



Group Discussion Guide

Romans 8:1-17

For groups meeting April 12 evening through April 19 morning.

Paul had just shared his own personal struggle with sin. He thanked God for delivering him from “this body of death” (Romans 7:24) despite the ongoing battle he fought with his own sin nature. In our struggle against sin, we can sometimes feel like we will be judged for the wrongs we commit. This is why Paul’s opening statement in Romans 8:1 is so important; to remind us that “those who are in Christ Jesus” are not condemned. Paul made sure his readers understood this, to keep them from listening to the notions that the accuser (Satan) had placed in their minds. He then shared exactly how God moved to save believers from condemnation: through the work of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 8:2, the word “law” can be understood as meaning a “principle.” So then, it was the principle of the Holy Spirit and his work “in (through) Christ Jesus” that had set believers free from the principle of sin and death. The meaning shifts back in verse 3 as Paul wrote about the limitation of the law and how God overcame this by sending Jesus. Paul indicated the law was not limited by its own design, but instead was limited “by the flesh.” It was because of mankind’s sin nature that the law could not bring salvation. God sent Jesus (“his own Son”) in a human body like those that were vessels of sin, to die as a sacrifice for sin (v. 3). In doing so, he provided a way for people to be reconciled to a holy God and the fulfill the “righteous requirement of the law,” which is a life of holiness that is lived “according to the Spirit” (v. 4).

Christian holiness is not a matter of painstaking conformity to the specific precepts of an external law-code; it is rather a question of the Holy Spirit’s producing his fruit in one’s life, reproducing those graces which were seen in perfection in the life of Christ.

F. F. Bruce, Romans: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 163–164.

The apostle then contrasted the two ways of life: the flesh and the Spirit. According to Paul, the key difference between how the two are manifested is found in the mind. Those who live according to the flesh think about and desire sinful things, while those who live according to the Spirit think about and desire the things of God (v. 5). The clarity of Paul’s contrast is striking, as he wrote that setting the mind on the flesh is death, while setting the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (v. 6). The mind that is set on the flesh leads to death because it is “hostile to God,” it “does not submit to God’s law,” and therefore the person of this mind “cannot please God.” This is a description of someone who does not know Christ.

In the next paragraph, Paul addressed the role of the Spirit in bringing a person into the family of God. He stated that those who have the Spirit living in them are “in the Spirit,” while those

who do not have the Spirit do not belong to him (v. 9). For the believer, the physical body is subject to death, but the Spirit gives life to our spirit through the righteousness of Christ (v. 10). Paul wrote that those who have the Spirit in them have the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead! And because of this, the Spirit will resurrect our physical bodies one day in the future (v. 11).

Paul reminded his readers that they are not slaves to the flesh (v. 12). He then focused again on the contrast of the Spirit and flesh, and taught that it is possible for the believer to “put to death the deeds of the body,” (v. 13). This is connected what Paul wrote in Romans 6:11, where he instructed believers to “consider yourselves dead to sin.” Believers are to surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit and allow him to empower us to die to sinful ways. Paul then wrote that believers are not pulled back into fearing for their lives, but instead we have “the Spirit of adoption as sons,” and this gives us an ongoing relationship with our heavenly Father (v. 15). This note on the phrase “Abba! Father!” gives us insight into the power of this relationship.

This phrase occurs in two other places in the New Testament—in Mark 14:36 (in Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane) and Galatians 4:6 (quoted in note on verse 14 above). Abba is an Aramaic word (in the ‘emphatic state’) which came to be used among Jews (as it is to this day in Hebrew-speaking families) as the familiar term by which children address their father. In synagogue worship Jews did (and do) address God as their Father, but not by this form of the word. The fact that this form made its way into the worshipping vocabulary of the Gentile churches is best explained by Jesus’ characteristic use of it. There is strong presumption, too, that when he taught his disciples to begin their prayers with ‘Father, hallowed be thy name’ (Luke 11:2), the word they were encouraged to use for ‘Father’ was Abba. When this non-Greek word passed into the usage of Greek-speaking churches it was amplified by the addition of its Greek equivalent, ho patēr (the two forms being rendered together ‘Abba! Father!’).¹

F. F. Bruce, Romans: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 167.

Many have asked the question, “How can I know that I am a child of God?” Paul answered that question as he wrote, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,” (v. 16). It is the work of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us and agrees with the testimony of our own spirit. As the Spirit does this, the believer experiences life and peace (v. 6). This relationship with God makes us “heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ,” and this relationship also leads us to “suffer with him” ... to be reviled by the world as he was (v. 17). Eventually, however, we also will be “glorified with him,” (v. 17).

Discussion Questions

1. Like Paul, we all struggle with our sin nature. It seems this struggle ends up leading us to the view of God as “angry tyrant.” Why do you think it is so hard to accept that God is a loving Father (v. 15) and that we who believe are not condemned by Him? What does it take to change our mindset to better match the view of God we see in Scripture?
2. Paul states that through Christ, God has done what the law could not do ... he condemned sin but also counted believers righteous and thus fulfilled the law (vs. 3-4). How does this lead you to praise God?
3. In your own words, what does it mean to walk according to Spirit? What does it mean to walk according to the flesh? What are the results of each? (vs. 5-7). Give a personal example.
4. Paul writes, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God,” (v. 8). In Hebrews 11:6 the author writes, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” What does this tell you about those “who are in the flesh”? And what does it teach us about what it means to please God?
5. What does it mean to you to know that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives inside of you? How does he help us to “put to death the deeds of the body” (v. 13)?
6. What is the connection between the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit, and our willingness to suffer with Jesus (vs. 16-17)? What does it mean to suffer with him?