

## Sermon 'The work of the Spirit in our lives' Romans 8:12-17

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Today, with the Eastern Church, we commemorate the day of Pentecost – when God poured out his Spirit on his Church. You do not have to be member of a Pentecostal Church to celebrate the great gift of God.

I have a Pentecostal background, so appreciate all things that we can say about his power, his gifts.

The Apostle Paul had a strong theology of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:14-17 we get a glimpse of this; today on this day of Pentecost I like to focus on one aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in his church and in our lives.

### **He leads**

How do we know we are children of God? The apostle says, 'All who are *led by the Spirit of God* are sons of God'. If we are led by the Spirit, we can be assured that we are God's children.

What does this mean, to be led by the Spirit? I think the concept can have different practical meanings. In the context of the book of Acts, in chapter two and elsewhere, we see that the Holy Spirit can lead people into moments of great joy, love, peace, even ecstasy. I guess you have had these moments, when you feel so close to God.

We also see how the leading of the Spirit can sometimes mean that the Apostles go here, or there, or the Spirit stops them from going somewhere. Have you never had this strong sense that you had to do something, or say something to someone, and it was exactly spot on, and it really helped that other person?

We also sometimes hear people use this term, being led by the Spirit, as a weak excuse for impulsive behavior, for not preparing for sermons, or as an excuse for bizarre behavior. That, I think, is abusing the term. This is not

what the Bible means with being led by the Spirit, and certainly not in Romans 8.

In Romans 8, I think Paul means something different. He says, in verse 13: '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'. So, the Spirit is involved in making us live better lives!

And then Paul continues, 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are Sons of God.'

Paul connects the work of the Holy Spirit with helping us live a life for God. It is the Spirit who moves us away from sinning to living for Him. He creates in us the desire to obey our Lord and to live a life for Him.

This does not mean we become perfect overnight; it means that when we sin, there is this voice in us – the voice of the Holy Spirit actually - telling us to change our life and to return to God. This leading is an ongoing process. It is God the Spirit in our life and in our church who desires that our lives are committed to God the Father and God the Son.

This is why the Holy Spirit was given to the Church on the day of Pentecost. So that we are drawn up to God again and again. He leads us; He develops our conscience; He helps us to live a life for God the Father.

This sounds rather mystical, and it is. We are talking about God at work in our lives!

At the same time, it is very practical. The Holy Spirit uses tools to develop our Christian lifestyle – He uses the Word of God – so we have to listen, to read, to ponder. He also uses other people to sometimes confront us. He uses our circumstances to make us trust God more.

But in any case, if we are children of God, we can be assured that the Spirit is at work. And if the Spirit is at work, we can be sure we are children of God!

If we realize our sinfulness, our shortcomings, our mistakes in the face of God, this should not make us despair of his Fatherhood and that we are his children. The fact that we realize our sins is clear proof that the Holy Spirit is at work – so sensitivity to our shortcomings actually shows that we are a child of the Father.

### **He bears witness with our spirit, that we are children of God**

The second manner, in which the Holy Spirit ensures us that we are children of God, is by actually testifying to it in our own spirit.

This inner conviction is, again, rather mystical. It is about God speaking to us. God confirming to us – you are my child.

For doing this, the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God; even now, as you listen, He confirms to your heart: I am God's child! He uses the Bible – where Jesus says plainly that those who believe in Him, are children of God.

And the Spirit also makes us see the fruit of His work in our lives. He transforms us by his moral guidance. Yes slowly, every so slowly he changes us, but any change testifies to the fact that we are God's children.

But He also testifies to our hearts in a more direct manner – the mystery of a God who communicates with us! He assures us that God adopted us as his sons and daughters. We have this Spirit-given inner conviction; the Spirit of God is our witness!

In Roman Adoption legislation, witnesses played an important role. Seven people had to be witnesses to the legal transaction. Well, the one Holy Spirit is enough for us. He testifies to us that we are children of God, and the matter is thereby assured.

God our Father adopted us as his children by making us part of the life of His One and Only Son, Jesus Christ. Our unity by faith with Jesus Christ the Son of God, had made us children of the Father. And the Holy Spirit of God who is in our life, testifies to this.

### **He makes you pray to God as Father**

Paul underlines that we can be certain of being children of God by pointing to a third aspect of the Spirit's work in you. The Spirit makes us address God as 'Abba, Father', and therefore we can be sure we have been adopted by God as his children.

Now this word Abba is Aramaic. It is the word Jesus himself used when He spoke with God in the garden of Gethsemane. It was also the word Jesus taught his disciples to use when praying to God. 'Our Father who art in heaven.' In Arabic we use an almost similar word. *Abana alladi fi samawaat*. Abana, our Father, who art in heaven.

When Paul speaks of us calling God, 'Abba Father', does not just focus on the inner feelings of believers, but he refers to our common prayer life. He most likely refers to the liturgical habit in the very early churches, where the Lord's Prayer was often prayed. But this common prayer cannot exist without our personal fellowship with God as well. Our individual hearts cry to him as well, God, My Father...

To address God as Father is not something small. It is a sign of our confidence actually, because it suggests closeness and intimacy. It suggests we are not afraid of Him.

Is God not angry at us? Is He not a dangerous God? Can we really speak with Him, in a manner that is so close?

Many of our Muslim friends here in Egypt live in fear of God. They cannot trust Him because you can never be sure that Allah accepts you, and you can never be sure of His behavior. He may decide to crush you like a cockroach if you do not follow every rule of his rulebook.

We can pray to God the Father with confidence; to call God 'Abba, Father' is an amazing thing. The Holy Spirit drives the children of God to talk with him, to communicate with Him in a manner that is personal, intimate, and full of confidence. And this in itself shows that we are indeed children of God. We find all this

so 'normal' but it is a miracle. How can human beings communicate with God Almighty!?

Well, we can, because it is God Almighty Himself whose Spirit is in us and among us. God gave His Spirit to his church, to enable us to live for him, to love him, to speak with him. He is like a Magnet, given by God inside us, that draws us continually to God, the Magnet.

All this has been made possible because we have been adopted by God. Slaves you may treat badly – but your own sons and daughters you love and defend with your own life!

Our word *adoption* comes from Latin, *adoptio*. The Apostle Paul refers mainly to the Roman legal habit of adoption in his letter to the believers in the city of Rome.

In the Roman Empire adoption was a difficult process, but once adopted, a child was legally absolutely similar to the natural children of the father. By adoption he received the same legal rights as the other children, not unlike how adoption is treated in the western world nowadays.

Some consequences of adoption in the Roman Empire:

1. The adopted son lost all right in his previous family and gained all the rights of a legitimate son in the new family.
2. The adopted child became a legitimate heir of the estates of his new father.
3. The old life of the adopted son was wiped out. All his debts were cancelled; he was regarded as a new person totally separate from his past life.
4. In the eyes of the law, he was absolutely the son of his new father.

The Roman Empire took this very seriously. Emperor Claudius adopted Nero as his son, in

order for Nero to inherit the throne of the Empire, and this was accepted by the politicians as normal.

Our adoption as children of God has similar impact; our former life exists no longer; our slate of debts has been wiped clean; we are now truly children of God, and Gods inheritance is ours.

Salvation started with the eternal plan of God; it was made possible because God himself came with Christmas to this world for our salvation; it is finalized because God came with Pentecost to his church to lead us into a life of love and obedience for God, to make us know with great certainty: God is now our Father, and to draw us into relating to God in prayer, as Our Father in heaven.

### **And this means we can be assured of being heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ**

Finally, Paul writes all this to assure us, that as children of God, we will inherit with Jesus Christ all that the Father will give to his Son. What Jesus Christ inherits, we inherit, because we are children of God.

And what we will inherit is above all, communion, eternal communion with God. Of which we already have a foretaste because with Pentecost God himself came into our lives to make us enjoy all these great blessings. Right now we enjoy this to a certain extent, and one day we will enjoy this fully, when we dine with our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forever and ever.

**Amen**