THE SPIRIT OF LIFE HAS SET YOU FREE

Romans 8:1–17

Key Verse: 8:2

“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”

Have you ever felt ruled by something? Maybe it was a strong craving for your favorite food, or a desire for success, or even for revenge? Or it might have been feelings of failure or loss or fear? Whatever the case, you couldn’t get it out of your mind. The more we give in to our impulses or negative thinking, the more enslaved we can become. In a similar vein, in Romans Paul’s been describing how sin gets hold of us and enslaves us, and really it’s sin that’s at the core of all our problems. In his time the Jews thought the way out was the Law of Moses—know it, study it and practice it, and you’ll be fine. But Paul knew firsthand that the law doesn’t really help in eradicating sin from our hearts and lives. Today it might be self-help advice: Just meditate more, get in your zone, etc. But sin still takes hold of our minds and hearts. As Paul wrote in the previous chapter, we want to do what’s good but we end up doing what we hate. So Paul introduces us to the true way out. What is it? It’s the Holy Spirit. Paul describes the Spirit in various ways in today’s passage. But the main idea is that the Spirit sets us free from the law of sin and death (2). In this study we want to learn what this freedom in the Spirit means, and how we can experience it in our daily lives. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

**First**, freedom from condemnation (1–4). Paul begins by proclaiming one of the greatest truths of the gospel. Read verse 1. “Now” pertains to the new era since Jesus came and died and rose again. Before Jesus came, there was all kinds of condemnation: the condemnation that God’s law requires for our sin; the condemnation of other people who criticize us; and, our own self-condemnation. God justly condemns all our ungodliness and wickedness (1:18). Our sin brings condemnation to us all (5:16,18). Paul also wrote about it in a personal way when he described his own hypocrisy: delighting in God’s law but enslaved by his own sinful desires (7:13–25). He must have really felt condemned. We all might hide what’s going on inside us, or escape the bad outcomes of our sins for a while, but we still can carry around this sense of condemnation in our souls.

Read verse 1 again. In Greek the emphasis here is on the word “no”—no condemnation at all, of any kind! Wow! No matter how wretched a sinner we are, through faith in Christ Jesus there is now no condemnation for us. In God’s sight, despite all our sins, we’re fully justified through faith in Christ (5:1). Living with a sense of condemnation is miserable. It’s related to shame, guilt, fatalistic thinking and the power of death. But through faith in Christ there is therefore now no condemnation for us. Living by faith means fully accepting this truth.

But how did this happen? Read verse 2. Paul has been writing to those who know the law and have been living under it (7:1). He’s already proclaimed that we’re not under law but under grace (6:15). We’ve been released from the law through our faith in Christ (7:6). Still, as Paul experienced, we can feel condemned by the law, for not living up to its standards. No matter how much we try or how hard we struggle, we just can’t do it. But the good news is, the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death. In this statement “the law” refers not to the Law of Moses but to the principle of the law. A major principle of the law is: the wages of sin is death (6:23a). But there’s also “the law of the Spirit of life.” Here, “law” refers to the rule or the reign of the Spirit. When we receive the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus, the Spirit begins to rule or reign in us. Paul uses the past tense here. He says “has set you free.” He means it’s already happened. We may not feel like it; we may not feel fully free from the condemnation of the law. But because the Spirit is in us, it’s already happened.

In Romans Paul has repeatedly used the imagery of slavery. He said we were slaves to sin (6:6,7,16–18) and held captive by the law (7:6). But through faith in Christ, we’re set free; free from sin, free from the law. Freedom! What good news! The Greek says it stronger: it says we’re set free “from *that* law of *that* sin and *that* death.” Where does this wonderful freedom come from? Paul says it’s “the Spirit of life.” This first half of chapter 8 contains more teachings about the Spirit than any other place in the New Testament. Paul mentions the Spirit 15 times in these 17 verses. And five times he mentions how the Spirit gives “life” (2,6,10,11,13). With his life-giving power the Spirit breaks the power of sin and death that have been reigning over us. It’s not by our own power, but by the almighty power of the Holy Spirit. Read verse 2 again. Paul really wants us to believe this good news, to have this assurance that in the Spirit, we really are set free. But the more we’re aware of the reality of our sin, the harder it is to believe. When we’re chronic sinners, it seems hard to believe we’ll ever be free of sin. But as we’ve already seen, through faith in Jesus God already gave us the Spirit, and to him, we’re already set free. It’s not about what we’ve done, what we can do now, or what we’re going to do; it’s about what God has already done.

What was it? Read verse 3. God sent his own Son “in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin” and thus “he condemned sin in the flesh.” This is referring to Jesus’ death on the cross. It reminds us of 2 Corinthians 5:21a, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us…” God punished and condemned innocent Jesus in our places, so that we could be set free from all the condemnation of our sin and of the law. Isaiah wrote: “…upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.” In Hebrew, “chastisement” is punishment. Some punishment may not seem enough; it doesn’t fit the crime. But when innocent Jesus suffered and died on the cross, it was enough punishment for all the sins we could ever commit. Only when we look at Jesus on the cross can we gain the conviction that we’re no longer under any condemnation. By faith, what Jesus suffered was enough for us to be right with God. But he didn’t suffer all that just so that we can continue living in our sin (6:2,3,6). Why was he condemned on the cross? Read verse 4. To put it simply, Jesus died so that we might live in his righteousness. He became sin for us so that his righteousness, his perfect obedience to God’s law, might become ours (2Co5:21b). It’s called “the great exchange.” When we come to him on the cross, our life purpose also changes. As Peter wrote, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1Pe2:24a).

**Second**, freedom to walk according to the Spirit (4). Read verse 4 again. This is the fourth time in this chapter Paul mentions “the flesh.” In Greek it’s the word *sarx.* This word is used various ways in the Bible. Sometimes it just refers to our physical body. For example, David and Abraham were forefathers of the Jews “according to the flesh” (1:3; 4:1). *Sarx* can mean the body with all its limitations and weaknesses. It also can refer to our sinfulness (7:18). God created all things good, including our flesh. So the flesh isn’t inherently evil, as Gnostics taught. But the flesh with its passions and desires can powerfully rule over us, and when it does, it’s for evil. Paul said that before we believed in Jesus we were “living in the flesh,” and our sinful passions were aroused by the law (7:5). He said that when we’re “of the flesh” we’re unspiritual, and sold under sin as slaves (14). He confessed that in his flesh he served the law of sin (7:25). But now in chapter 8 he shows us that the Spirit of life sets us free from living in the flesh.

The key word in verse 4 is “walk.” Paul uses this same word in Galatians 5:16. As Christians we have two options. We can walk “according to the flesh” or “according to the Spirit.” We all can take walking for granted because it’s something we do so naturally. It’s fun to go on a walk with no definite place to go, just to enjoy the experience and the scenery. But not everybody is free to walk. Some have been injured or crippled. The weakness in their bodies can seem like a prison. And some people avoid taking walks because they’re afraid of being robbed or shot. Just as we all have a natural gait in our walk, maybe a shuffle or a slight limp or sway, so when we walk according to the flesh, we all tend to end up in sin. Though it may seem to be free, it’s really not a free walk. But the Spirit enables or empowers us to walk in a new way. What kind of way? As Paul said in 7:6, it’s in “the new way of the Spirit.” It’s in the freedom of the Spirit. But it’s not a selfish, self-centered freedom. Paul writes in verse 4, “…in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us…” This is the kind of walk that frees us from or chronic sinfulness and enables us to live like our Lord Jesus did. So it starts with what we believe. We believe that in Christ Jesus we have the Spirit and are set free from the law of sin and death. But this faith also has to start playing out in our actions. By faith we start walking according to the Spirit. And this is real freedom.

**Third**, freedom to think according to the Spirit (5–8). In these verses Paul goes deeper. The Spirit affects not just our walk, but how we think. In these verses, one of the problems of “the flesh” is that it can dominate our way of thinking. We get caught in thinking about “the things of the flesh.” What does this mean? Again in Galatians 5 Paul spells this out. He writes, “For the desire of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal5:17). Paul goes on to write: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal5:19–21a). When our mind is set on the things of the flesh, we’re hostile to God, and we can’t please him (Ro8:7,8).

Paul writes that our mind can be “set on” certain things. In Greek the word is *phronousin*. It can mean “understanding” or “wisdom” or “view of oneself.” It also can mean “to share a similar way of thinking with others”. But here it seems to mean “to turn our minds to something, to seek and strive for it.” We can turn our minds to the things of the flesh, or to the things of the Spirit, to seek and strive for them. So what are “the things of the Spirit”? Galatians 5:22–23a says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” We can choose to think about these things of the Spirit. Paul writes in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Today the media bombards us to think about things other than those of the Spirit. We all need the Spirit to set us free from our dark and sinful thinking and from the mindset of this world, which is basically godless. But we also need to make a choice of what we set our minds on. We need to pay attention to the Spirit’s prompting and let him guide our thinking into the things of the Spirit. Otherwise, our thinking will be worldly, consumed with self and the things of this world and all its wrong values and anxieties. Praise God who gives us the Spirit to set us free from all this and give us life and peace!

**Fourth**, freedom due to the Spirit dwelling in us (9–11). The Spirit’s freedom isn’t a temporary spiritual high; it comes from a core change that he brings. Read verse 9. All real Christians are people who have the Spirit of God dwelling within them. The indwelling Spirit confirms that we really do belong to Christ, despite all our weaknesses and failings. Read verse 10. The Spirit brings Christ’s own presence within us. He shows us that our body is dead because of sin. But he also assures us that we have life because of the righteousness that Jesus gives us. Read verse 11. This is a promise both for now and for the future. The Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, meaning he has power to do amazing things within us, too. He can give life to our mortal bodies, meaning spiritual life. He’s the one who helps us not to be dead in our transgressions and sins, and to live out our newness of life (Eph2:1; Ro6:4b). He also someday will raise us from the dead as he did Jesus. What a blessing that we have God’s Spirit dwelling in us!

**Fifth**, freedom to put to death the deeds of the body (12,13). Read verse 12. Many people think that because they have a weak physical body, a sinful nature, they cannot but give in to sin. So to excuse their bad behavior they say, “I’m only human.” But to Christians that’s a lie. We’re not debtors to the flesh, to live according to it. We don’t have to follow all its impulses or thoughts and desires. As Paul said earlier, we need to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). But how do we actually break free from the sinfulness within us? Read verse 13. It’s the Spirit who empowers us to “put to death the deeds of the body,” meaning to crucify the sinful passions and desires of our flesh (Gal5:24). It won’t happen automatically; we’ve got to listen to the Spirit, follow his promptings within us, and then depend on his power to resist sin. It’s a fierce spiritual battle. But ultimately it brings us real freedom.

**Sixth**, the freedom of children of God (14–16). In these verses Paul describes another way the Spirit sets us free. Read verses 14–16. The Spirit gives us such a beautiful joy and assurance that we are now God’s own precious child through our faith in Jesus. The Spirit sets us free from our deeply rooted slavery to fear. No matter what we face or how intense our struggle may be, we can always cry out to our Father God, and the Spirit will remind us that we truly are God’s child which will drive out all our fear. This is another way the Spirit sets us free from condemnation and from the law of sin and death.

**Seventh**, freedom to suffer with Jesus (17). In our nature we avoid suffering. But the Spirit frees us from this habit and gives us a willing heart to suffer with our Lord Jesus in spreading his good news in our world. While we suffer, the Spirit assures us that one day we’ll share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Read verse 2. May God grant us this faith that the Spirit of life sets us free, free from condemnation, free from our sinful flesh, free from a sinful mindset, free to be close to our Father God, free to really live like and for our Lord Jesus. May God help us learn how to walk according to the Spirit each day, and moment by moment.