

Good News for the Unsure

Romans 8:12-17

Introduction

How can I tell whether God lives in me? How can I tell whether I have the Holy Spirit?

Christian believe that when we put our trust in Jesus, that the Holy Spirit comes and lives inside us. I remember being challenged a number of years ago by a fellow university student who was in a sect. They believed that the Holy Spirit was only for the Apostles, that average Joe Blogs believers didn't have Him living in them in the way we saw last week. We were having a discussion and she challenged me: "If you had the Holy Spirit, surely you'd be able to show me?"

I was a bit flummoxed - I'd never been asked to prove that the Holy Spirit lived in me before! When I pushed her on it, she wanted me to do something miraculous - raising the dead, parting the Red sea. Quite how I was supposed to do this in a campus coffee shop, I'm not quite sure. Maybe I could have turned the coffee into tea? Though actually sometimes it was hard to tell the difference in some of the campus coffee shops!

How would you answer that question though? "How can I tell whether God lives in me? How can I tell whether I have the Holy Spirit?" If you're just listening in, or visiting, maybe think "Well, what would that mean to have the Spirit inside you? What would it be like to have God in you?"

We said last time that every believer has the Spirit of God inside them. There are no two classes of Christians. We are all equal in God's sight. But how can you tell? What does the Holy Spirit do to a believer?

The Holy Spirit works at a fundamental level, more than just enabling believers to do flashy things, as we were just talking about. He works at the level our identity; He gives us a brand-new identity in God. He begins to change the fundamentals of our personality and character - not in a way that destroys it, but in a way that refines it, makes it what it should be. He gives us new tastes and new desires. He changes us at an elemental level.

So what changes does He make? How can you tell whether he lives inside you? Well the first thing that we learn from our passage is that we are all now sin-slayers.

We are now Sin-Slayers (by the Spirit) v12-13

That's verses 12 and 13, let me read them to you again:

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

Brother and sisters, if the Spirit lives inside us we should be cold-blooded killers; not of people (God forbid!), but of sin in our lives. The first part of our new identity is that we are sin-slayers, we are to put to death sin in our lives. Paul's argument here is that we no longer owe our old selves anything, we are not indebted to the flesh. When we worked for the flesh it brought us only death and misery. No, we are instead to work against the flesh, the

old way, putting it to death, in order that we might live. As John Stott, a famous Christian writer wrote,

“There is a kind of life that leads to death, and there is a kind of death that leads to life”.

What he’s saying there is that if our unchanged lives show that we are really in the flesh and not the Spirit, we will die in our sin.

But if we are putting to death all that is fleshy and sinful in our lives, we show that we have the Spirit and so have life, eternal life! Putting sin to death doesn’t earn you the Spirit - but if you have the Spirit, that is what you will do. The fruit shows the tree; the symptoms show the disease. They don’t give you it; they show you it. Someone who has the Spirit will be putting sin to death.

In verse 14, Paul calls this being led by the Spirit. That’s the implication of that word ‘for’. A Spirit-led Christian is one who is fighting sin. Remember what we said last week, after Jesus had been baptised with the Spirit he was led by the Spirit into the Wilderness. What for? To do battle with the Devil, to fight temptation, to overcome it!

Being Spirit-led is not about our musical preferences or whether we preach or pray with or without notes! It’s not about the style of music or how trendy it is. A Spirit-led Church is one that is serious about fighting sin. A Spirit-led Christian is one that is serious about fighting sin. So are you Spirit-led? If you are, you will be a killer- a killer of sin in your life, a killer of the deeds of the body that belong to your old self.

But what does that actually mean, to kill sin? It’s a weird subject to talk about together. What does that actually mean? Well, the agreed expert on this in Christian History is John Owen. He wrote two books on just verse 13 of our chapter! If you can get hold of a modern edition they are really excellent, “Indwelling sin in believers” and “The Mortification of Sin”.

The principles of those books though are this: know your enemy, and then kill your enemy. He writes about what sin is and how to kill it. Now spoiler alert, this is the basic idea: Putting sin to death means, in my own words:

1. Weakening sin’s grip on our day-to-day life
2. Constantly fighting and contending with sin
3. Attacking sin with the best weapons he has given us

Those are the three things really it means. Weakening sin’s grip on our lives day to day, constantly fighting and contending with sin, and attacking sin with the best weapons he has given us. Sin is like the Canaanites left in Canaan, left to themselves they will grow and attack – if you read through the Old Testament, that’s what you’ll see, when they’re left there they’ll just grow and attack. Sin is like weeds in the garden, if not dealt with they will just grow and grow and grow. Some of you have had a bit more time in the garden, you’ll find that actually by the end of lockdown there’ll still be weeds coming out – they just grow!

Sin is like dust, not in the Philip Pullman sense, if you’ve ever read his books, but like dust in that if you don’t keep dusting it just comes back. Our boys have been helping clean the house, while they’ve been off school. One of them said this week, “I don’t need to dust here - I dusted here last week!”

Well we laugh, but we treat sin like that, don't we? We need to battle on our sin like Joshua. We need to pull up those sins like weeds. We've got to get out our sin dust buster, if you like, and be getting at sin. Be killing sin or sin will be killing you – that's what John Owen said.

But we're not alone in the battle, in fact we are under no circumstances to battle alone. We are to put death sin by the Spirit - that's what our passage says. The Spirit is given to us to help us wage war on sin. Owen gives us three ways, and keeping that weed analogy, this is me putting them into my own words.

What the Holy Spirit does to help us is destroys the root of the sin, the thing deep down inside ourselves, and that makes it possible for us to pull up the weeds. If the Spirit didn't do that work, we wouldn't be able to pull them up.

He also makes us hate the weeds that are sin. When Caroline was pregnant with both our boys inside her she had an aversion to coffee.; when the Holy Spirit is inside us, he gives us a sin-aversion, if you like. He makes us desire to get rid of them.

So he makes it possible by getting at the root. He changes our desires so that we want to get rid of sin. And then thirdly, He makes the right plants grow. He helps us crowd out sin in our lives by good works and the fruit of the Spirit and causing them to grow in our lives, choking out the sin, if you like. Notice in all these ways though He does not do the work for us. He is essential for the work, we are essential for the work, too. It's His power and His leading to do it, but we must do it too.

Sometimes when we tell our boys to tidy their rooms, they need to lift something really heavy, way beyond what they could lift themselves - so I "help" them to fulfil the task that I have given them. It's by no means an equal partnership, but both of us are involved.

They must do it - it is their responsibility to clean their room. But I must do it, because they cannot do it by themselves. And that is how we kill sin - we do it, by the Spirit. If we trust in ourselves to do it, then we'll fail every time.

Think of Joshua and the Israelites. Who knocked down the walls of Jericho? God. But would it have happened if they hadn't marched round all those times? And what about when they try and do it in their own strength and in their own way? It's an unmitigated disaster, isn't it?

We must be led by the Spirit, and if we are led by the Spirit, we will be killing sin in our lives. The second part of our new identity, that the Spirit gives us is that we are now sons of the Father.

We are now Sons (of the Father) v14-17a

Have a look at verses 14 – 17:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 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!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ,

It says here, we have received not a spirit of slavery, but a Spirit of sonship! A Spirit of adoption. Of all the Spiritual blessings, I think adoption must rank as one of, if not, the highest!

Not only are we forgiven, not only are we justified- that means declared innocent before God. Not only are we all those things, but we are also welcomed into God's family. And not just a minor part, some distant nephew or niece - we are adopted as sons. And in the Roman world, as with our world today, adoption was total and complete. Adopted children were not classed as second-class sons or daughters - they were treated as completely equal to their natural born siblings. So much so that the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar, was, in fact, the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He inherited Rome from Julius Caesar! Far from being inferior, he was actually picked as the heir of Caesar! And He was the emperor when Jesus was born, this was a familiar situation. Adopted sons had full rights as sons, and even heirs to their fathers, equal with natural born children.

And that's the point of this little section here. God hasn't just taken us from slave to free; He's taken us from slave to family! Sons of God, and heirs of God. Sons in Roman society were usually their heirs; we are the sons of God, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

Our relationship with God has now fundamentally changed. We can call him now not only God, or Lord, or King, we can call Him Father! In fact, the word used here is even more intimate, "Abba". It's really the Aramaic word for dad or daddy or even, dada. I think that's why a lot of translators leave it untranslated. The intimacy is almost embarrassing. How could we dare to call the Lord God Almighty, "Daddy"?

Now we need to tread carefully here: He is still the Lord God Almighty, we approach Him with reverence and awe. But the reverence and awe due to a very important Father who loves us, not to a dictator who might chop our heads off! When some people pray, you'd think that it was some sort of terrified henchman talking to Darth Vader or some baddie, not a son talking to his loving Father! When the prodigal son goes to his father and asks to be made his slave the resounding answer is NO!

Yes, it's true we are slaves of righteousness. It's true that Paul describes himself as a slave of Christ Jesus right at the beginning of Romans. But now our fundamental identity is children of God, an intimate relationship with God. That's why the cry that comes from our hearts is Abba! Father!

The Christian you see has two cries in this life, "Wretched man that I am!" - we saw that in Romans 7 that Paul cries out - but equally "Abba! Father", Romans 8! As we stand now, we are both sinners and sons. One day though, we will no longer be sinners! The sonship in that way is a more fundamental identity because it will last on into eternity. We shall not always be sinners, but we **shall** always be Sons!

And more than sons, if that were possible, heirs! Heirs of God. As we said last week the inheritance is not land or money or some family heirloom - our inheritance is God himself. As God said to Abraham in Genesis 15: *"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."* Or as he said to the Levites in Numbers 18: *"I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel."*

God himself is what we are promised. The amazing blessing of faith in Jesus is not the gifts of God, but the gift of God. We will spend eternity with Him as beloved children - adopted into his family by grace. And think about it, it must be by grace - grace is a free gift that God gives to us - it must be done freely by God, because no-one can earn their way into a family. Family is about love, not about merit. You don't get in on merit, but by the love of the Father. We are now sons of Father and heirs of God - incredible! Finally, the last part of our identity, we are now sufferers with Christ.

We are now Sufferers (with Christ) v17b

Have a look at verse 17, the second part:

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

What did it mean for Jesus to be the Son of God? Well, it meant that He suffered and died on the cross then was raised to glory. Now we too are sons of God and we follow in the same pattern. We follow in his footsteps into suffering. If we don't, then why should we expect to follow in his footsteps into glory?

Now, this is not teaching salvation by suffering, any more than it is teaching salvation by works, by putting sin to death. This is what characterises a Christian, not what makes one.

Again, it is describing the identity of a Spirit-led person - one in whom the Spirit dwells. A Spirit-led Person suffers. Jesus himself told us this in John 15:18, "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*" Or in John 16:2, "*They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.*" The path of the cross is the way of the Christian. Degrees of suffering will be different, but all Christians will suffer.

That's why I can have nothing to do with the "Health, Wealth and Prosperity Gospel". That says "Come to Jesus and never fall ill again, Come to Jesus and never be in financial need, Come to Jesus and everyone will like you". Well, what total nonsense, utter nonsense! The path to glory is a path of affliction, not of affluence! And every time we tell someone that it's not, we peddle a lie. How else do you understand this verse? How else do you understand the life of Jesus? How else do you understand the life of the apostles? Listen how Paul describes the Apostles in 1 Corinthians 4:9-13:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

That's what Paul says about his life, as an apostle, and those of the other apostles. Health, wealth and prosperity, pff! Try preaching that nonsense to Christians in North Korea - you'd be laughed out of the room. Try preaching that to Christians in Afghanistan. In fact, try preaching it through most of Christian history and you'd be laughed out of the room.

It's only here and now in the West that people can get away with it, where we don't suffer as our brothers and sisters do across the globe - but is it them, or is it us who are more faithful!?

Jesus suffered, the apostles suffered, we will suffer too. So don't let people tell you it's a sign God is not with you. When you suffer, you suffer **WITH CHRIST**. Christ suffered, we suffer. Christ took up His cross, we take up ours and suffer outside the city gate. All Christians in one way or another will suffer for their faith.

But, just as much as that is true, so the second part of this verse is true. As certain as suffering is for the Christian, so is our glorification. The verse links those together - "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." In God's economy, suffering and glorification go together. One comes after the other. After suffering as a Christian, it is followed by glory with Him in eternity. Do you notice, by the way, just how much focus there is here on the future?

It's so easy, isn't it, to dwell on our present circumstances and lose the wood for the trees. Yes we are now sufferers, but we are sufferers on our way to glory. We are pilgrims on the way to the promised land. Life in the here and now can be hard - and I think we're feeling that at the moment, aren't we? But we need to keep in mind the destination. In the end, we're just passing through on the way to glory. One day these last 40 days we've had in lockdown will be nothing but a breath - but I'm getting ahead of myself, that's really next week's message, if you read ahead.

But it's telling us here that we suffer, but it serves a purpose, preparing us for glory. And yes we suffer, but we suffer with Christ. Christ suffered - He had his 40 days of isolation in the wilderness! He had his cross to bear. John Newton, who I've been reading a lot during the lockdown, wrote this:

"[We are given] a daily portion of comforts and crosses, each one most suitable to your case, is adjusted and appointed by the hand which was once nailed to the cross for us; that where the path... leads, there is the best possible situation we could possibly be in at that [moment in time]"

We are not suffering alone. We are suffering alongside the one who suffered for us and who has our suffering on a leash. And suffering for Christ is a mark of the Spirit, it's a part of identity, it's who we are now.

So how can you tell if you have the Spirit? Well, are you now a sin-killer, or is sin killing you? Are you in the battle with sin? Even if you feel you're losing, are you in the battle? Do you fight sin, or do you just roll over and obey sin when it calls?

Are you now a Son? What is the cry of your heart? Is it that double cry of "wretched man" and "Abba, Father"? Or is it something else?

Are you suffering with Christ? Is life about serving Him or remaining comfortable in your comfort zone? Safe from suffering, but in danger of sliding?

Suffering for Christ is mark of the Spirit, we shouldn't shy away from suffering when we're called to. Now, it could be for some joining us this morning, that the answer to those questions is "no".

Well, it could be that you're spiritually in a bad way, or perhaps, consider for a second, that you might not be a believer at all. The Spirit doesn't dwell in you. I don't say that to unsettle your assurance, but to point you to the true marks of a believer as they're given in Scripture. It's not about how you self-identify or what ceremonies you've been through. It's about faith in Jesus – trusting in Him alone - and that brings us the Spirit. And the Spirit will change you in these ways.

Whether you're in a bad way or unsure, why not get in touch and we can talk some more. My email address is in the contact us section on the website, or put a comment on the bottom and I'll get back to you. It's important to talk about these things, isn't it – we need to be sure.

Well my Uni friend, who challenged me on this, didn't listen. To be fair, I didn't preach her a three-point sermon, but just sort of mumbled something about the fruit of the Spirit - another legitimate avenue, I think, but maybe without the mumbling.

But we have an answer- our lives have been changed by the Spirit. So let's pray that the Father would continue to change us more into the likeness of Son by His Holy Spirit, that we might know that the Spirit dwells in us. Let's pray.