

DO YOU WANT TO REALLY LIVE?

Romans 8:1-13

Last Saturday, when it was stupid hot, Cathy and my sister Eileen made me promise not to work outside. So I had the whole day to myself. Cathy is in VBS mode and needed to decorate the children's classroom and planned to do it Saturday afternoon. Thus began the battle in my mind/heart. I had the time to help her, but decorating is definitely not on my list of things I enjoy. But it was clear as day that the loving thing to do was to put aside my preferences and help her. Though the battle raged for a few minutes, I'm pleased to report there was victory. In the end, it was a very enjoyable time, we got a lot done and enjoyed doing it together.

But why was there a battle at all?

Because I still have brain damage.

Part of my brain has been significantly healed; the part that reasons and feels love – the prefrontal cortex. Its this part of my brain that agrees with God's Word and wants to do His will. But there remain neural circuits with which I was born and which I have strengthened by choice and habit, that drive self-centeredness. These neural pathways have not yet been removed. These unhealthy pathways that drive self-centeredness and fear are what the Apostle Paul calls the sin that dwells in our bodies.

Even after we have been graciously justified and made alive to God, we still need to be healed and set free from these dysfunctional, broken neural pathways and bodily practices associated with the old life of self-centeredness. Thankfully our brains can be healed and rewired. Meditating upon the truth of God's Word rewires our brain. Replacing lies with God's truth strengthens the prefrontal cortex and speeds the dismantling of unhealthy neural circuits. Replacing self-serving behaviors with other-centered behaviors strengthens good neural circuits and contributes to healthy muscle memory.

This whole process is the process of *sanctification*.

The process of *sanctification* is also the process by which we enter more deeply into the life of God. As we read Romans 8:1-13, notice how many times the Holy Spirit is connected with life. If we really want to be fully alive we must realign our life purpose and pursuits on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings life to all those who set their minds on His will.

ROMANS 8:1-13

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. **2** For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and 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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, **4** in order that the righteous 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** For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. **7** For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. **8** Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact 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, although 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 Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

12 So then, brothers, 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.

KEEPING IT IN CONTEXT

In chapters 1-4 Paul deals with *justification*. *Justification* is the first aspect of salvation. Through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ we are delivered from the *penalty* of sin. We are declared righteous by God. We are restored to a living relationship with God for all eternity. That is our new *position* before God.

In chapters 5-8 Paul deals with *sanctification*. *Sanctification* is the second aspect of salvation. It is the lifelong process of being delivered from the *power* of sin. The goal of *sanctification* is that we increasingly become like Jesus (8:29).

Justification means we are righteous in our *position*: *sanctification* means we are becoming more righteous in our *practice*.

In Romans 8:1-13 Paul continues to deal with the process of *sanctification*. In 7:21-25 he summarizes the struggle of *sanctification*.

THE STRUGGLE OF SANCTIFICATION (7:21-25)

Romans 7:21-25 (ESV)

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. **22** For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, **23** but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. **24** Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? **25** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Ever since Adam, humans have been born with brains controlled by fear and selfishness. Our selfish, fear-controlled brains are hostile to God and instead of trusting His love and submitting to His will we take life into our own hands and by any means necessary try to secure our needs and wants. Instead of loving God and loving others, we love ourselves and use others. We make our survival the most important pursuit in life.

Even after we trust in Christ and God graciously declares us righteous, we still possess brains with neural pathways shaped by fear and self-centeredness. In the realm of our brains, when we trust in Jesus Christ and are justified by God, a change takes place in our brains: the prefrontal cortex (center of reasoning and experiencing of love) is imbued with love and truth from the Holy Spirit and we come alive in a relationship with God the Father, Jesus and the Spirit. This is why we love God and want to do His will.

But the many neural pathways shaped by fear and self-centeredness still exist. This is the sin that still dwells in us. It takes time for these unhealthy neural circuits to degrade and healthy ones to form.

This is the process and struggle of *sanctification*.

How does this process move forward in our lives?

In Romans 8:1-13, Paul teaches four truths critical to the healing of our brains and our sanctification.

The first truth is that you and I need to stand firm in the fact that we are *justified* even though we continue to struggle against sin.

STAND FIRM IN THE FACT THAT YOU ARE **JUSTIFIED** EVEN THOUGH YOU CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE AGAINST SIN (8:1-4)

Romans 8:1-4 (ESV)

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. **2** For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and 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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, **4** in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Why is there no condemnation for those of us going through the struggle of sanctification?

Because God, through Jesus, condemned and judged all our sins – past, present and future. We stand before God as those who fulfill the righteous requirement of the law. In verse 4, *those who walk according to the flesh* are the unsaved; *those who walk according to the Spirit* are the saved. These are descriptive categories. As we will see in verses 9-11, Paul refers to all Christians as those who are *in the Spirit*.

So in your struggle against sin, stand firm in the fact that you are *justified*; that you are righteous in your standing before God.

Why is this important?

Because this struggle can lead to doubt and fear in our relationship with God. “Am I really saved?” “Will there come a point when God has had enough?”

This passage teaches that our struggle with sin after we have been justified is *normal*. Sanctification is a process. God wants us to be confident that He is with us every step of the way – that He is *for us*! Our Father is not in heaven with His arms crossed, scowling and criticizing everything we do. He’s the father running alongside us cheering us on as we wobble our way learning to ride our two wheeler.

God is *for us*!

He was for us in *justification*.

He is for us in *sanctification*!

So stand firm in the fact that God has declared you righteous on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus! Stand firm in the fact that you are justified even though you continue to struggle against sin.

The second truth you need to embrace is the fact that through the Holy Spirit you have been set free to pursue a completely different life.

REALIZE THAT THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT YOU HAVE BEEN SET FREE TO PURSUE A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT LIFE (8:5-8)

Romans 8:5-8 (ESV)

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** For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. **7** For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. **8** Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Before Christ, when we are in Adam, separated from God by our sin, we have no options but fear and self-centeredness. To “set our minds on the flesh” is to make our desires paramount; it is to make ourselves and our “survival” the ultimate point of reference in our world. It is to treat ourselves as God should be treated making our desires the number one pursuit in our lives.

We lived such lives not believing that God loves us or that God could care for us. It’s a survival of the fittest existence.

But when we’re born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit we are liberated to orient our lives, not on ourselves, but on the Spirit and what He wants for us and others. God’s love and care frees us up from fear and self-centeredness to love God and love others.

We didn’t have this option when we were “in the flesh”. Now that we have been justified by God through the blood of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit imparts to us this whole new life. It is not just an option, but as we will see, it is our obligation to pursue this new life that is aligned, not on ourselves, but on the Spirit.

The third truth you need to embrace is the fact that it is the Holy Spirit Who brings you life, not your old way of living.

EMBRACE THE FACT THAT IT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO BRINGS LIFE TO YOUR SPIRIT NOW AND TO YOUR BODY IN THE FUTURE (8:9-11)

Romans 8:9-11 (ESV)

9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact 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, although 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 Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

The moment you trusted in Jesus the Holy Spirit attached Himself to you and connected you to the Father and to Jesus. This is what it means to be alive – to have an interactive relationship with the three persons of the Deity. God is the source of all life. To be connected to Him is to be alive.

The Holy Spirit is a person. He is with you every moment of every day giving you life. In these verses, Paul emphasizes the life-giving ministries of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is giving life to our spirits right now and He will give life to our mortal bodies in the resurrection.

The point is that the Holy Spirit is the life-giver. This is the same point Paul made in verse 2:

Romans 8:2 (ESV)

2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

I like the way Ray Ortlund translates verse 2:

For in Christ Jesus I am under a new arrangement for living, in which the Holy Spirit imparts life to me. This new order sets me free from the old arrangement for living, confined to sin and death.¹

The Holy Spirit brings life. If you want to really live, realign your life purpose and pursuits on the Holy Spirit.

Your old way of living – cut off from God – self-centered survival of the fittest – always and only brings death. As we will see, before Christ we could live no other way. Now, in the Spirit we have another option – to realign our lives on the Spirit.

This leads us to the fourth truth:

WE OWE IT TO GOD TO REALIGN OUR LIVES ON THE HOLY SPIRIT IN LIGHT OF ALL THAT GOD DOES TO GIVE US LIFE (8:12-13)

Romans 8:12-13 (ESV)

12 So then, brothers, 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.

Living for ourselves did not bring us life. It may bring us momentary pleasure, but nothing lasting. It will always bring bondage, broken relationships, guilt, fear and emptiness. God has gone to indescribable lengths to set us free from the way of sin and death. Why would we continue to make our desires paramount and live in death?

This is one of those troubling passages where I wish Paul had said things a different way. He is clearly speaking to Christians when he addresses them as “brothers” in verse 12. He warns these brother Christians that if they live according to the flesh they will die but if by the Spirit they put to death the deeds of the body, they will live.

The death in 8:6 is clearly spiritual death – separation from God. Is Paul teaching we can lose our salvation? I don’t think so because of 8:1, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

¹ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *A Passion for God: Prayers and Meditations on the Book of Romans* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 107.

So how are we to understand verse 13? At a minimum we are to take it as a stern warning. To fail to realign our lives on the Holy Spirit will have dire consequences.

What does it mean to realign our lives on the Holy Spirit?

It means dying to living our lives for ourselves and instead trusting in God's loving care and being freed up to seek His Kingdom and His righteousness as our life pursuit. It means we want to be and do what God wants us to be and do. And all these things are found in God's Word.

At the heart of setting our minds on the Spirit is setting our minds on God's Word. The primary means of healing our brains is through meditating and applying God's Word.

Christian psychiatrist and author Timothy Jennings shares this fascinating finding:

Brain research shows that fifteen minutes a day in meditation or thoughtful communion with the God of love results in measurable development of the prefrontal cortex, especially in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). This is the area where we experience love, compassion and empathy. The healthier the ACC, the calmer the amygdala (alarm center), and the less fear and anxiety we experience. Truly, love casts out all fear.²

One of the primary ministries of the Holy Spirit is *illumination*. He enables us to understand the Scriptures and its application to our lives. This is another way the Holy Spirit heals our brains and helps us win over sin. But we play a part in this process; we must choose to spend thoughtful time reading and meditating upon God's Word.

As we do this, significant healing will take place in our brains and deep, positive change in our lives.

² Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: interVarsity Press, 2017), pp. 132-133.