’s Spirit. There is no such thing as a Christian believer without the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit: that would be a contradiction in terms.

But back to the main idea here – living in the Spirit means the Spirit lives in us.

Those who selfishly live in the flesh look out for number one. Those who live in the Spirit love their neighbor and are learning to put others first. Those who live in the flesh see things from their own perspective. Those who live in the Spirit increasingly learn to see things from God’s perspective. Those who live in the flesh demand justice, at least when they are wronged. Those who live in the Spirit offer grace, mercy, and forgiveness because they recognize they have received these gifts from God.

In verse 11, we see that the presence of God’s Spirit assures Christians of resurrection life, life beyond the day our current “mortal bodies” expire. The only way this happens is through “the Spirit of Him that raised Jesus from the dead (compare John 5:21). Eternal life is not mentioned here as such, but it is implied. After all, what point would there in being raised from the dead only to die yet again?

When David Livingstone, a missionary, was asked how he had been able to serve God so well and for so long in Africa, he replied that the source of his strength had been the divine companionship of Jesus. How utterly true for everybody!

An Obligation to Live the Godly Life (Romans 8:12-14)

Paul, therefore, looks back at what he's taught previously. He has explained the Gospel, addressed the differences between Jew and Gentile, and outlined the need for righteousness and how that righteousness has been provided for us. He has made clear the principle of justification by faith using Abraham and David as examples, and he has pointed out that reconciliation has been secured through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Paul now moves from what God has accomplished to how we are properly to respond. He calls the needed response by one word: "obligation." This word can refer to financial obligation (as in Matthew 8:24). But Paul uses it in the sense of "one who has a moral obligation" (compare Romans 1:14; 15:27; Galatians 5:3).

Paul's readers, "brothers and sisters in Christ," indeed have such an obligation. And it's an obligation to the Spirit that includes killing the misdeeds of the body. Life in the Spirit must include rejecting self-centered impulses approved by the world (Colossians 2:20-23).

This self-mortification is not easy. It is a complete reorientation of our priorities with God as the focus. And, to be sure, we can never accomplish this by our own willpower. It must happen by the Spirit. God does not expect us to live the spiritually pleasing life without giving us the resources we need to be successful. It is through the leadership of the Holy Spirit that we are able to live and produce the deeds of a godly life (Galatians 5: 22-25).

When Albert Schweitzer was over 80 years of age, he returned to Europe for a furlough from Africa. Before he set out again for Africa, a reporter asked him, "Why are you going back to Africa? For that matter, why did you leave comfort and fame in the first place for Africa?" Dr. Schweitzer thought for a moment and then said quietly, "You see, I had to do something for Christ."

Right there is our moral obligation, and the end result of filling this obligation is life! The good life!

Action Plan

1. How does Paul view the Law? What purpose does the Law serve?
2. How does Paul, and how do you, characterize people who "live in the Spirit?"
3. What are some ways we can make ourselves more open to the Spirit's influence?

Resources for this lesson:

"2018-2019 Standard Lesson NIV Commentary," Uniform Series "International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching," pages 313-320

"The NIV Application Commentary, Romans" by Douglas J. Moo, pages 247-255

"Adult Bible Studies, Spring 2019, Discipleship and Mission, Teacher, Uniform Series," Gary Thompson, pages 98-106

"The Book of Romans, The Smart Guide to the Bible Series," Gib Martin and Larry Richards, pages 107-114

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