

Set Free!

Set Free from Judgment, Set Free for Life

by the Rev. Dr. J. Ted Blakley



YEAR A • PROPER 10 • TRACK 1

Genesis 25:19–34

Psalm 119:105–112

Romans 8:1–11

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

A. D. 2014, Sunday, July 13th

☞ 8:00 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, Kansas

☞ 10:30 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, Kansas

The Sermon

2120 words • 19 minutes

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. *Amen.*

“SO WOULD I”

Earlier this week I was talking to Rebekah, and she asked me, “What are you going to be preaching on this Sunday?” I said, “Well, I think I am going to focus on Romans 8 and what it means to ‘live according to the Spirit.’” And she said, “Oh, I would love to know how to do that.” And I said, “So would I... So would I.”

So what does it mean to live according to the Spirit, to walk according to the Spirit, to set our minds on the things of the Spirit?

The Exercise Bike

Let me begin with a story that I hope relates. On Monday, we sold my exercise bike on Craig's list. We were asking \$25, but we received \$26, because the man who bought the bike paid us with 13 two-dollar bills. Well, that's not really relevant to the story, it's just a bit interesting. Anyway, on Monday, we sold my exercise bike which ended a brief, uneventful chapter in my life.

You see, I got this bike about 12 to 18 months ago because I felt that I was really needing exercise in my life. But I hate running, and I was too busy to join the YMCA. I needed something that I could do at home, something that would not take a lot of preparation or time. So I bought a recumbent, exercise bike from the Salvation Army. I took it home, hauled downstairs, and put it in the unfinished portion of our basement. I was really excited.

Unfortunately, my excitement didn't translate into a consistent habit of exercise. I don't recall how many times I rode the bike when I first got it, but it wasn't a lot. And as the weeks went by, I rode it

less and less. In fact, months would go by without it getting any use... at least by me. The kids treated it as a jungle gym.

The bike took up a fair amount of space, so after a few months of going unused, Rebekah suggested that we get rid of the bike. But I was against the idea. I would recommit myself to riding it, but that rarely if ever happened. And so, every few months, Rebekah would broach the topic of selling the bike, and I would reiterate my objections—namely, that that bike was my best hope for developing a healthier lifestyle. Yet, it just never materialized. I knew I needed to exercise, I genuinely wanted to exercise, yet I persistently and consistently failed to exercise.

THE CRUX OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

How many of you have experienced this dynamic in your life? How many of you have been in situations in life where you *know* what is good and right and wholesome, and you genuinely *want* to do what is good and right and wholesome, and yet you find that you are *unable* to do what is good and right and wholesome, at least not on a consistent basis. This is the same dilemma Paul described and bewailed in last week's reading from Romans 7. He writes,

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I don't do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I can't do it. ¹⁹ For I don't do the good I want, but the evil I don't want is what I do. ... ²¹ I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Paul, of course, isn't talking about struggles with exercising or eating right. He is talking about the struggle to follow God's will. Paul knows what is right, so he has awareness. And Paul wants to do what is right, so he has desire. But for some inexplicable reason, awareness and desire aren't enough to translate into right action.

This leaves Paul feeling demoralized by his failure to follow God. Not only that, Paul feels like he is under a curse, and here's why. As a Jew, Paul belongs to the chosen people of God—the people God rescued from Egypt, the people that God gave the law. The law was a great blessing because it revealed God's plan and vision for human life and community. God's law revealed how one could live in a right-relationship with God and with other human beings.

But there was a problem. Human beings were broken, so very, very broken. We were enslaved to the power of sin, so we were not able to follow God's law and God's law went from being a blessing to a curse. According to Paul, the law showed us what was good *and* the law inspired us to do what was right, but—and this is a big but—the law could not empower us to do what was good and right. And so, the law, as holy as it was, only became an icon of our human failure, a source of judgment. Therein lies the curse.

In this respect, the law was like my exercise bike. My bike held out a promise of health and wholeness, but it couldn't deliver on that promise. In the beginning, it was a source of inspiration, but in the end, it merely became a monument of failure, a source of self-condemnation and self-recrimination.

And yet, I held onto the bike. Why? Because I didn't have anything else to replace it with, that is, until Thaddaeus and I began to play racquetball a few weeks ago. So last week, when Rebekah brought forth her bimonthly suggestion that we sell the bike, I readily agreed. She asked me why the sudden change, and I said, "Well, I am getting exercise with Thaddaeus, so now I have an alternative."

LIVING ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT

No Condemnation

And that is exactly what Paul is talking about in today's reading from Romans. We have an alternative, an alternative to being demoralized by our repeated shortcomings and failure to live the Christian life. We have an alternative to living with the fear that God is judging us, an alternative to internalizing the judgments of others, and an alternative to judging and condemning ourselves. For as Paul declares:

There is... now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (ROM 8:1-2).

No condemnation! The law has been fulfilled by Jesus and no longer serves as a standard of judgment, a standard that can be used against us, a standard that we fall short of over and over again leaving us overwhelmed with our own sense of guilt and shame. We don't have to justify ourselves to God, to others, or even to ourselves because we have been set free from all judgment.

Can you imagine what life would be like without judgment? Think of your own life; think of the lives of those around you, the lives of your family, your friends, your coworkers. What would our lives be like if we didn't feel compelled to spend so much emotional time and energy making ourselves acceptable and presentable to God,... to one another,... or even to ourselves?

According to Paul, a life without judgment is a life of peace. Such a life is a wonderful thing to contemplate. Yet, I find that it isn't all that easy to imagine. We have been so conditioned to judge everything, to evaluate everything, especially ourselves, that I sometimes find it hard to imagine what a life without judgment would look like, let alone live. Thank God we have not been left to our own to figure it all out.

The Gift of the Indwelling Holy Spirit

Thank God that in Christ we have been given the gift of Holy Spirit, the very same Spirit that animated and directed Jesus' life. Thank God that the Spirit of Christ has been poured into our hearts, for only by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit are we able to contemplate and begin to live out a life of peace, a life beyond judgment and condemnation, a life characterized by unconditional love, forgiveness, and acceptance of ourselves and others.

The Holy Spirit is the alternative to the law, because the Spirit not only teaches us what is good and inspires us to do what is right; the Spirit goes one step further and empowers us to do what is good and right. That is grace.

Setting Our Minds on the Things of the Spirit

So back to our original question, "how *do* we live by the Spirit?" Perhaps the place to begin is with Paul's descriptive phrase to set our minds on the things of the Spirit. He writes, "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” (ROM 8:5).

Now “to set our minds on the flesh” can refer to living a self-centered, self-absorbed, narcissistic life. But that’s not all it means. “To set our minds on the flesh” also refers to our efforts to try to fix our flesh—our efforts to try to overcome our own brokenness, our own shortcomings and sins. “To set our minds on the flesh” is all about trying to make ourselves worthy of God’s love and affection, and we have been trained for this our whole lives.

Consequently, “to set our minds on the Spirit,” is to shift our focus and our energies, away from what we hope to earn by our own effort, to what we have been given in Christ. For under the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, who we are does not depend upon what we are able to accomplish, it does not depend on what we are able to contribute. Our identity—our entire existence and worth—comes in what we have been given by God in Christ.

So to live and walk according to the Spirit begins with redirecting our attention to the things that come to us through the Spirit of Christ. Instead of devoting so much of our time and energy to the impossible task of fixing our own flesh and earn our own salvation, we can devote ourselves to thinking about and giving thanks for what we have already been given in Christ.

Instead of frantically seeking the approval of others, we can calmly rest in the truth that in Christ, God has given us his full and whole-hearted approval. Instead of trying to make up for all our shortcomings and failures, we can abide in the reality that all is forgiven, that all is made new. Instead of striving to be good and perfect, we can relax knowing Jesus has already made us perfect by his goodness. And instead of trying to earn the approval and love of those around us, we can begin to accept and spend the infinite love God has showered upon us.

JUST PRETEND¹

Now I know this may sound too good to be true, but it isn’t. The good gifts that God has given us in Christ goes well-beyond what we could have ever hoped for or imagined. But just pretend. If you don’t yet believe it, pretend to believe. If you don’t know how to accept it, pretend to accept it.

When you pray, pretend that God is listening. When you feel abandoned and alone, pretend that God is with you. When you hate yourself for the things you’ve done or, better yet, have failed to do, pretend that God loves you and accepts you just as you are.

In all that you do, just pretend, and the Spirit will do the rest.

In fact, the Spirit does it all, so all you have to do is pretend.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

¹ Sometimes in the Christian life, we find it hard to internalize or appropriate for ourselves the amazing grace and goodness of God in Christ. We find the gospel really too good to believe. And so I am suggesting that we pretend our way into trust and acceptance. To pretend is to act as if something is true, and generally, the object of our pretend is not true. But here, the object of our pretend is true, and we pretend, we act as if the gospel is true, knowing that in time we will be more fully convinced of its truth. Therefore, in the sense that I am using it here, pretending is a small act of faith, a mustard-seed step of faith; and it corresponds to Paul’s exhortation to “reckon” or “consider” in Romans 6:11.

The Scriptures

ROMANS 8:1–11

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ 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, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ 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.