

## **“Debtor and Royalty”**

**Romans 8:12-17**

**February 26, 2023**

---

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Identity is a major factor in behavior. A person identifying as a victim will often behave in a way that gives up easily, followed by self-pity and self-condemnation. A person who is secure in his or her identity will approach the world with confidence and curiosity, seeing challenges as opportunities rather than threats.

In his book, *The Soul of Shame*, Curt Thompson writes, “In the last twenty years, research spearheaded by the work of psychologist Allan Schore and others persuasively suggests that of all the primary tasks of the infant, there is none more crucial than the pursuit, acquisition and establishment of joyful, securely attached relationships” (p. 60). Just as such secure attachment is important for normal physical and emotional development, it is also vital for our spiritual development. Thompson goes on to point out how such secure attachment gives an infant a “secure relational base” from which to explore the world. Without it, no creative activity can ensue.

Paul knows that much of our growth in personal holiness, our sanctification, depends on our sense of identity and our secure attachment to God. That’s why he begins this chapter with the statement that there is no condemnation for us in Christ, and ends with a lengthy statement about no separation. Today’s passage features two truths about our identity. We are debtors, and we are royal sons and daughters of God Most High.

### **I. Debtors – v. 12-13**

Most of us are very familiar with what it means to be a debtor. My first debt was when Wendy and I bought our first house in 1981. Mortgage rates had just reached an all-time high, and we were facing a rate of 16 percent. Because of these high rates, it was not uncommon for sellers to finance the mortgage for their own house, for the simple reason that buyers couldn’t afford the house otherwise. That happened to us, and the seller agreed to finance our mortgage at the attractive rate of 12 percent. Since mortgages are secured by the house that is being purchased, the repayment of the loan gets first priority in one’s budget, lest the house be re-possessed and sold to pay the loan.

Paul wants us to accept the fact that we have a debt to pay that should also get top priority for us. Interestingly, before telling us what that debt is, he tells us what it is not. **“We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the**

**flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die”** (8:12-13). The “flesh” is Paul’s word for the sin nature with its corrupt desires (6:12). He starts with this negative word for the simple reason that the flesh comes to us with the insistence that our desires must be satisfied, just as debts must be satisfied. Our sinful desires are like a debt collector who keeps calling and interrupting our lives to insist that we pay what we owe by satisfying those desires. This can be seen in the language that is often used. “You owe it to yourself,” followed by some statement that leads to indulging certain sinful desires. “You owe it to yourself to satisfy your sexual desires, or to indulge in overeating or drinking, or to be lazy, or to take that money that’s not yours but that you somehow deserve.” Such sinful desires are common to us all, and they want to convince us that we are obligated to satisfy them.

Paul wants us to know that we owe no debt to these sinful desires. If we do give in to them, they will take us to a bad place. **“For if you live according to the flesh, you will die.”** Literally, the text says, “you are about to die.” The idea is that satisfying the desires of the sinful nature puts us in a treacherous place, as if we are walking blindfolded on the edge of a cliff.

Instead of being indebted to the sinful nature, Paul says that we have a debt to the Spirit to **“put to death the deeds of the body,”** and this will lead to life. So there is a kind of life that leads to death, and a kind of death that leads to life. This death that leads to life has been referred to by many throughout the history of the church as the “mortification of sin.” It is what Jesus was referring to when he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, **“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away”** (Matt. 5:29-30). Jesus, of course, is using hyperbole to make the point that we are to take sin seriously. He is not advocating bodily mutilation, but he is advocating that we realize what’s at stake in the choices we make.

In the Middle Ages, the approach to mortification took a direction that was not helpful. Christians sought mortification through leaving the world and joining monasteries. These were places of extreme self-denial, separation of the sexes, deliberate poverty, rough clothes, and denial of sleep. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul forbids such an approach to our growth in personal holiness. In Colossians 2, he says that such regulations as “Do not handle, do not taste, Do not touch” **“have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh”** (Col. 2:23).

What, then, is Paul advocating here? At least two things. First, we are to accept the fact that there will be an ongoing battle between our sinful desires and our desire to please God. We are not to do what Neville Chamberlin did with Adolph Hitler just before World War II. The British Prime Minister met

with Hitler and reached a peace agreement about which he declared “I believe it is peace for our time.” This false peace only served to give Hitler more time to strengthen his forces, leading to greater destruction. We must realize that there is within us all these evil desires, and attempts to live peacefully with them will only allow them to grow in strength.

Second, to mortify sin means that we must fight against sin through whatever means necessary, no matter how radical. To word it differently, we don’t pray on the one hand, “Lead us not into temptation,” while on the other hand putting ourselves in the place of temptation. Dan Doriani gives a helpful illustration of that when he writes of a woman who was married to a difficult man. She attended a large church, always alone because her husband elected not to come with her. She would often sit behind a man who also worshiped without a wife. Though they never spoke, he had a look and manner that stirred her imagination. She knew she had a choice. She could sit closer to him in order to ensure that they would meet, or she could switch to another service and focus on worship and on loving her husband. Her choice for the latter is a perfect example of what Paul means when he tells us to **“put to death the deeds of the body.”** The present tense of the verb used here indicates that this is something we will need to do continuously.

Verse 14 is something of a bridge verse between the idea of being a debtor to God and being a son or daughter of God. **“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”** This is not an encouragement to make sure we are led by the Spirit, but rather a statement of fact for all Christians. To be a Christian is to be led by the Spirit. The word translated “led” has a stronger sense than our English word conveys. It was used, for example, of someone leading an animal with a rope and halter, or of someone being arrested and led to prison. That doesn’t mean that God’s leading of us violates our will or turns us not robots, because the Scriptures appeal to our will many times. What it does mean is that as we mortify sin in our lives, we can have confidence that we’re not battling sin by ourselves. The Holy Spirit is at work too, closing doors to those places that would be too tempting for us and opening doors to encourage us. Even in the suffering times of life, God’s Spirit is leading us to places of growth and healing. He does this because of our exalted status as God’s sons and daughters, which brings us to our next point.

## II. Royalty – v. 14-17

The Holy Spirit not only leads us to places and circumstances of growth in holiness, he also assures us of our sonship. The contrasting attitude is that of the slave, with a resulting fear. **“For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons.”** The ancient city of Rome was filled with slaves, and many of the Christians in Rome had experienced slavery. In the mid first-century BC, the

Roman general Pompey conquered Judea and brought many Jews to Rome as slaves. Slaves are prone to fear for the simple reason that sadistic punishment is so often used to keep them in line. It is not uncommon for people to bring that same attitude toward God, in which their relationship is not unlike the punishing master toward his slave. “I have to be good so God won’t punish me.” Fear of punishment instead of mutual love becomes dominant.

The parable of the prodigal son states perfectly the change that takes place in the heart of the Christian by the work of the Holy Spirit. In open rebellion, the prodigal son took his portion of his father’s estate and used it to get away from his father. His attempt at freedom did not end well, and he realized that life under the authority of his father wasn’t so bad after all. But he felt that he had permanently lost his sonship status, so he concocts a plan to return to his father as a servant. His father rejects that plan entirely. Upon seeing his son while he was still far off but walking toward home, the father runs to meet him and showers him with kisses. The son starts his rehearsed speech to appeal to his father to be allowed to return as a servant only to be interrupted by the father, who makes a speech of his own to his servants. **“Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again”** (Luke 15:22-24). All of that is an indication that this son will not be received as a servant, but will have his sonship status returned to him. The work of the Spirit, in the heart of the Christian, is to put the robe across our shoulders, the ring on our finger, and to assure us that the Father is rejoicing over us.

One of the results of this is that we cry out, **“Abba! Father!”** The word translated “cry out” has the sense of uttering a loud cry, even a scream. It would be the word used when a frightened child cries out for help to a parent. This cry is uttered to “Abba,” which is the Aramaic word for father. Aramaic is the language Jesus would have spoken. It is a colloquial and familiar term that a child would have used in addressing an earthly father. The Jewish scholar Joachim Jeremias said of this word, “*Abba* was an everyday word, a homely family-word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner. Jesus did it always, in all his prayers which are handed down to us, with one single exception, the cry from the cross.”

It is bold of us as Christians to believe that God is a Father to us, and it is a boldness that comes from the Holy Spirit. He reassures us and teaches us to call out to God as our Father. In his book *Children of the Living God*, Sinclair Ferguson describes a friend who adopted a child from another country. She was slow to bond with her father, but one day appeared at his side with a shoe in her hand. “Daddy,” she said, “I need another shoelace.” It was the first time she had called him “Daddy,” and he knew that their relationship had changed. He was not bothered by her request. On the contrary, his heart thrilled that she was beginning to accept his fatherly love for her. In the same way, when

the Holy Spirit helps us take our needs to our heavenly Father in prayer, the Father is pleased.

As children of our heavenly Father, not only do we come to him with our needs, we also receive from him the greatest status possible. **“And if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ”** (8:17). There may be a rich person somewhere you count as a close friend. This rich person may enjoy your friendship, confide in you, and prioritize spending time with you. But in the vast majority of cases, when it comes time to write a will, priority is going to be given to those with family status. That’s precisely the status we have received by God’s grace. We’re made part of the family of God through adoption. Our inheritance is the enjoyment of the family, as well as the redeemed earth that God has promised to give to the second Adam and all who are in him by faith.

Some might read verse 17 and wonder why Paul had to include suffering along with glory. We are fellow heirs with Christ, **“provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”** The Spirit’s work in our lives makes of us more than fair-weather friends of God. By his grace, we become deeply attached to God so that we become those able to refute Satan’s accusation about Job. “Take away the blessings,” Satan claims, “and leave only the suffering, and Job **“will curse you to your face”** (Job 1:11). God does such a deep work in our hearts that we say, “I’m attached fully, come what may.” As a result of embracing our sonship identity, the choices we make are not guided first by a desire to avoid suffering but by our exalted identity.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Someone sent me this week a Lenten meditation “A Liturgy for One Battling a Destructive Desire” (from *Every Moment Holy*). The prayer starts like this: “Jesus, here I am again, desiring a thing that were I to indulge in it would war against my own heart, and the hearts of those I love. O Christ, rather let my life be thine! Take my desires. Let them be subsumed in still greater desire for you, until there remains no room for these lesser cravings.” The prayer then concludes like this: “Let me build, then, my King, a beautiful thing by long obedience, by the steady progression of small choices that laid end to end will become like the stones of a pleasing path stretching to eternity and unto your welcoming arms and unto the sound of your voice pronouncing the judgment: Well done.”

**Discussion Questions**  
**Romans 8:12-17**

1. Can you think of some examples of the way security helps a person move out into the world in healthy ways? Consider some of your experiences growing up. If you grew up with a basic sense of security, how did that help you?
2. How might the security promised us in Romans 8 help us grow as Christians?
3. In verse 12, Paul brings up the metaphor of debt. What does it feel like to be a debtor? How does our sinful nature attempt to make us feel that we owe it something?
4. Paul says that we are debtors, just not to the sinful flesh. What is our debt?
5. Verse 13 gives a command that is sometimes referred to as the “mortification of sin.” It means to put to death the sinful deeds of our nature. Can you think of specific examples of what that might look like? Are there ways you put to death sinful deeds?
6. The leading of the Spirit in verse 14 is a forceful leading, similar to the way a person leads an animal (but without the violation of our will in the process). Can you think of ways God has led you through closing doors or opening doors?
7. Paul’s contrast to a spirit of sonship is a spirit of slavery, together with the fear that accompanies such a spirit of slavery. Can you think of some practical examples of that contrast?
8. The Spirit helps us cry out, “Abba! Father!” Can you think of ways that you have learned to call out to God when you are in need, even in very small ways?
9. What encouragement comes to you from verse 17?