

Sermon: The Spirit has come

Romans 8:1-11

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This week I typed in Google the words: "Be a better person" and I got 84 million hits. It seems we, humans, like to be better than we are. And the fact that the topic is discussed so much seems to indicate that we do not have easy answers.

What to do to make ourselves better? Judaism in the time of Jesus and the apostles had a simple answer: we need to stick to the laws of God.

God has made his standard known, and if we just obey, if we follow that standard, we will be better people. In theory.

In practice, Israel found out that even with that perfect standard of the will of God, it was unable to actually live as better people.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul showed the Jewish followers of Jesus that they should not make the laws of the Old Testament the criterion for non-Jewish believers in Jesus.

These Jews wanted all followers of Jesus to be circumcised and follow Israel's food laws, and to celebrate the Jewish sabbath. Even the non-Jews among them.

"How can you be a good Christian if you do not follow our morality", was the deeply rooted argument. Good Christians must be like us.

But even the Jews themselves had been unable to obey God through their laws. It did not help them to be better people, and as their morality only created division in the church, why push it?

The Thora had never helped Israel to be better people. Not because these laws are wrong, but because Israel, just like all of mankind, was infected with the disease called sin.

Sin - the inborn and nurtured tendency to do our own thing, works in all of us and makes it impossible to be better people.

1 No condemnation

So we must always carry our miserable self around? We must always feel as the 'wretched man', stuck to sin and death?

No, says Paul, God has donated a solution separate from the laws of Israel.

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

About this word 'condemnation, katakrima in Greek, the reformed theologian FF Bruce says that it probably means "the actual punishment that followed the sentence. There is no longer reason for those who are in Christ to do penal servitude as though they had never been pardoned, never been released from the prisonhouse of sin."

Our sins are forgiven, the power of sin is broken, and we are able to serve God.

We are able, because our Lord Jesus in his own physical existence, dealt with sin once and for all. So if we are *in him*, in our ark of salvation, God does not condemn us; he only sees Jesus Christ when he looks at us. And we are also part of the person who dealt sin and its power a definite blow.

I say "we" and "us", and that is a proper way of applying these words of Paul, but he was in the first place addressing the situation of the Jews. They had tried to follow the laws of God, and they had failed, but Christ was their solution.

What the law was powerless to do, Christ has done. He lived all the laws. And He also pushed sin away - just as God pushed the waters of the Red Sea away for Israel to be saved from Egypt.

In Romans 6, Paul compares this exodus of Israel with our baptism. Jesus, through our baptism, saved us from the world of sin and put us into the world of God.

After Israel had gone through the waters of the Red Sea God gave his good and perfect laws to Israel, at Sinai. Those laws fully undermined any sense that Jewish people were better than anyone else. They undermined any sense that we humans are okay and that we only need good rules and we will be better people.

The Thora showed Israel, and all mankind, that we need something stronger, something more dramatic, for being able to obey God.

2. Gift of the Spirit

Was was the new thing that God gave Israel in the desert, after they were saved from Egypt, from the life of sin? After He gave them the laws on Mt Sinai?

He also gave them the tabernacle. That was the place where God resided. It was the place of forgiveness of sins, and also the place of guidance for the people. By night the glory of God rested on the tabernacle as a fire, and by day as a column of smoke.

What is this glory of God on the tabernacle?

It is the Holy Spirit; God himself.

After Paul discussed in Romans 6 how as believers we are baptised into the new life with God, and in Romans 7 how the law of Israel did not help them to serve God, Paul now, in Romans 8, describes the coming of the Holy Spirit.

God himself is in our midst and that has changed everything. Even in the Old Testament times, by the way, that gracious presence of God was Israel's salvation, and they needed that for their disability to serve God through his laws.

Jesus is our solution, and his Holy Spirit, to make us better people.

Yes we still die, we still have a body that is dead. Almost all commentators interpret the expression "your bodies are dead because of sin" as referring to the fact that, due to sin, the human body is destined to die.

So sure is this prospect of death that the Apostle sees the body as "already dead". But the principle of life is at the same time at work in your life and this guarantees your eternal life. More about this next week.

What we know for sure today - the life of God is renewing our lives, and thanks to its power - we are able to serve God even in our present life. Maybe not always very perfect, but very real at the same time.

He makes us better people in a process that with a formal theological term we call 'sanctification'.

Jesus is the perfect temple of the Holy Spirit; God was fully present in Jesus through his Spirit. And we, who are in Christ Jesus, are also thereby temples of the Holy Spirit. He surrounds you, he resides, as it were, in you. He also drives you all the time, from inside your heart and mind, to do the will of God.

So how to deal with sin? How to get rid of that nasty disease that is both the result of our wrong DNA and also of how we learned bad habits?

Let me give a simple example: [Hold up an empty glass. Ask"] "Do you know how to get the air out of this glass? How to get sin out of your life? We cannot suck the air out. We cannot beat sin out of us.

The answer is simple. [Take a pitcher of water and fill the glass. Explain:] Now the air is gone.

The victory in the Christian life is not accomplished by sucking out a sin here and there, but by being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God is here in church and in your life, to enable you to live for God. That is the good news. We can be better people. Truly spiritual people.

This is actually what God had promised throughout the centuries to Israel. He had promised that he would pour out his Spirit on his people; He had promised that one day He would write his laws in their hearts, so that finally they could truly obey their heavenly Father.

All these promises of God were fulfilled with Pentecost, and they are being fulfilled in our lives; in us, who through Jesus Christ are filled with the Spirit of Christ.

God's Spirit is at work in you.

Be careful, by the way, being better, spiritual people does not mean there is anything wrong *per se* with your physical existence. I know, Paul speaks of the flesh, and of the Spirit, but the flesh in his dictionary is not simply the body, not your flesh and blood.

How, then, is he using it? He really means human nature in all its weakness and he means humanity in its vulnerability to sin. He means everything that attaches a man to the world, instead of to God.

When Paul in Galatians 5 gives a list of the works of the flesh he includes the bodily and the sexual sins; but he also includes idolatry, hatred, wrath, strife, heresies, envy, murder.

Church father Tertullian wrote in his book *On the Resurrection of the flesh* (10):

In these and in similar statements it is not the substance of the flesh which is censured but its actions.

What needs to change is our attitude; instead of a focus on ourselves, on satisfying our own needs, our own appetites, our focus should be on God and on serving our neighbour in love. And this change has been made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and by the Holy Spirit who came into our life.

3 Two kinds of life

As we live in the air, so we live in Christ, never separated from him. As we breathe in the air and the air fills us, so Christ fills us.

The Holy Spirit is at work in your life; he draws you every closer to God. He does this, even when you are not aware. He brings you to church; he fine-tunes your conscience; he makes you feel bad when you don't do the will of God; he makes you rejoice in obedience to God.

So the work of the Spirit has an objective aspect - He is doing this in you. But we must also cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Listen for instance to what John Chrysostom said about this in his Homily on Romans (13):

We need to submit to the Spirit, to wholeheartedly commit ourselves and strive to keep the flesh in its place. By so doing our flesh will become spiritual again. Otherwise, if we give in to the easy life, this will lower our soul to the level of the flesh and make it carnal again.

We have a responsibility, to commit ourselves to allowing this work of Christ and the Spirit in us.

God uses means to work in us. The Spirit uses Holy communion, the Bible, your friends, things that happen to you, a good book. See God at work in all this.

All people who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ have the Spirit of Christ in their life; in all who believe in Him, God is at work. In all of us, our life is renewed. In all of us, the Spirit of God drives us to living out the will of God, that is to love Him and to love all people.

Conclusion

John Chrysostom, in his Homily on Romans (13), said enthusiastically:

When one has the Spirit within, what can be lacking? With the Spirit one belongs to Christ, one possesses Him, one vies for honour with the angels. With the Spirit, the flesh is crucified, one tastes the delight of an immortal life, one has a pledge of future resurrection and advances rapidly on the path of virtue.

So our focus should not be on battling sin, not on keeping the laws of God in front of us all time. Our focus should be on being close to Jesus Christ. On the cup of our life being full of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus Christ we have received all we need to live for God. In Him we are the temple of the Holy Spirit who will lead us ever further on the path of living for our Lord.

In him we have received the power to love God and to love each other, and to not let anything drive us apart for God and from his other children. Through Christ and the Holy Spirit, we can truly be better persons.

Amen