

Rom. 8:12 So then, brothers and sisters, 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 children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

ARE YOU A PENTECOSTAL?

Are you a Pentecostal? That was what a student asked renowned preacher Fred Craddock as he lectured in a school out West. Craddock didn't quite know what to say. The room grew silent. Craddock said that he looked for help from the Dean of the school, but he was nowhere to be found.

And so Fred asked, “Do you mean do I belong to the Pentecostal church?” “No,” the impatient student replied, “I mean are you Pentecostal?”

Craddock tried again. “Are you asking me if I am charismatic?” “No, that’s not it.”

“Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?” Once again the student repeated his question, “I WANT TO KNOW IF YOU ARE PENTECOSTAL?”

Fred finally gave up and said, “I don’t know what your question is.” The student replied, “Obviously you are not a Pentecostal.” He left.

What about you? Are you a Pentecostal?

Most days I wouldn’t even bother to ask that question. Of course we’re not Pentecostal. We’re Presbyterians, God’s frozen chosen. What in the world would we want with Pentecostal fire? Let that stuff rain down on someone else.

But, each year we celebrate Pentecost Sunday. We tell these stories about how the Spirit of God came down and changed people.

It wasn’t a cool, calm worship service done decently and order. It was a raucous, loud pulse pounding revival. People got turned inside out and upside down. They were on fire. They didn’t know what hit them.

You don't see things like that any more ... not even in Pentecostal churches, and you certainly don't see it in the Presbyterian Church. It would be tempting to say, "No, I'm not a Pentecostal. That describes someone else. That's not me."

But, let's resist that temptation. According to this passage, we are Pentecostal; we are a Pentecostal people. The Bible tells us that we are a people who are led by the Spirit.

And the presence of the Spirit in our lives changes everything. The Spirit changes who we are and how we live.

SPIRITUAL PERCEPTION

In our lesson for today Paul says that there are two ways to live. One is life "according to the flesh" and the other is "life in the Spirit."

What does Paul mean? Paul is talking about two different ways of viewing the world. The Apostle is talking about what we might call "spiritual perception."

Have you ever seen those psychological experiments dealing with perception? In one experiment a room

is built in a very distorted fashion. The floor is sloping, and one side of the room is much bigger than the other.

But, when you look at the room from one particular vantage point, the room looks just like a normal room ... until another person enters that room. On one side the person looks very small. But, as they move to the other side of the room that person looks like a giant that is about to go through the ceiling.

Now we know that it is impossible for a person to change size as they walk from one side of the room to the other. But, we still “see” things that way. Why? Because the room “looks” normal from our perspective, and our brain adjusts reality to fit our perception.

LIVING ACCORDING TO THE FLESH

The same kind of thing can happen when it comes to our spiritual perception. If we live according to the flesh we assume certain things about our world.

For example, we might believe something like “it’s a dog eat dog world and nice guys finish last. You’ve got to look out for number one, and God helps those who help themselves.”

If that's what we believe (and a lot of people do believe that including many who call themselves Christian), we will see the world in this negative way and respond accordingly. We spend our lives trying to "win" because that is the only way we can assure our "salvation."

This is for some the American dream.

But, the phrase "God helps those who help themselves" is not in the Bible. If we live by that phrase we are living according to the flesh. Our perception is distorted; we are blinded by our assumptions. We see ourselves "big" when we are really "small."

What we need is something that they talk about in education these days. We need a "paradigm shift." That is, we need a whole new way of thinking, a whole new set of assumptions, a whole new way of looking at the world.

I think that the current financial crisis is an opportunity for us to look at our world in a different way. Perhaps the dollar isn't "Almighty." Perhaps we have been putting our "stock" in the wrong things. And perhaps we have been following a path

that leads not to life but to death in every sense of the word.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

Today is Pentecost Sunday. On this day we remember that the Spirit filled the early church and transformed their life together. They began to see things in a different way. Fear was replaced with courage.

And one of the biggest changes wrought by the Spirit was a new way of looking at their possessions. The Scripture tells us that they voluntarily shared what they had with each other. And when things got really tight they even sold some of their property and gave the proceeds to the apostles so that everyone could have enough.

The Spirit led the early church to see the world in a new way and led them to a new way of living.

I think that heavenly revolution is still going on. The Spirit still leads us to see our world in a whole new way, and that leads to a whole new way of living.

What is at the heart of this new life in the Spirit?
What is the overriding message that changes the way
we look at the world?

GOD'S CHILDREN

Simply put it is this: we are God's children. What we could not do for ourselves God in Christ has already done for us.

I like the way John Wesley put it after his famous conversion experience. He said that he "exchanged the faith of a servant for the faith of a son."

Gratitude is the motivating force for those who live by the Spirit. When we see how much God has given us, we become a grateful and a giving people. And we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit instead of our own desires.

This is the key to being a spiritual person. This is the key to becoming a child of God. We let God lead us.

Children depend upon and trust their parents. They know that their parents have more knowledge and experience.

And it's important for children to obey their parents because good parents want the best for their child. They want to keep their children safe and help them grow. If a parent child relationship is built upon trust and love it can be a wonderful thing.

In a more profound way this should be our relationship with God. We should invite the Holy Spirit to lead us. We should open ourselves to the idea that our view of the world is distorted and needs to be corrected.

I like that bumper sticker that reads, "If God is your co-pilot, switch seats!" That's what today's lesson is all about; it's about switching seats. Instead of following our own desires, we decide to follow Jesus.

SLAVERY AND ADOPTION

In our lesson for today we read that we have not received a spirit of slavery that leads to fear. Instead, we have received a Spirit of adoption.

In Paul's world slavery was a fact of life. Some commentators suggest that up to one third of the population was in slavery in those days. And for most people there was no way out of that slavery. If

you were born a slave you would remain a slave. There was no upward mobility in the ancient world.

But, there was one slim hope. You could be adopted. Adoption had the potential to change everything in your life.

William Barclay in his commentary on this passage talks about the Roman practice of legal adoption. A child who was adopted passed from the absolute power of his natural father to the absolute power of his adoptive father.

The adopted son lost all his rights to his former family and gained all the rights of a fully legitimate child of his new family. He could inherit his adoptive father's estate even if other sons were born later as real blood relations.

In the eyes of the law the former life of the adopted person had completely disappeared. The adopted person literally and absolutely had a new father.

So the Romans understood the analogy that Paul was making. They had seen former slaves who had been adopted into noble families. They had seen how a life of fear and deprivation had been replaced by a life of hope and privilege.

And Paul was saying,

“This is what it’s like when you are adopted into God’s family. You get to leave the old life of fear behind and you get to call God Father. You are no longer a second-class citizen. You are a full citizen. You are a joint heir with Christ in the heavenly kingdom.”

THE SPIRIT OF FEAR

We are the adopted children of the heavenly King. But, in order to claim the new life, we have to leave the old life and especially the old fears behind.

Do you notice how life today is still filled with a spirit of fear?

When you go to the airport they even have a color-coded fear system. The guy over the intercom tells you, “Today’s threat level is orange.” And I think, “Oh wow. It’s orange. I have no idea what that means, but it has the desired effect. I am afraid and suspicious of everyone.”

Politicians play upon our fears. Don’t vote for the Republican (Democrat or Independent). They can’t

be trusted. Be afraid, very afraid. And we are sold cars, insurance and everything else in this world with the same line. Be afraid. Buy this, do this, vote this way in order to escape trouble.

Yes, the spirit of fear is a great motivator in our world.

But, that's not our Spirit. That's not the Spirit that we proclaim in the church. That's not the Pentecostal Spirit.

Our Spirit is a Spirit of adoption. Our Spirit takes away fear and leads us to a new life.

A SPIRIT OF SUFFERING

Notice that Paul does not think that life in the Spirit is a life on easy street. On the contrary, the Spirit of the risen Christ enables us to take chances. The Spirit of the risen Christ enables us to look suffering in the eye and say, "This will not have the final say in my life."

In fact sometimes the Spirit of the risen Christ leads us in a path of suffering in order to see greater glory. Our common suffering gives us a way to understand the salvation of God.

North Carolina Judge Jesse Caldwell tells the story of Vietnamese woman who was waiting her turn to be examined in a crowded hospital emergency room. She gradually became aware of a frustrating “non-conversation” being attempted a few seats down. A nurse was trying to ask a new patient for some details on her illness. The patient spoke Spanish. The nurse did not.

The Vietnamese woman listened for a minute then realized that while she didn’t speak Spanish she did understand the broken-English bits and phrases the Spanish speaking patient offered as answers. Because of her own experience of learning to communicate in “broken English,” the Vietnamese woman could hear the heart and gist of what this other woman was trying to say.

The Vietnamese woman offered to “translate” the broken English of the Spanish speaker into something the nurse could understand. She was so successful at bridging the brokenness of their languages that eventually the Vietnamese woman was hired by the hospital as a kind of generic translator.

Brokenness was the common language spoken by all hospital patients.

Do you speak the language of a broken people? Perhaps that's why the Bible says that those who share in the glory of the heavenly family also share in the sufferings of Christ. It is through our common language of "brokenness" that we are able to communicate God's love to the world.

The Holy Spirit chooses to speak through broken people to a broken world. It is a language of the heart. It is a language that comes from the very heart of God.

Because we know what it is like to be broken by hatred, we can speak of the healing love of Christ's sacrifice.

Because we know what it is like to be broken by despair, we can speak of the healing hope of Christ's forgiveness.

Because we know what it is like to be broken by doubt, we can speak of the healing faith in Christ's promises.

Because we know what it is like to be broken by illness, we can speak of the healing wholeness of Christ's resurrection.

Compassion is the door that leads us to a life in the Spirit instead of a life in the flesh. Compassion allows us to be led not by our own self-interest but by the call of the Spirit as expressed in Jesus. Compassion is the language that enables us to tell God's story to the world.

A NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

Tony Compolo told a story about a friend whose life was transformed by the call of the Spirit transformed. This friend's name was Al Whitaker, a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. One day at breakfast his wife looked across the table and said,

“Al, is this what you want to do the rest of your life? I mean you're helping rich people get richer. It's a good thing, I guess. But is this what you want to do.”

That night at supper he looked at his wife and said, “That question you asked me this morning was troubling. You should know that when I left the office today I handed in my resignation.”

Al started an organization called Opportunity International. This group prepares people to go into Third World countries, places like the slums of Manila or the barrios of Bogota or the slums of Haiti

... the forgotten places of the world where so many people suffer and die. He goes to those places and starts what we might call cottage industries.

Compolos a teacher at Eastern College started a special program that trained some of his students to go and work with AI, starting small businesses and cottage industries among the poor. Tony said that AI Whitaker and those working with him generated 2.5 million jobs among the poor and oppressed of the world.

Assuming that there are six people to a family in a third world country this represents 15 million people who have been delivered from poverty. Tony said they were delivered from poverty “not for a day, not for a week, not for a year, but for the rest of their lives.

He was a man who said, ‘I’m going to be open to the Spirit of God. I’m going to allow Jesus to invade me, to possess me, to take possession of my being. And he changed and the world has been changed because of him. “

What about you? Are you open to being led by the Spirit of God?

It's not an easy thing to be led by the Spirit. In some ways it's much easier to be led by our fears. But, the Bible tells us that our fears lead to a life of slavery.

But, for those who find the courage to follow Jesus a new life is possible. You don't have to do everything. You just have to do the next thing. What is God leading you to do today? Where does God want you to go?

May God help us find the ears to hear that call.

Amen.