

“FLESH VS. HOLY SPIRIT IN ROMANS 8—EXPERIENTIAL SANCTIFICATION”

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In Romans chapters 1—5, Paul addresses salvation, positional sanctification or justification. In chaps. 6—8, Paul moves on to teach experiential sanctification or how believers are to live the Christian life. In chap. 8, he specifically focuses on the spiritual life of believers. In Romans 8:1–17, Paul teaches believers they have an option: to live the spiritual life or live a carnal life, to walk according to the Spirit or according to the sin nature. But, as this paper will demonstrate, at no time does Paul address the unbeliever nor is his purpose simply to contrast the unbeliever and believer. Instead, Paul focuses on the struggle that every believer faces—to live a life pleasing to God or a life indistinguishable from the unbeliever.

As we begin our study of Romans 8, we must first understand the context. The Book of Romans was written to believers, as indicated by Paul’s use of “saints,” ἁγιοι, *hagioi*, in 1:7 and “we” used throughout the epistle. We also know the text is written to believers because of Paul’s use of the phrase “in Christ Jesus.” “In Christ” is Pauline terminology for positional truth—positional sanctification or justification. We are identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection at the instant we put our faith alone in Christ alone. As a result of the believer being “in Christ,” Paul will say in 8:1 that there is “no condemnation.”

Conflict of Opposing Principles

In the original manuscript (M.S.) of the Greek language, chap. 7 flows immediately into chap. 8. Paul’s thought is not broken by any grammatical indicator or literary style, and, of course, there were no chapter breaks or versification in the original M.S. In chap. 7 vv. 21–25, Paul discusses the law of God and the law of sin. In neither case does he address law from a legal sense—that is from a Mosaic Law or civil reference, but from the standpoint of a principle or a dictate from a source. Paul compares the dictates of God against the dictates or desires of sin or the sin nature.

I find [realize] then a law [principle], that evil [desire to sin] is present with me [Paul or the believer], the one [Paul or the believer] who wills [wants/wishes] to do good [obey God]. For I delight [rejoice] in the law [dictates/guidance] of God according to the inward man [what I know in my mind or soul], but I see another [different] law [desire or persuasion] in my members [body, body parts—tongue, hands, which seem to have a mind of their own], warring against [opposing] the law [dictates] of my mind [what I know in my soul], and bringing me into captivity [overpowering my soul] to the law [dictates/demands] of sin [mental attitude sins, sins of the tongue, overt sin] which is [at work] in my members [body/sin nature]. O wretched man [sinful person] that I am. Who will deliver [rescue] me from the body of death [the sinful desires of my body which causes carnality, temporal death]? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, [on the one hand] with the mind [soul, wish/will] I myself am serving the law [dictates] of God, but [on the other hand] with the flesh [sin nature in the body] [I am serving] the law [demands] of sin [lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, pride of life].¹ (Rom 7:21–25)

Paul concludes chap. 7 by saying there is a principle in the life of a believer; in our minds we know what is right and wish to do it, i.e. live a spiritual life, but because we continue to have inherent sin in the body, we often follow the lust of the flesh and sin, immediately lapsing into carnality. He continues in chap. 8 describing how the believer who possesses this internal struggle is able to live the spiritual life, that is, have victory over the law or dictates of sin (desires of the sin nature; 1 John 2:16). In this chapter, Paul introduces the role of God the Holy Spirit in experiential sanctification, the spiritual life of the believer. In 8:1, Paul says “*therefore*,” drawing a conclusion in chap. 8 to his subject of experiential sanctification in chaps. 6—8.

“No Condemnation”

There is therefore now no [οὐδεὶς, *oudeis*, emphatic: none of any kind] condemnation [κατάκριμα, *katakrima*, condemnation, a punishment following a judicial sentence] to those who are in Christ Jesus, who are not walking [living] [περιπατέω, *peripateo* (present active participle)] according to the flesh [σάρξ, *sarx*, sin nature], but [are walking/living] according to the Spirit [πνεῦμα, *pneuma*, God the Holy Spirit].² (Rom 8:1)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is quoted from the New King James Version.

² A manuscript disagreement exists regarding the length of v. 1. Many early Alexandrian and Western texts have no additional words after “Christ Jesus” (NASB, NIV). The Majority Text includes the final two phrases (KJV, NKJV). I will include the entire verse in my consideration of v. 1.

The noun *katakrima* is an intensification of the noun κρίμα, *krima* meaning “judgment.” *Katakrima* means “judicial pronouncement upon a guilty person, condemnation, punishment, penalty,” or the punishment after a judicial sentence.³ This Greek word *katakrima* is only used three times in the NT, and all three times it is used by Paul in Romans. He uses it the other two times in chap. 5 vv. 16 and 18 where it refers to original condemnation or judgment of the entire human race in Adam.

But in 8:1 when Paul says “there is no condemnation,” to what is he referring? Is he describing the believer who is no longer under the “condemnation” or guilt of Adam’s original sin—the Fall? or is he describing no *punishment* for the believer who no longer walks according to the flesh but according the Spirit? Paul’s subject in chaps. 6—8 is no longer justification and condemnation for original sin, but experiential sanctification. Thus Paul’s use of *katakrima* in 8:1 does not refer to condemnation in the original sense, but carries the connotation of punishment, the temporal punishment that all believers receive when living according to the flesh. The word translated “flesh,” *sarx*, means “flesh, physical body” or in Paul’s thought, a totality of the body dominated by sin.⁴ Therefore the word *sarx* is often used by Paul to represent sinful desires in competition with the leading of the Spirit (Rom 7:17–18; Gal 5:16).

For the believer who is “in Christ” and walks “according the Spirit” there is no punishment. However, for the believer who is “in Christ” but still walks “according to the flesh,” there is divine punishment. In v.1, Paul contrasts the two opposing walks of believers, not believer and unbeliever. This is the struggle Paul addresses through out Romans 8:1–17. Though we, as believers, are no longer under the penalty of sin and are dead to sin, we still can and do sin, thus serving the law of sin resulting in punishment. Though we may want to live the spiritual life, we know we cannot do so and serve the law of sin at the same time. So how can the believer live the spiritual life? Paul gives us the first clue when he uses the phrase “according to the Spirit.”

³ BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

⁴ BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

Dying to sin/Freed from sin

Before we move to v. 2, let's see how Paul ties together what he taught in chap. 6 to what he is saying now in chap. 8. First, in 6:1–5, Paul says we, as believers, are dead to sin (v. 1). This means the power of sin has been broken in our lives, and we are free from the penalty of sin. This freedom gives us the potential of walking in “newness of life” (v. 4). The freedom to walk in newness of life comes from our identification with God the Holy Spirit that placed us into union with Christ. In union with Christ we are identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, and as Christ was raised to newness of life, so is the believer.

Second, while we have been freed from the tyranny of the sin nature, we still have the presence of the sin nature. Before we believed in Jesus, all we could do was sin; we were enslaved to the sin nature. After salvation, as 6:7 says, “he who has died [to sin] is free from sin.” The problem now is that while we are no longer capable *only* of sin, we have an option: to sin or not to sin. How do we not sin? How do we “walk in newness of life?” How do we do what we want to do and not do what we hate (7:15)? Paul will develop this principle in 8:2.

Experiential Sanctification

Law of God the Holy Spirit

What Paul says in v. 2 is essentially a restatement of the argument found in chap. 6. Now, for the first time in his topic of experiential sanctification, Paul interjects God the Holy Spirit. Why? Because it is the participation of God the Holy Spirit who helps the believer to overcome the struggles that Paul has been describing in chaps. 6 and 7. Paul gives us the key to exploiting the freedom that has been given to us by the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord (Rom 6.1–7)—God the Holy Spirit.

For [*γάρ*, *gar*, for, because] the law [principle] of the Spirit [God the Holy Spirit] of life [positional sanctification] in Christ Jesus has made me free [Gal 5:1] from the law [principle] of sin and death. (Rom 8:2)

The word “for” or “because” (*gar*) both connects v. 2 with v. 1, further developing what is said in v. 1, and reflects back to what Paul developed in 6:7. The reason he can say “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” in 8:1 is *because* of the “law [principle] of the Spirit of life” in 8:2 placing us “in Christ Jesus.” We might even translate the phrase “Spirit of life,” as “life-giving Spirit.” Therefore, v. 2 is descriptive of the condition of Paul and all believers, spiritual or carnal, not a contrast between believers and unbelievers.

Conflicting lives

Instead, Paul strikes a contrast in v. 2 between the “law of the Spirit of life” and the “law of sin and death.” We *had been* enslaved to the “law of sin and death,” which Paul established in 6:16–18. We *had been* “slaves of sin” resulting in death, the spiritual death of the unbeliever, but we *have been* “freed from sin” as believers in Christ Jesus. Paul is not saying that all believers are routinely living by God the Holy Spirit, but that they are indwelt by God the Holy Spirit which frees them from the power of sin in their lives so that they are no longer enslaved to the sin nature (6:17).

Paul can now refer back to 6:18 where he said: “When you were freed from sin, at the same time you became slaves of righteousness.” Here Paul reiterates that our position “in Christ Jesus has made me free from the principle of sin and death.” It is the “Spirit of life” that has freed us. If it was not for the Spirit of Life we would not be able to walk in the Spirit, and while we would no longer be slaves to sin, we could do nothing about that freedom. Without the Spirit of Life, we are akin to slaves who have been set free but have no means to participate in that freedom.

Paul teaches a similar principle in Gal 5:1, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty [freedom] by which Christ made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage [slavery].” Again we see the warring of the two opposing principles or laws which Paul introduced in Rom 7:21–25: the laws of God and the dictates of the sin nature. We are born (justification) according to the Spirit, no longer to be under bondage to anything—neither the Mosaic Law nor the flesh, which is the sin nature (Rom 8:2).

Mosaic Law and righteous living

Now let's take Paul's next sentence as a whole, which encompasses both vv. 3 and 4.

For what the law [Mosaic Law] could not do [produce righteousness or pay the sin penalty] in that it was weak through the flesh [sin nature], God [God the Father] *did* by sending His own Son [incarnation] in the likeness of sinful flesh [true humanity] and an atonement for sin [because of the sin problem]: He [God the Father] condemned [judged] sin in the flesh [sin was judged in the body of Jesus (which the Law could not do)], that the righteous requirement of the law [Mosaic Law] might be fulfilled in us who do not walk [live] according to the standard of the flesh [sin nature] but according to the standard of the Spirit [God the Holy Spirit]. (Romans 8:3–4)⁵

Paul returns one last time to the Mosaic Law, which was part of his discussion in chap. 7. The Mosaic Law is not mentioned again in Romans 8. When the standard or guide of God the Holy Spirit is introduced, the Law is dispatched.

What is it that the Law could not do or was powerless to do? It could not produce righteousness. The Law could not judge sin; therefore, it could not justify. Neither could the Law produce the spiritual life. The Law is holy and righteous (7:7–12), but its

⁵ When reading v. 4, we must take note how the sentence is punctuated because punctuation affects meaning and interpretation. In the original text there was no punctuation, therefore no commas. In the English translations the first person plural pronoun “us” is followed by the relative pronoun “who” resulting in a subordinate clause that functions as an adjective; “who” defines the meaning of the “us.”⁵ In some versions of the English translations, such as the NASB and the NIV, the editors inserted a comma after “us” making the subordinate clause a nonrestrictive element. At best the nonrestrictive clause can be interpreted as an appositive, “a noun substitute that renames another noun just before it.”⁵ At worst, it can be interpreted as “nonessential to the meaning of the sentence.”⁵ How does this affect the interpretation of v. 4?

Some editors, (NASB, NIV) have included a comma which allows the nonessential aspect of the subordinate clause in the passage to contrast the walk of the unbeliever, “according to the flesh” and the walk of the believer, “according to the Spirit.” However, the context does not support this position. From the beginning of Romans, Paul is speaking to believers. In chaps. 6–8, he presents the options to those who have been freed from the bondage of sin: the law of sin and death versus the law of the Spirit of life—to “walk according to the flesh” or to “walk according to the Spirit.”

Therefore, the sentence in v.4 is best translated without the insertion of the comma, making the subordinate clause restrictive and essential to the meaning of the sentence. It is essential that we “walk according to the Spirit” for the “righteous requirement of the law” or righteous living to “be fulfilled in us.” The “us” isn't all believers; it is those who do not “walk according to the flesh.” These polar opposites are the contrast we see throughout Romans chap. 8.

purpose was never to produce righteousness. However, “what the Law could not do” God the Father accomplished by providing *the* source of righteousness, His Son. The Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, comes in the likeness of fallen man, in a physical body, and resolves the sin problem by being an offering for sin.

What the Law could do was to point the way to righteousness and be a requirement for holy living, Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7 (“you shall be holy, for I am holy”). The Law was given to a redeemed people to show them how to live a redeemed life. The Law was designed to tell a holy people, Israel, how to live a holy life. It was not written and designed to redeem Israel but to guide them in righteous living. That righteousness life can now be fulfilled by the believer by walking or living according to the standards, demands, and guidance of God the Holy Spirit.

Newness of life

Another way that we understand Paul used Rom 6:1–5 to set up his discussion of experiential sanctification in chaps. 6–8 is the phrase “walking in newness of life.” Paul uses “newness of life” in 6:4 as an example or metaphor for living by means of God the Holy Spirit though he has not yet introduced the concept. He says we have new life, but how do we walk in the sphere of this new life? In chap. 7, Paul discusses option one which is merely wishing and trying to do it. After all, we are dead to sin. However, Paul clearly illustrates that simply wanting or trying to live the spiritual life does not work. He *tries* not to sin, but that, of course, simply does *not* work. He continues to sin

In chap. 8 Paul introduces option two. He revisits the concept of “walking in newness of life” but without using the phrase. By teaching how the believer who has died to sin and the power of the sin nature can live by walking according to the Spirit, Paul gives the key to “walking in newness of life”—God the Holy Spirit. Not only have we been set free to live in newness of life, we have the means to do it as well. Paul continues with this thought in v. 5. He answers the implied question of what does it mean to be walking or living according to the flesh and walking or living according to the Spirit.

For those who live according to the standard of the flesh [sin nature] set their minds [decisions and actions] on the things of [relating to] the flesh [sin nature],

but those *who live* according to the standard of the Spirit, the things of [relating to] the Spirit. (Rom 8:5)

Paul is not talking about *unbelievers* who are living the way they do because they are “dead in their trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). On the contrary, Paul is talking about *believers* who are still living according to their sin nature instead of living according to the Spirit. Paul is not trying to evangelize his readers. He is teaching believers how to live the Christian life. He is drawing a distinction between a carnal lifestyle and a spiritual lifestyle.

In another epistle Paul teaches this same contrast in a manner similar to Romans 6—8. Paul writes the following in Col 3:1–3.

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ [Rom 6:4], keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind [φρονέω, *phroneo*] [Rom 8:5] on the things above [things of the Spirit], not on the things that are on earth [things of the flesh]. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God [Rom 6:5]. (Col 3:1–3)

Writing to believers in Colossi, Paul presents the readers with the choice between setting their minds on things above, which is where Christ is, or on the things that are on the earth, which are lusted after by the sin nature. The phrase “set your mind” is translated from the same verb used in Romans 8:5, *phroneo*, meaning “to think about or to be intent on.”⁶

Therefore, in Rom 8:5 as in many of his other epistles, Paul teaches the distinction between two different types of believers, not between believer and unbeliever. In the first part of the verse, “live according to the flesh,” Paul describes the carnal believer. In the second part of the verse, “live according to the Spirit,” Paul describes the spiritual believer. Paul continues drawing this distinction in 8:6, which is reflective of the struggle he presented in 7:15–20.

For to be carnally minded [mind set of the flesh; decision making and acting] is death [temporal/carnal], but to be spiritually minded [mind set of the Spirit;

⁶ BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

decisions and actions] *is* life [ζωή, *zoe*, experiential sanctification] and peace [εἰρήνη, *eirene*, harmony with God]. (Rom 8:6)

Operational or carnal death

Once more Paul begins with the carnally minded believer. The word “carnally” (*sarx*) is also routinely translated “flesh.” He says when the believer thinks or makes decisions based upon the sin nature, “the mindset of the flesh,” the result is “death.” Paul is not referring to physical death or even the spiritual death of the unbeliever but the carnal or operational death of the believer (sometimes referred to as temporal death). This is the same concept of death that we saw in v. 2 and is taught by other analogies in Gal 5:16, Eph 5:18, and 1 John 1:6–7. The believer thinking, living, walking according to the flesh is not spiritual. He is described as not walking by means of the Spirit, not filled by means of the Spirit, and not walking in the light. The carnally dead believer does not produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) because he is thinking according to the sin nature and not according to the Spirit. In fact, the carnal believer in operational death produces at best human good (wood, hay, and straw of 1 Cor 3:12), at worst, sin and evil.

Spiritually minded

The contrast “but” in Rom 8:6 gives the opposite of carnal death, that is, spiritually minded or mind set of the Spirit. What does it mean to be spiritually minded? Since Paul is building a strong contextual argument, we simply must think in terms of the phrases we have already studied. “Walking according to the Spirit” or “living according to the Spirit” and now we have another phrase – “be spiritually minded.” All of these phrases describe the same concept, experiential sanctification. The phrases are synonymous.

Of course, we have synonymous phrases on the opposite side of the spiritual life equation as well. If the believer is “living according to the flesh” or “walking according to the flesh,” he is carnally or fleshly minded. Paul has built an equation with polar opposites on each side of the spectrum. The believer is either walking or living by means of the flesh or sin nature and is carnally minded, or he is walking or living by means of the Spirit and is spiritually minded.

Paul says that being “spiritually minded” is or results in “life and peace.” The contrast is dramatic; to be carnally minded results in death and to be spiritually minded results in life and peace. What does it mean to result in “life and peace?” If we are observing polar opposites, and we in fact are, one way to see the meaning of “life and peace” is to understand it to be the opposite of the results of carnal or operational death in the first part of the verse. If carnal death is the production of human good—wood, hay and straw, sin, and evil, then the production of the spiritually minded is divine good—gold, silver, and precious stones, righteousness, and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). The “life” (*zoe*) can also be described as the enhanced life of John 10:10.

At this point we must once more remember that Paul is addressing believers. The contrast in context is not between believer and unbeliever but between the believer’s carnal and spiritual life. The tendency when we encounter the word “life” in v. 6 is to default to eternal life, but that cannot be Paul’s meaning. Paul is writing to believers, and every one of them already has eternal life. The “life” in v. 6 is the difference between what brings reward or loss in 1 Cor 3:12–15. It is the difference between the “works of the flesh” in Gal 5:19–21 and the “fruit of the Spirit” in Gal 5:22–23.

The word “peace” is the Greek word *eirene*, and is translated, “a state of concord, peace, harmony” and “a state of well-being.”⁷ The basic thought behind the word is tranquility, harmony, and a sense of well-being. The third word listed in the fruit of the Spirit is “peace.” All the other words describing the fruit of the Spirit, for the most part, contain “harmony or well-being” as a quality. This quality is the “peace of God that passes all understanding” in Phil 4:7. We can say as believers who are “in Christ” that when we walk or live by means of the Spirit of God, we are in harmony with God, at peace with Him.

Mindset of the flesh

In Romans 8:7 Paul continues to develop the mind set of the flesh.

Because the carnal mind [mind set of the flesh] *is* enmity [hostile] against [toward] God; for it is not subject [\square *ποτάσσω*, *hupotasso*, submission, obedient]

⁷ BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

to the law [principle] of God, nor indeed can be [because it comes from the sin nature and not from God the Holy Spirit]. (Rom 8:7)

He explains why the carnal mind, the thinking that comes from the sin nature, results in operational death. The thinking of the sin nature is the opposite of the thinking of God and therefore hostile toward God. Why? The carnal mind is dominated by the sin nature and not subordinated or submissive to the law or principle of God. In fact, the sin nature never can be subordinate to God. The word for “subject” (*hupotasso*) means to “subject oneself to someone” and in the passive voice has the quality of being obedient.⁸ The concept of yieldedness to God’s will is developed from this and other similar passages.

While the idea of yieldedness sometimes takes on a negative connotation simply by the way it is presented, it is a proper biblical principle. The elementary principle of yieldedness is being in submission to God’s will and not being in submission to the sin nature. When we are obedient to the “law of God,” we are living according to the Spirit and not hostile to God. Paul ends v. 7 by saying that it is simply impossible for anyone under the domination of the flesh to be subordinate to God. The two principles are antithetical.

A supporting companion passage for what Paul teaches in Romans 8 is Gal 5:16–17. The life based on the sin nature and the life based on the Spirit are in opposition to one another.

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against [opposes] the Spirit, and the Spirit against [opposes] the flesh; and these are contrary [in opposition; resistant] to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. (Gal 5:16–17)

As we move to 8:8, we encounter a shift in terminology. Up to this point in the passage Paul has used the phrase “in Christ” to describe the believer as justified, or his positional sanctification. He has not been addressing the unbeliever but the two different manners of walking or living: by means of the sin nature or by means of the Spirit.

⁸ BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

So then, those who are in the flesh [unbelievers, as opposed to “in Christ”] cannot please God [a believer living according to the flesh, thinks and acts like an unbeliever]. (Rom 8:8)

Now, Paul describes his subject as being “in the flesh.” The phrase “in the flesh” describes the unbeliever. Paul has not changed the topic, but he now makes a dramatic comparison: the life of the carnal believer to the life of an unbeliever. The carnal believer acts just like an unbeliever. The unbeliever has only one option in his life—to think and live according to the flesh. He cannot please God. However, as we have seen, the believer has the option of living either according to the sin nature or according to the Spirit. Paul now frankly states that a believer after salvation who continues to live according to the sin nature [flesh] is simply living and acting like an unbeliever. He cannot please God. Another point that arises from the comparison of this passage and Gal 5:16–23, is that the believer living according to his sin nature is unproductive in the spiritual life. So, we can say that the carnally minded believer is acting just like an unbeliever and is no more spiritually productive than an unbeliever.

As Paul continues this point in v. 9, the comparison is easier to understand.

But [remember] you [believer] are not in the flesh [an unbeliever] but in the Spirit [believer with God the Holy Spirit], if indeed [1st class condition] the Spirit of God [God the Holy Spirit] dwells in you [indwelling of God the Holy Spirit]. Now if [1st class condition] anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ [indwelling], [then] he is not His [a believer in Christ][contrast of believer to unbeliever]. (Rom 8:9)

Paul’s argument is that neither the unbeliever who is carnally minded nor the believer who is carnally minded can please God. So while the believer cannot be “in the flesh,” he can still “live by means of the flesh.” In 8:9, Paul quickly reminds the recipients of his epistle that they are *not* unbelievers, *not* “in the flesh,” but believers, “in the Spirit.” Paul’s thrust might be stated as follows, “I know you Romans have believed in Jesus as your Savior and are positionally no longer ‘in the flesh,’ even though some of you have not changed your lifestyle from the way you previously lived as an unbeliever.”

Paul is still addressing only believers, or he would not make the statement, “you [believer] are not in the flesh [an unbeliever].” Otherwise, he would be contradicting the

emphasis of what he has been teaching regarding the spiritual life of the believer. The fact is that many of these believers who have the Spirit of God in them *have* been walking according to the flesh. So Paul must be alluding to unbelievers when he uses the phrase “in the flesh.” The “Spirit of God” and the “Spirit of Christ” both refer to God the Holy Spirit and is a reference to the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit.

In the Spirit

Paul immediately defines what he means by “in the Spirit” to clarify that here he is making a contrast between the unbeliever and believer. He uses two first class conditional clauses in the original language to explain both positively and negatively that believers have the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit in them.⁹ The use of these first class conditions is a rhetorical method of presenting an argument which may simply be seen as an “if ... then” relationship between two clauses, indicating a cause and effect.¹⁰ The first class condition may be represented: “For the sake of argument let’s assume it’s true.”

First, Paul states that an individual is “in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.” He says in effect to the Roman believers: “For the sake of argument, let’s say the Spirit of God dwells in you. If that is true, then you are a believer. On the other hand, let’s say for the sake of argument, you do not have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in you, then you are not a believer. ‘This one is not of Him’ because you do not belong to Christ.” Paul sets both the stage for vv. 10–11, which states two results of being “in the Spirit” or “in Christ,” and his conclusion in v. 12.

Indwelling of the Holy Spirit

Romans 8:9 is a critical passage on the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The indwelling of God the Holy Spirit identifies us as believers.

⁹ The first class condition indicates *the assumption of truth for the sake of argument*. Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of NT Syntax, An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 309.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 304–305.

¹¹ Parallel passages in which Paul also teaches the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit of believers are 1 Cor 3:16 and 6:19.

And [but] if [1st class condition] Christ *is* in you [indwelling; believer], [then] [μέν, *men*, on the one hand] the body [σῶμα, *soma*, sin nature in the flesh] *is* dead [spiritual] because of sin [not capable of spiritual production], but [δέ, *de*, on the other hand] the Spirit [God the Holy Spirit or human spirit] *is* life [experiential sanctification] because of righteousness [experiential righteousness]. (Rom 8:10)

Paul's use of "Christ in you" is synonymous for being "in the Spirit." The first result of being "in the Spirit" is stated by another first class condition and once more states the two possible opposing situations in the believer's life, this time with a *men...de* construction. The Greek text uses a grammatical construction (*men...de*) that is often omitted from English translations but literally means "on the one hand this ... on the other hand that."

Paul says if the person is "in Christ," the "Spirit of God" or "Spirit of Christ" (both found in v. 9) indwells him, then, on the one hand, the body is dead. The word "body" (*soma*) has been used in chaps. 6 and 7 and most recently in 7:24, where it refers to the sum total of Paul's struggle against "my flesh" (7:18) and "my members" (7:23), the sin nature. Paul says that once we are "in Christ" two principles are true. First ("on the one hand the body is dead"), the life according to the body or flesh, which is also the sin nature, is dead as far as pleasing God and spiritual production. Second ("on the other hand the Spirit is life"), the life according to the Spirit is life, enhanced life, and pleasing to God.

Paul then says the reason this is true is "because of righteousness." It is possible to interpret the righteousness here as imputed righteousness of God, but Paul is not talking about justification. Yes, the believer has God's imputed righteousness, but the believer is not experientially sanctified in life because of the imputation of God's righteousness to him. God's imputed righteousness is the potential that all believers possess for experiential sanctification. The believer is sanctified because he exploits this potential by living by means of the Spirit thereby producing experiential righteousness, the life that is "pleasing to God."

But [and, moreover] if [1st class condition] the Spirit [God the Holy Spirit] of Him [God the Father] who raised Jesus from the dead [physical] dwells [indwelling presence] in you, [then] He [God the Father] who raised Christ from the dead will also give life [make alive; enhanced life] to your mortal [θνητός, *thnetos*,

physical] bodies [sin nature] through His Spirit [God the Holy Spirit] who dwells in you [experiential sanctification]. (Rom 8:11)

Again, Paul uses the rhetorical device of establishing a possible valid position for the sake of argument and *then* drawing a valid conclusion from that position. The post positive conjunction (*de*) beginning v. 11 is better understood as “moreover” or “furthermore,” as Paul builds on the conditional sentence from v. 10. Paul says that if the Spirit of God the Father dwells in us (the same Spirit of the Father who raised Christ from the dead), then God the Father who gave life to His Son will certainly give life to those who believe in His Son. The *ei* in the *protasis*, the “if” clause of this conditional sentence, might be better translated as “since.” Paul says that *since* we as believers all have the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit, *then* something else will certainly be true as well. That something else is stated in the *apodosis*, the “then” clause, that God will “make alive” our bodies which are mortal and still contain the sin nature. Since we still have our mortal bodies, we still have a sin nature. However, God the Holy Spirit now indwells the believer, and by means of His influence the believer is enabled to have a spiritual life that pleases God.

While it might appear v. 11 refers to the resurrected life and glorification, these are not Paul’s topics in chaps 6—8 up to this point. He will not shift to glorification until v. 17. Also, Paul stays in context with what he had written in 6:12—believers not allowing “sin to reign” in their mortal (*thnetos*) bodies. Now he can say that it is God the Holy Spirit who is the instrument that allows believers to “present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness,” 6:13.

Therefore [conclusion], brethren [fellow believers], we are debtors [obligated to God] -- not to the flesh [sin nature], to live according to the standard of the flesh [sin nature]. (Rom 8:12)

Paul now draws the conclusion to his conditional sentences which again stress how the believer is to understand the spiritual life. He says that we, as believers, “brethren,” find ourselves in debt. But to whom are we in debt? Here in 8:12, Paul might be reflecting back to a question he asked in 6:1, “Shall we continue in sin?” In 6:6, Paul says “we should no longer be slaves of sin” and in v. 14, “sin shall not have dominion over

you.” In 6:18, he says that as believers “having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” In 7:25, Paul says he serves the law or principle of God.

Paul’s purpose in this part of his epistle is to teach the believer that he is no longer under the power of the sin nature, 6:2. The unbeliever has no choice but must live by his fallen nature. In that sense, he is a debtor or obligated to the influence, inclination, and power of the sin nature. However, the believer has the option of walking according to the flesh or walking according to the Spirit. In 8:12, Paul says as believers we are no longer under any obligation, no longer a debtor, to the sin nature. Paul has this concept in mind in 1 Cor 6:20 when he says you (believers) “were bought at a price,” and “therefore” we are to “glorify God in your body and in your spirit.” In 2 Cor 5:14–15, “those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.” In Eph 1:14, Paul describes believers as “purchased possessions.” The believer is indebted to God, not to the sin nature.

Paul uses a causal conjunction (*gar*) in 8:13 to introduce two first class conditional clauses and to explain why the believer should not live according to the flesh.

For if [1st class condition] you [believer] live [daily life] according to the flesh [sin nature] you will [μέλλω, *mello*, about to] die [□ποθν□σκω, *apothnesko*, to die, temporal death; divine discipline]; but if [1st class condition] *you live* by the Spirit [God the Holy Spirit in experiential sanctification] you put to death [defeat] the deeds of the body [sin nature], you will live [enhanced life; John 10:10; advancing in the spiritual life]. (Rom 8:13)

Once more we see Paul’s doctrinal focus on believers living according to the flesh, not unbelievers who are living unregenerate lives. The subject of the verb “live” in v. 13a is the plural “you” whose antecedent is “brethren” in v. 12. Paul addresses believers who continue to walk or live (customary present tense) according to the sin nature. They are not in danger of dying physically (as near as we know), and as believers they are no longer subject to spiritual death. The death that Paul addresses in conjunction with the believer living according to the sin nature is operational death.

This is the same idea that Paul recorded in 6:12–14, “being alive from the dead.” If the believer is living according to the flesh (1st class condition), it is inevitable that the believer “will die,” operational death, that is, fail in the spiritual life and have no spiritual

production. The inevitability comes from the present tense of the verb *mello*, and present infinitive of the verb *apothnesko*.¹² The sense of this construction is that “you will die” (carnality, loss of spiritual momentum) is the inevitable result of living according to the sin nature.

However, Paul gives the other option for the believer (another first class condition); if the believer lives by means of the Spirit, then the result is the present indicative, ongoing aspect of “putting to death the deeds of the body.” The “deeds [actions] of the body” are the manifestations of a life that is influenced by the sin nature. “Putting to death the deeds of the body” is synonymous with living according to the Spirit; they are simply two sides to the same coin. Paul says in Gal 5:16, “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” “Not fulfilling the lust of the flesh” as found in Gal 5:19–21 is putting “to death the deeds of the body.”

The phrase concluding 8:13, “you will live,” has as its antecedent “brethren” in v. 12. This life is not physical life or eternal life but is the life having been identified as experiential sanctification or the enhanced life, which is the fullness of life described in John 10:10. When the believer is obediently living in accordance with the Spirit, he enjoys a life that brings him happiness, contentment, and tranquility.

Sons of God

For [*gar*] as many as [οσοις, *hosos*] are led [γω, *ago* (present passive indicative)] by the Spirit of God, these are sons [υιοις, *huios*] of God. (Rom 8:14)

In v. 14, Paul begins an explanation (*gar*) why living by the Spirit puts to death the deeds of the flesh and promotes life as found in v. 13. The phrase “as many as” (*hosos*) is quantitative and can be inclusive or exclusive. Paul has been drawing a contrast between carnal and spiritual believers and here is restricting “sons of God” only to those who “are led by the Spirit.”

We are now facing a significant problem in interpretation. Who are the ones who are “led by the Spirit of God?” One position might be that being “led by the Spirit of

¹² BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

God” equates to salvation, having the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit, and therefore the justification that makes all believers “sons of God.” The problem with this position is several-fold. First, this would completely abandon the context of Paul’s discourse. Paul’s is teaching believers how to live the spiritual life, not drawing a distinction between believer and unbeliever.

Second, the verb “led” (*ago*) is better translated with the present tense, continuing aspect, “being led,” indicating that it is a process, not positional. The believer’s life is experiential, a process of growth as he moves from day to day. The verb is also passive, meaning the believer receives the action of the verb, but that does not mean the subject is not involved in the process. In Paul’s development of his subject, he clearly indicates that either the sin nature or the Spirit strongly influence the believer’s decisions. So in 8:14 the mature believer who will be called a “son of God” has chosen the life according to the Spirit and not the flesh, sin nature. In this passage, “being led by the Spirit of God” equates to “walking by means of the Spirit,” “living by means of the Spirit,” or to be “spiritually minded.”

Third, “sons of God” *can* be defined by faith in Jesus as it is in Gal 3:26, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” However, in the context of Galatians 3:26–29, Paul is teaching the unity of the Body of Christ in the Church Age. In the context of Romans 8, Paul uses two different words to describe this family relationship to God. In v. 14, Paul uses the word for a more adult son (*huios*) and in v. 16, children (*tekna*) of God. The distinction implied is that believers enter the family of God by faith in Jesus, but within the family of God there are mature sons (*huios*) and there are also those who can be simply identified as children (*tekna*). In the context of Romans 8, a child (*teknon*) of God is a general term for a believer. A son (*huios*) of God as found in Paul’s ongoing didactic of the spiritual and carnal believer is the believer who is living according to the Spirit. In the ancient world, the designation “son” was more than just a male offspring but could also indicate a position of privilege, achievement or coming of age. Being a son was a special designation for someone arriving at a prescribed level of maturity and responsibility.

For [*gar*] you did not receive the spirit of bondage/slavery [*δουλεία, douleia*] again to fear [*φόβος, phobos*], but [*□λλά, alla*] you received the Spirit of adoption

[υἱοθεσία, *huiiothesia*, sonship] by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” (Rom 4:15)

The explanatory *gar* alerts the reader that he will receive further information regarding the status of “sons of God.” Paul once more reflects back to Rom 6:1–11 where he uses the verbal cognate “to be slaves” (δουλεύω, *douleuo*) of the noun slavery, *douleia*. As believers, we are not slaves to sin and therefore should not live like unbelievers as if we were still in bondage to the sin nature. The believer has received a spiritual life that frees him from sin nature slavery. The word “spirit” is not used for God the Holy Spirit, human spirit, breath, or life but for disposition, character or nature. The phrase “spirit of slavery again unto fear” means that the believer is no longer living under the dominion and tyranny of the sin nature. The life of a slave could be a fearful existence. However, the strong adversative conjunction (*alla*) indicates the believer has received the far superior position with the Spirit into a status of “sonship.”

In most English versions, the word “adoption” is a little misleading. The use of the word “sons” (*huiioi*) in v. 14 argues in favor of a translation “sonship” (*huiiothesia*) in v. 15. Sonship gives us a special relationship with God the Father. Since we know the Father loves us and has sent His Son to die for us (Rom 5:8), we can approach the Father with the intimate address of “Abba, Father.” “‘Abba’ is a Greek and English transliteration of the Aramaic word for father (Mark 14:36; Gal 4:6).”¹³

In v. 15, Paul makes a very dramatic distinction between the situation of slavery and fear surrounding the life under the dominion of the sin nature and the life of intimate fellowship with God the Father for those who live according to the Spirit.

The Spirit [*pneuma*] Himself [αὐτός, *auto*] bears witness [συμμαρτυρέω, *summartureo*] with our spirit [*pneuma*] that we are children [τέκνον, *teknon*, plural, *tekna*] of God.” (Rom 8:16)

Paul does not link v. 16 to v. 15 grammatically, but God the Holy Spirit in v. 16 is positioned to support the prayer (“Abba, Father”) of the believer in v. 15. The word for

¹³ John A. Witmer, *Romans, The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; 2 vols.; Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983) 2:471.

spirit (*pneuma*) is found twice in v. 16: first for God the Holy Spirit and the second time for the human spirit in the believer. God the Holy Spirit with the intensive use of the pronoun *autos* (“Himself”) provides a witness or testifies with our spirit. This grammatical construction emphasizes that we have the full presence and force of the third member of the Godhead assisting us as “we cry out, ‘Abba Father.’” The verb “bears witness” is prefixed with the preposition *sum* (“with”) that might be viewed as strengthening the meaning of the verb or supporting the definition of “to testify or bear witness with.”¹⁴ In context the translation “testifying or bearing witness with” creates the idea of God the Holy Spirit joining the believer in prayer in His intercessory mission (Rom 8:26).

The second use of *pneuma* indicates that God the Holy Spirit is supporting the human spirit of the individual as the believer prays. As we prayerfully enter the throne room of God, we are not alone. We are encouraged, supported, and guided in our prayers, reinforcing the fact that we are children of God. We may not know *what* to say. We may not know *how* to say it. We may not have the confidence to pray, but “He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because the Spirit intercedes on behalf of the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:27). Furthermore, the witness of God the Holy provides us a sense of assurance “that we are children of God.”

Now, we can conclude the thought begun in v. 14 regarding the distinction between the terms *huiioi*, “sons of God,” and *tekna*, “children of God.” The two terms could certainly be taken as synonymous or even stylistic. However, in context Paul has been emphasizing the contrast between the believer walking according to the Spirit and the believer walking according to the flesh. In v. 14, he says that those who are “led by the Spirit, these are sons of God.” If we are flowing with Paul’s thought, then we realize that there might be an implied opposing category—those who are *not* led by the Spirit are *not* sons of God. But that is *not* what Paul is saying in v.14; he is simply referring to believers who are not “walking according to the Spirit” but are “walking according to the flesh.”

¹⁴ BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

So when we arrive at v. 16, we are discussing a praying believer. All believers have the privilege of prayer to God the Father. Moreover, God the Holy Spirit will assist any believer in their prayer. So the phrase “children of God” is referring to any believer who prays, whether spiritual or carnal. The term *huiοi* of God in v. 14 indicates more than simply a believer; it indicates a mature son who has standing and legal privilege. He is the believer walking by means of God the Holy Spirit. This distinction now becomes extraordinarily significant as we move to v. 17.

And if [εἰ, *ei*, if, since] [1st class condition] children [*tekna*], then [also] heirs [κληρονόμος, *kleronomos*] – [on the one hand, *men*] heirs of God and [on the other hand, *de*] joint heirs with [συγκληρονόμος, *sugkleronomos*] Christ, if indeed [εἰπερ, *eiper*] [1st class condition,] we suffer [endure] with [συμπάσχω, *sumpascho*] *Him*, that we may also be glorified together [συνδοξάζω, *sundoxazo*] [*with Him*]. (Rom 8:17)

Heirs of God

Paul begins v. 17 building on our relationship with God by writing that if we are children (*tekna*) of God, we are heirs of God. He uses a first class conditional clause to set up a situation that he is going to assume is true for the sake of teaching his next point. Paul says that anyone who is a believer, who falls into the category of being “children of God,” is an “heir of God.” All believers, spiritual and carnal are therefore “children of God” as emphasized in v. 16. This is important because Paul is going to continue his contextual contrast about believers who are walking according to the Spirit and those who are walking according to the flesh, but he will draw this distinction in another dramatic way.

Before we read about that distinction, let’s develop the concept of being an heir of God. At the moment of justification, we, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, all become heirs of God (Gal 3:29). Paul also teaches this principle in Titus 3:5–7 where he says that “He [God] saved us through the washing of regeneration” and “having been justified us by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Peter says that God “has regenerated us...to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled ...reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet 1:3–5). Paul also tells us it is “the Father who has

qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints” (Col 1:12). So here in Rom 8:17, we understand that as believers, *tekna* of God, we are heirs of God.

Joint heirs with Christ

Furthermore, v. 17 says that we are not just heirs of God but also joint heirs with Christ. The Greek text again uses the *men...de* grammatical construction, which we have seen means “on the one hand this...on the other hand that.” The break in sentence and insertion of the *men...de* construction indicates a contrast in and of itself. The resultant part of the sentence completes the contrast. The *men...de* construction is more than a mere compounding of objects, God and Christ. The emphasis with this construction sets up a distinction, “on the one hand, heirs of God, and on the other hand, joint heirs of Christ.” The distinction should immediately be recognized by the shift in noun forms even in the English translation: “heirs of God” and “fellow heirs with Christ.”

What determines this distinction? First, there was no punctuation in the original manuscript, so the comma after Christ is an editorial insertion by the translators or later editors of our English versions. Second, if we remove the comma after “Christ” and *then* add the next part of the sentence with the conditional clause, “if indeed” and the verb “we suffer with” (Christ implied), we have an entirely different meaning than just being “heirs of God.” The first class conditional clause again is used by Paul to establish a situation that he assumes is true for the sake of teaching the doctrinal point. The conditional clause is not initiated by the simple particle *ei*, but *eiper*. The difference in the two particles is that *eiper* has the additional element of being “doubtful”¹⁵ or “emphatic.”¹⁶ In other words, “heirs of God” comes with the qualification of being “children of God” “Joint heirs with Christ” comes with additional “doubt” or “emphasis” —if the believer accomplishes the action of the following verb, “suffer with *Him*” he will be a joint heir with Christ.

Paul teaches two categories of inheritance in v. 17: an inheritance with God and a further inheritance with Christ. First, he states that if “children of God” (achieved by

¹⁵ BDAG: BibleWorks 8.

¹⁶ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the NT*, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1936) 130.

simple faith alone in Christ), then “heirs”—“*on the one hand* of God.” Second, Paul states “and [on the other hand] joint [fellow/co-] heirs with Christ” if *indeed* [different than mere “if”] “we” (existing heirs of God) “endure with” *Him*. Paul remains precisely on topic of the two categories of believer: one who is a child of God by faith in Christ but having no experiential sanctification, and the other child of God by faith in Christ who is walking according to God the Holy Spirit, growing spiritually, and, if enduring the adversity of the Christian life, is promised an inheritance with Christ above and beyond the normal inheritance of the non-enduring believer.

How else might we understand the present tense, ongoing aspect of “suffering with” or “enduring with” in this verse? It cannot be a qualification for salvation. It must be a qualification for joint heirship with Christ. This inheritance is also taught by Paul in 2 Tim 2:12 and John in Rev 3:21. There is a distinction among believers in eternity. Those who “endure” the adversities of life “will also reign with Him” [Jesus], 2 Tim 2:12. Those “who overcome I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat with My Father on His throne” Rev 3:21.

Ultimate sanctification or glorification

Finally, Paul concludes v. 17 with the phrase, “that [so that, in order that] we may also be glorified together [with Him].” Up to this point, Paul has been teaching experiential sanctification, but now says the importance of experiential sanctification is so that when we are glorified, which is ultimate sanctification, we might be glorified *together with Jesus*. The believer has the wonderful opportunity to endure testing with Christ so that we also may be glorified with Him.

The Lord Jesus Christ lived a perfect life and accomplished His mission on earth to go to the cross and complete the work of atonement for the entire world. When He arrived in heaven after His ascension, He was given the place of honor, sitting at the right hand of God the Father (Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1). Paul teaches a distinction between simply receiving a resurrection body at the time of the believer’s ultimate sanctification and also receiving an inheritance. Paul concludes this paragraph with a reference to inheritance that results in rewards, and ruling and reigning with Christ in eternity.

Conclusion

In Romans 8:1–17, Paul teaches the believer that God the Holy Spirit is the means of living the spiritual life. Positional sanctification frees the believer from the penalty of sin, but as Paul demonstrates in chap. 7, simply being free from the penalty of sin does not mean the believer is free from the sin nature. The spiritual life is only a potential at the moment of salvation. However, the believer has the indwelling ministry of God the Holy Spirit, and when we live by means of the Spirit, we have the power to overcome the flesh, walk in the “newness of life,” and please God.