

## **“You Are Special”**

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Romans 8:6-11 (pp 157-58 in Pew Bibles)

<sup>6</sup>To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup>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,<sup>8</sup> and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. <sup>9</sup>But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

<sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

## **YOU ARE SPECIAL**

I once heard a high school football coach talking to his team and trying to get them fired up for a game the next day. He was pointing out all they had accomplished in practice and the success they had had thus far into the season. He mentioned each group on the team and showered them with praise about the great job they had done and ended by saying how special they were to him, personally.

This tactic works for impressionable young people. But Paul says we are special in a way that completely eclipses what any football coach may say to his team.

Some bible translations use the word ‘flesh’ to indicate sinful nature and others simply call it sinfulness.

In the Old Testament, ‘flesh’ was understood to mean weakness and mortality. By New Testament times, the idea of flesh weakness had come to mean moral weakness or susceptibility to sin. Today, we think of flesh as leaning on the materialistic world.

We cannot say flesh IS sin, because God made all life on this earth and God cannot create evil. Sin of the flesh is to live and act only in an animal like instinctiveness.

What is the top priority of all animals? Survival. Survival cannot be accomplished without focus on self.

Our scripture today tells us we have two basic choices in our lives. One is to focus on self and the other is to focus on the Spirit. You have heard me say this before and it bears repeating: The main difference between humankind and other animals walking the earth is that we have the ability to see the world the way it is and yet envision it the way it should be. Notice I said we have the ability to envision; it is not an automatic step. Such an ability is a gift from God, and He gives it to all of us. That is where our choice comes into play. Can you decide what your way of living is, what your orientation is, what do you care for the most? That's above and beyond simple survival.

Make no mistake, self does matter! We hear Jesus say we should love others as we love ourselves. But not in a self-indulging lifestyle. We have the power to be better than animal instinctiveness, which is the mind of self.

To me, verse 11 of our scripture today sums it all up. It is what we call the center of gravity of this reading. In essence, it says the Spirit of God that raised Christ from the dead resides in you because God put it there. God's grace put it there.

Yes, we are special. The whole human race is special. God has taken that first step and the ball is in our court now. We must choose to use what God has given us.

There is a hunger in our society. It is a hunger to feel alive. When people hunger long enough and strong enough, they will eat most anything. The best entre for their spiritual hunger is already dwelling within them, they just don't know it. As I said last week, people don't know what they don't know.

So often, we think of the Holy Spirit as something we can tap into like an electric circuit. Luke Skywalker used something along those lines.

Yoda told him to 'Use the force, Luke.' Please don't tell me those screenwriters did not use the example of the Holy Spirit in their writing!

Star Wars never told us what the source of the 'Force' was. We know where the Holy Spirit comes from. Instead of being like some invisible magnetism, the power of the Spirit is the power that comes from our relationship with God. It is not a distant relationship in which the source is far away, aloof, and untouchable. It is a personal relationship with the creator, with the One who is the ultimate source of everything that ever was and is and will be.

The Holy Spirit makes you a new creature in a life that is stronger than sickness and even death itself. It gives us new beginnings when our lives seem to be at a dead end and it brings new wisdom and guidance from God. When the spirit is chosen, old ways of thinking and living are left behind and new ways of thinking and living begin to take over. People who benefit from the status quo and thereby value stability, prominence, and order above all else are suspicious and afraid of the Holy Spirit and too much talk of the Spirit makes them nervous and defensive.

The holy spirit is not the only so-called spirit at work in and among us. There are spirits of individuals, spirit of the times, and the spirit of certain interest groups. We may also include the spirits of envy, revenge, malice, greed, and other evil spirits. The epistle of 1 John tells us we should not believe every spirit we hear but rather test the spirit to see whether they are from God. If it is based on the fact that Christ has come in the flesh, take heed. If the spirit in front of you does not acknowledge this, do not follow it.

The Spirit is a relationship, not a formula. Our solid union with Christ is the defining feature of a Christian life. I was walking on the dock at Richardson's Fish Camp once and I saw a young boy and a man climbing out of their boat and heading toward the bait shop. I asked the boy if he had caught any fish. I could see the immediate pride, almost a strut, and he said, "Yeah, we caught lots!" I noticed he said 'we.' It wasn't the fish they caught that mattered. It was the 'WE' that mattered. The spirit of that father and son relationship was almost tangible.

You want more scripture about relationship with God? Read the Psalms. It could be a good summer project. Read all of them.

Christians down through the centuries have found them to be very realistic, very human, in their message. You want to hear about human fear? Human error? Human anger? Human doubt? Read the Psalms. Notice one thing: God does not speak in the Psalms. All the words are human; prayers to God, asking in one way or another to give Holy attention to their relationship. Intimate relationship. You think you have things, unspeakable things, in your life that no one else has experienced? Read the Psalms. It's all about God's relationship with us, each of us on a personal level. It's about you, now – today.

Jewish people of Paul's time believed that God's Spirit would be upon them at the end of time. Even today, there are a lot of people who focus on events at the end of time. Paul is saying that God's Spirit is with us **NOW** if we choose to allow it. It is a new reality, not fantasy or dreaming. It is looking at life through a new lens in the here and now, not later. We need to open our eyes and see who we are and to whom we belong.

We are special. God says so!

In all things we stand before God not on the strength of ourselves, but because of the Holy Spirit joining us to Christ.

Three months ago, we ushered in a New Year. New Year celebrations almost always come with resolutions. Invariably, most of them wither away and dry up. We go on in the same old habits, same old frustrations, same old shortcomings. We say something like, "I wish I could be what I wanted to be before I became what I am."

But, we can't. We're stuck. Change is hard. So, if it's up to us to make certain changes so that we deserve God's welcome, then as Stephen King says in one long word, "Forgetaboutit!" It's not going to happen. We seem to lack the freedom to make resolutions happen.

When we talk about freedom in this world, we really mean superficial freedom like where to live, where to travel, what to eat, what clothes to wear. But, deep down, we are not free unless empowered by the Holy Spirit.

God came to us in human flesh, not because we deserved it, but because He wanted us for Himself. The Word became flesh and lived among us in our depraved condition. We did what should be called the worst crime in history and yet God loved us.

Yes, we're special.

Try to picture a world where everything is perfect. That was God's original intent. But we are not perfect, so something has to happen.

Years ago, I had a chance to see how Massachusetts Institute of Technology, M.I.T., deals with their freshmen students. Students at M.I.T. come from all over the world to a very diverse campus. In order to be successful, new students need time to acclimate and adjust to a new, unique learning culture. Under the typical grading scheme we find in other universities, many bright, promising students would fail and be sent back home. To avoid this, M.I.T. doesn't use the usual A, B, C, D, F grading scheme for freshmen. They don't even use a pass/fail method. Freshmen students are evaluated on a pass/no record system until they have enough credits to be classified as sophomores. A freshman student either passes a course or there is no record of having taken it. Failure is not counted against them.

Sound familiar?

That's grace. And the students gladly accept it. Nevertheless, it's hard work.

On a highly magnified basis, that's what God's grace is. And just like the students, it requires a conscientious effort on our part. Grace is not something you can go out and get; it can only be given. There's no way you can deserve it or earn it any more than you can control your own birth or dictate the taste of apple pie. Through grace, God says you're here because He wants you here. Nothing can separate us from Him.

But, there's one catch. Grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it.

And what type of person will that make you?

Jesus is a prime example of what it means to be a Spirit filled person. His is the type of life one might not have expected in a spiritual person. We often picture a spiritual person to be somber, solemn, judgmental, and with no sense of humor. With Jesus, it was the life of a person who went to parties, ate and drank, had a good time. He was interested in people, in the health of their bodies as well as in their souls. He talked more about what people did with their money than their sexual life. He loved his enemies and did good to those who hated him. That is the kind of life that is the result of God's Holy Spirit coming to dwell in a person.

If I want to know what it would mean to be a truly spiritual person, I must first look at the life of Jesus and the kind of person he was, not at my own life and the kind of person I would like to be. We must stop circling round our own personal feelings and needs and problems, because these are mere distractions from the truth. Spiritual life has to do with prayer, seeking personal inspiration from Bible reading, recognizing the holiness of other people, and feeling the presence of God when we gather in the company of like-minded Christians.

As Paul said, the Holy Spirit is none other than the risen Christ himself, continuing the work that the earthly Christ began.

So, why do we have so much trouble with this? Is it because it seems too good to be true? Does it sound too much like fantasy? I think it is because we come to God with too much baggage, too many conditional clauses, too many doubts. If we wish to feel the spirit at work, we must come spiritually naked, baring our souls to Him and trusting Him.

Even if we eliminate all excuses against the use of God's grace, death remains the greatest contradiction in all this. One of the hardest, if not the very hardest thing to reconcile in our human sense of justice, is the knowledge of impending death for all of us. In a spiritually controlled life, we come closer and closer to God and death begins to appear as just one stage before we rise again. To the spiritually mature, death is just an intermission. To God, life and death are a continuum of His love, and nothing can separate us from God's love. The spirit of God that raised Christ from the dead is in each of us.

So, there you have it. We are loved; we are blessed, we are special.

Amen.