

The Breath of God | Keeping in Step with the Life-giving Spirit

Galatians 5.15-18; Romans 8.1-13

"The Law of the Spirit of Life"

5.26.13

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Galatians 5 ⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Romans 8 ⁸ Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. ¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Over the past six weeks we've been looking at the third great act of God in the Bible – 1) creation, 2) the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ (the whole event of His life, death and resurrection) and 3) the giving of Himself to all the nations, both Jews and Gentiles, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (celebrated LAST Sunday).

Today, we continue looking at the Third Person of the Trinity, God, the Holy Spirit...and we begin to consider the difference He makes in the life of the Church. What does it mean to be indwelt by the Spirit and how will that lead to changed lives?

This second passage (Romans ch. 8) uses the word "Spirit" more than any other chapter in the whole Bible. It's written by the Apostle Paul and *it's a dense chapter* with most of the words for which Paul is most famous occur in these few verses; words like "Spirit...flesh...law...death...life...righteousness...mind...sin...in Christ." Huge ideas converge in this key chapter.

And THE theme that *dominates* this famous passage is one that also captivates our modern world and that is... security. The word comes up a lot in our time and place – security system, security guard, internet security, Homeland Security... And not ONLY is there a kind of “post 9-11” preoccupation with that word *in a world that’s INsecure and vulnerable to terrorism and physical danger* but ALSO, philosophically and psychologically, MODERN HUMANITY is facing its insecurity. Men and women and children are facing the existential dilemma...the desire for security.

In this passage St. Paul proclaims that the third great act of God answers our quest for security – the heart of God answers the existential dilemma. So, #1) How insecurity makes true fulfillment impossible #2) How the Gospel [the Christian message] and the Spirit offer security #3) How it looks in practice

After the Age of Enlightenment, at the start of the Modern Era after the American and French Revolutions and at the start of the Industrial Revolution, philosophers become very focused on the existential dilemma – we have freedom to choose and it’s a frightening responsibility.

Kierkegaard writes about “the sickness unto death” – a sense of despair in the heart of people. Ernest Becker, wrote a chilling book (won the Pulitzer prize mid '70s) called *The Denial of Death* – basically says the only way we can be psychologically healthy is to live in constant denial that we are all going to die. And if we can’t achieve that denial we will live in perpetual insecurity and emotional anxiety.

Maybe it’s because of our affluence (maybe we’re bored) but people even very young people are *insecure* about their identity (“Who am I and *how can I be true to who I am?*”). There’s a quest for liberation, to be loved, valued, significant, approved, to know my purpose...and all of this is a quest for certainty and for... security.

And for the writers of the Bible, we are made for significance...made for glory and we can only realize that purpose if we live in relationship with God and IN that way we were made to relate to Him. We find our greatest freedom and fulfillment and significance in that realm.

For instance, a Blue Whale is an amazing creature and people pay huge sums to go see whales in their natural habitat or realm. When we see them there, we’re stunned by their power and majesty and size and freedom. BUT we wouldn’t be so impressed to see a full-grown Blue Whale in the Sahara Desert... or in a gymnasium or on I-95... It would be the end of freedom...because it is not the habitat of realm suited to the whale’s nature.

We are made to respond to God as a subject responds to a king... BUT we are out of our element and unable to live in a state of obedience and power and freedom...IN FACT, *the realm into which we are born*, is the realm of the sinful nature, what Paul calls, “the flesh”. And as long as we stay in this unnatural habitat we cannot fulfill our destiny...“and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (v.8)

We are made to delight God... and delight IN God...made to reflect His image and be like Him...obey Him and walk with Him as beloved children with a Perfect Father... But instead, like beached whales in the

wrong realm, our obedience is grotesque and ugly...just like a Blue Whale moving its giant fluke and surging through the deep...but that same motion in the desert would just be horrifying to watch.

Our attempts to obey are self-serving and motivated by fear and pride and competition and a kind of negotiating attitude that says, "I'll do it – but what do I get in return?"

And Paul refers to this kind of obedience as living "under the Law". We know somehow that we were made for obedience but our obedience is all wrong and it's weird and unnatural and awkward and graceless. We learn, for instance, to carry out the technical requirements of God's commands and yet miss the whole intention of those very commands. The wife says, "You never bring me flowers anymore" and the husband responds with flowers... AND an attitude that says, "There! Are you happy now?" The letter of the law is there but the attitude of the heart is absent.

And all the while we strive to obey... flapping our flukes like a whale on a sand dune... we are wondering, "Am I doing enough?" (Imagine if that giant whale could talk and he stops his frantic movement long enough to ask you, "Am I doing enough? Am I? Should I keep going...faster? More?" – What could you say? Nothing! He's in the wrong habitat and all his flailing is just... grotesque.)

We wonder if we're being good enough...and we figure, *ONE way to KNOW* is to compare ourselves with other people. If I'm better than MOST people than I...guess...I am...doing enough...obeying enough ...right?!

This is obedience...in the realm of the flesh... living under the Law... and it leaves us deeply insecure emotionally, psychologically, relationally and most of all spiritually. We feel absurd. We feel out of our element and there are times – moments of existential angst, when we just can't deny it – moments of deep, deep insecurity.

And yet into this absurdity – as odd as a Blue Whale in the Sahara Desert – God sends His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. Jesus Christ comes, looking like us in every way, but without a bent heart, without a sinful nature.

For Him, obedience is NOT grotesque, but graceful and powerful and natural like a Blue Whale gliding through deep water. And this Man, Jesus Christ, obeys the way we were MEANT TO OBEY...but none of us has ever actually done. And He meets the requirement of God's commands on behalf of a new humanity – He obeyed IN MY PLACE!

And His obedience is freely attributed to me as if I was the obey-eras if I had obeyed in that natural, free, whole-hearted, graceful beautiful way...instead of my awkward, corrupt, forced, fearful, heartless way that is IN THE FLESH and UNDER THE LAW.

And now, given the verdict, I have no reason to be insecure or afraid. I can stop asking, "Am I doing enough? Am I better than my co-workers or my parents or my classmates or pew-mates?"

I don't have to live in that angst and dread of a student awaiting a grade. The report card is IN! Jesus Christ's grade goes to me! The requirements of the Law have been met ON MY BEHALF! What I could not do, (v.3) "God did! Sending His own Son..."

NOW I have a new mindset...obeying, NOT out of a merely reward/punishment motive...I have been put into the right habitat – a whale back in the ocean. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (v.6) ...you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. (v.9) Obedience is becoming natural to me...like swimming to a whale. I've been indwelt by the Spirit of God and my habitat is changed. I was in that realm of condemnation where the sinful nature was all I had...obedience was unnatural and forced and self-focused and grotesque...but that changed. There is no condemnation! God transferred me to realm where I can actually realize my purpose, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (v.2) Obedience can become like a whale cutting through the water.

I have a new destiny. As Jesus Christ was raised, I will be raised, "if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. (v.11) Life is not absurd and I don't have to live in denial.

And finally, a new kind of facing up to obligation and a new way of dealing with my own flaws and tendencies – a way to move forward in this new habitat, a method of propulsion that leads to life!

Now what does all this look like in practice? Let me focus on three practical marks:

1) The kind of obedience that comes from the flesh (i.e. from sinful motives and human effort) and that comes from the insecurity of being UNDER THE LAW leads to comparisons, competition and strife. That's why Paul warned the Galatian churches, *"But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."*(v.15)... And Paul ends the same paragraph with the words, *"If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another"*(v.25-26).Paul saw these young Christians slipping back into that old, dead way of obeying that looks good but is really based not in the security of the DECLARED VERDICT... but based in trying to win God's affection and trying to impress others.

When congregations live this way, it becomes religious cannibalism. Bite and devour one another and eventually be consumed by one another. Here's Richard Lovelace from the great book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* "Most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of dead goodness, an ethical respectability which has its motivational roots in the flesh rather than in the illuminating and enlivening control of the Holy Spirit."

It's one reason, as we discussed a few weeks ago, that people are afraid to come to church. We all have this tendency and until the Spirit convinces me that I have the Verdict...that Jesus Christ earned for me and I am not obeying to protect myself from God and to get above others... until that happens all my obedience will tend toward comparison and competition...So, "beware!", says Paul!

#2) Even when we have been transferred from one habitat to the Other – from being under law and in the flesh to being under grace and in the Spirit – we still face a tremendous inner battle.

Togo back to my Blue Whale illustration – it's like we really got used to living on that sand dune and we still think that's how it ought to be. So our new way of obeying...is not always graceful and glorious. In fact we still try to impress people (and we're utterly convinced that we stopped that years ago!) and we're often still deeply insecure because we're not believing that the "NOCONDEMNATION" verdict really, really depends on Jesus and really, really applies to me.

As long as we live on this side the flesh and spirit will be at odds. Every day.

The passage ends with this sober warning, "*for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*" (v.13). We can't put our sin to death by reputation...by fear of getting caught... or fear of getting a disease... or by sheer willpower... or because, "I'm just better than that!"... or by having demons cast out of us...or by rituals...OR by using our insecurities "if you don't shape up, God is going to strike you...people won't like you...you won't get married."

"If *BY THE SPIRIT* you put to death the deeds of sin you will live." I get the Spirit by coming with open, honest, no excuses TRUST before God and simply saying, "Father, I keep sinning and I know You hate sin (it destroys and ruins everything) but I look again to Him who loved me and gave Himself for me... I trust what Jesus did ...who lived for me, died and rose for me and who won the Spirit for me."

Believing the Gospel daily...EVERYDAY...is how we get the Spirit (Gal 3.1-5) *and His influence* and how we overcome our junk and actually change and how we walk according to the Spirit...every day.

Last, why do we need each other in this whole process? Well, that's a big topic, which I want to explore next week – the Spirit's work in the Body. But I will say: He does work in the Body (the church) and in real relationships here...so are you sure you don't want to sign up for one of those Home Groups? Stop by the table...there's still time.

"Without me," says Christ, "you can do nothing" (John 15.5). He is speaking specifically about getting sin out of the heart. Putting any sin to death must be fueled by grace. In ourselves we cannot do it... Any strategies, efforts or struggles that are not motivated by this expectation of relief from Christ and him alone are useless, will do you no good. Indeed, if your efforts to be good are not fueled by the expectation or means appointed by Jesus Christ for getting help from him, they are worthless.

Let faith look on Christ in the gospel as he is set forth dying and crucified for us. Look on him under the weight of our sins, praying, bleeding, dying; bring him in that condition into your heart by faith; apply his death to your sinful tendencies. Do this daily.

- John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin in Believers*, 1656 (modern English, paraphrase)