

Sermon: The Spirit has come

Romans 8:1-11

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Yesterday I typed in Google Search the words: "Be a better person" and I got millions of hits. Pages with names like "15 ways to be a better person", "9 ways to be a better person, 101 ways, 16 ways, "31 ways to be a better person."

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.

That is the 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 enforce the laws of the Old Testament on 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 should do this.

"How can you be a good Christian if you do not follow our morality and our rules", was the deeply rooted argument.

But even the Jews themselves had been unable to obey God through their laws. It did not help them to become better people, so why push this issue of keeping the law?

The Thora had never helped Israel to be better people. Not because these laws are wrong, but because Israel, just like all of humankind, 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 by our own means. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own hair.

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? The idea that we cannot make ourselves better can be rather depressing.

But this is not needed. In the first place, Paul in Romans 8:1, encourages us:

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

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; our Lord Jesus dealt with sin once and for all. So if by faith we are *in him*, in our ark of salvation, God does not condemn us; he only sees Jesus Christ when he looks at us. That is great news.

This is about us. Through faith we are 'in Christ Jesus'. So with confidence we can repeat after Paul: there is no condemnation!

If our Lord Jesus does not condemn me, I shall not condemn you. If your Lord does not condemn me, then it is also not your business to condemn me. In the community of the church, we must never forget this liberating news.

But our Lord did more than to just forgive our sins. He also makes us better people.

2. Gift of the Spirit

How he does this, is explained by Paul in his letter to the Romans. He does this by comparing the Christian life with the journey of Israel from Egypt to the promised land.

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

And after Israel had gone through the waters of the Red Sea, after he set them apart as the people of God, he then gave his good and perfect laws to Israel, at Sinai.

Those good 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 then we will be better people.

The law showed Israel, and all of us, that to be put in the perfect environment of the new land, and to have these perfect laws, still did not make Israel into better people.

We need something stronger, something more dramatic. The best of circumstances and the best knowledge of the will of God, is not enough for us to be better people.

So what 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. This was the place of forgiveness of sins, and also the place of God's presence. 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; it is God himself. And this presence of God himself, *that* should make the real difference in our lives.

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 is with us.

Our Lord Jesus is our solution - through his Holy Spirit He makes us better people.

God is renewing our lives, and thanks to God's power - we are able to serve God even in this 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'. We are made holier.

And this process of sanctification, of becoming better people, is not because we have a lawbook, but because the Holy Spirit - God himself - is present in our life. The lawbook tel us what is expect from us - and that is important. But it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to do what is expect from us.

He surrounds you, he occupies your life. He also drives you all the time, from the inside of 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 the result of how we have learned bad habits?

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. He helps us to focus less on ourselves, on satisfying our own needs, our own appetites, and to focus more on God and on serving our neighbour in love.

3 Two kinds of life

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 - It is God at work in you. But we must also purposely cooperate with the Holy Spirit. We have to do something. What?

Well. God uses means to work in us. The Spirit uses Holy communion, your friends, things that happen to you, a good book. And God uses his written Word - and this includes... the law.

A law we do not reject, but a law that we love. A law that is good. But change in us does not come from focussing on the law, but from a focus on God. On the Spirit of God, who is the agent in us that conforms us to what God wants.

I remember being on Mt Sinai in Egypt. We walked up in the afternoon, and when darkness fell, we had to walk down again, over a very rough, uneven, dark path. That was rather hard.

How to walk in life without stumbling? It does not help at all to stare at the path. If you focus on how to walk on that uneven path, you lose track and you stumble more. Just like a focus on ourselves, on being good, does not help much. It is much better to look up. To not stare down, but to make sure you catch the light in your eyes. To focus on our Lord. That makes the going easier.

When we focus on what we must do, what we must change, how we must be better people, if we focus on the law, we actually mainly see our own shortcomings.

If we focus on the light, on Jesus Christ, on God the Father, on the work of the Holy Spirit in us, we are much better conformed to what He wants us to be.

He is at work in you, surely, to bless you, and to make you a better person.

That is often a painful and slow process. Yes. But a process that we are engaged in as forgiven people. Not a process to reach God, but a process with God on our side. The Holy Spirit encourages you in this learning process.

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 being 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

Church father 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.

Paul says in Romans 12 that we must present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. That is our side of the bargain. We do this each week at Holy Eucharist.

In Jesus Christ we have received all we need to live for God.

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.

So let us pray to Him: come Holy Spirit, fill my life again. Drive evil out and lead me to serve you more.

Amen