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TO BECOME REALLY GOOD AT THE PIANO

Romans 8:1-8

Don’t you find it easy to become frustrated and annoyed right now? We’ve just been through now more than 2 years of a pandemic full of fear, confusion, uncertainty, controversy, misinformation, division, and death. It’s better on that front, though some keep warning us that covid is not done with us yet. Life has returned to something that at least resembles normal. At least we don’t have to wear masks at the grocery store. But there are still many sources of irritation. Try to get a contractor to do a home improvement project these days. “Sure, we can get to you in 6 months,” which actually means you’ll be lucky if we get to it this year. How about buying a car. I recently read that in the past 2 years the average price of a used car has gone up 41%. Are you kidding me? Then there’s the price of everything, but especially gas. Laurie and I were hoping to have a big vacation in the fall because we have had an exciting but exhausting year. However, we are reconsidering that right now. We are seriously thinking about buying a tank of gas for our car instead.

Then there is the pervasive incompetence that is rampant these days. Toby told me about an experience he had recently that typifies it. He had been wanting a breakfast burrito from a particular restaurant. So one night he had the opportunity to get one. This store had a drive thru window. He ordered his burrito, and when he got to the window to pick it up the employee said, “That’s a bean and cheese burrito.” Toby said, “No, I ordered a breakfast burrito.” The employee checked and said, “Oh, yes, you’re right. I see the order.” He looked around and said, “Oh, good, I found it. I have your breakfast burrito right here.” Toby got his burrito and went happily on his way. He began eating his burrito. It seemed to have a lot of beans for a breakfast burrito, but he figured he’d get to the other stuff quickly. He didn’t. The guy had given him a bean and cheese burrito! Unbelievable.

Today is Palm Sunday. On this day Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem to the tumultuous shouts and cheers of his followers. But he knew what was coming. In John 12:27 Jesus said, “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’?” He then said, “No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.” What Jesus endured his entire life, but especially in that next week, is beyond our ability to comprehend in its horror and pain. But he said he came for that reason. Why did he put himself through all of that? In John 10:10 he said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” He came to bring us eternal life. But he also said that he came so that in the middle of life’s ups and downs, with all of the confusion, fear, frustration and annoyance that life can hand us, we would have fullness of life. That fullness cannot be derived from what’s happening to us and around us. It is something inside of us. Romans 6 said it is a new life. It is this new life Christ came to obtain for us. We have seen that we cannot experience that life by trying harder to be better, by living by “the law.” How do we experience that full, new life? Paul tells us in Romans 8. This morning we will look at Romans 8:1-8 to see how to do it.

IN CHRIST:

WE FACE NO CONDEMNATION

Paul starts off this section with the word “therefore.” He is stating a conclusion based on something he has said before. Romans 7:7-25 is a large parenthetical section. What Paul says here connects with Romans 7:6 where he had written that we have been released from the law. Where there is no law, there is no guilt.

You may not be aware of this, but in 2019 a bill was introduced in the California state legislature that would require the state to build one new lane each way, both southbound and northbound, on Interstate 5 in the Central Valley and the same for Highway 99 up the center of the valley. The bill had a unique stipulation. It was that on these new lanes there would be *no speed limit!* The theory was that this would reduce traffic congestion. Yeah, it would probably reduce congestion by removing cars from the freeway after they have accidents while going 120 miles per hour. I don’t know what happened to that bill, but I bring it up because had it happened, you could not be guilty of speeding on those new lanes. There would be no speed law, so you could not break the law. You’d be free of the law.

Paul says “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, sets you free from the law of sin and death.” One of the big points of chapter 7 was that the law, any law, but especially the Law of Moses, does not fix what is wrong with us. It just points out the problems, showing where we fail. As Paul says in verse 3, it was powerless to make us truly good because of “the weakness of the flesh.” He means that thing that is wrong in us that will cause us to fail to be able to truly keep any law.

In Christ we are now free from the law. If there is no law, there is nothing to condemn us. No speed limit, no breaking the speed limit. That is Paul’s point. There is no condemnation in Christ. The Greek word for condemnation is *katakrima*. The second part of the word means “judgment” and the first part means “down.” So it means to “judge down.” It came to mean to condemn, but it has this sense of to look down on, to deem unacceptable. One of the hardest things for most of us is to believe that God doesn’t deem us unacceptable, that he doesn’t “judge down” on us. Maybe we can accept that God will forgive us and let us into his kingdom, but we feel he is displeased with us, kind of frustrated by us. It’s like he’ll put up with us, but he is just tolerating us. He’s “judging down” on us.

It is common for us to have a sort of intellectual acknowledgement that God loves us and that we are forgiven, but for us to not really feel it, to not really believe it in our hearts. In 7:15 Paul wrote, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do.” We read that and think, “Wow, he’s inside my head. I am exactly like that. I don’t understand myself either. I don’t do what I want to do just like Paul.” If that’s true, how could God accept me? How could he just ignore the crummy stuff in me?

Edward Snowden is under indictment for espionage after he stole and revealed massive amounts of classified documents from the CIA and the NSA. Some of the information he revealed was about sensitive military capabilities and operations. However, some of what he revealed is disturbing. It showed that every digital communication made by US citizens, including text messages, emails, Facebook posts, Skype calls, Google searches, phone records, credit card purchases and more is recorded by the NSA. Those digital records will never disappear. Doesn’t it make you uneasy to know that the government knows that much about you? How uneasy does it make you to know that God knows way more than that about you? Knowing this we think we need to try harder to get God to not disapprove of us.

God doesn’t ignore all the stuff in us, he deals with it by, as Paul wrote, “Sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh.” So, yes, God does condemn our sin. But he did it by putting it all on his own Son to bear the punishment of it. That’s what we need to remember. God didn’t ignore it. He dealt with it in Jesus.

Last fall *Christianity Today* magazine published an article by a man named Greg Stier. He grew up in a deeply dysfunctional family. His mother had been an extreme partier, and at one point she got pregnant. She went from her home in Denver to Boston under the pretense of visiting relatives, but actually she planned to get an abortion that her parents wouldn’t know about. But those relatives talked her out of it. She had the baby, and that baby was Greg Stier. His mother felt horribly guilty about the whole thing. She would sometimes look at Greg and say, “I’m a bum. I’m nothing but a no good bum.” She was filled with rage toward men in general. Greg says anger filled his whole family. His mother had 5 brothers who were body builders and street fighters. Greg wrote of his brothers, “the north Denver mafia nicknamed (them) ‘the crazy brothers.’ You know it’s bad when even the mafia thinks your family is dysfunctional.” But Greg’s grandparents took him to church, and when he heard the good news about how Jesus had died for us and offers us forgiveness, he put his faith in Jesus. Around that same time a seeming miracle took place. A hillbilly preacher who came to their area was dared to reach out to Greg’s uncle Jack, the toughest of the crazy brothers. When the preacher knocked on the door, Jack answered with a beer in each hand. Surprisingly, he listened as the preacher explained the gospel of grace. When the preacher said, “Does that make sense to you?” Jack answered, “Hell yeah!” Thus he entered the kingdom of God. In one month Jack brought 250 people to church to hear this great news. One by one, all of the crazy brothers came to believe in Jesus. Greg tried to tell his mom about Jesus, but she would just shut down. She could not believe God could ever forgive her. Finally, 15 year old Greg made his mother listen to him. After he laid it all out for her she said, “You mean to tell me that if I trust in Jesus, he forgives me for every sin? Even the bad ones?” Greg said, “Yes, that’s why he died on that cross.” He said she took a drag on her cigarette, stared off into space for a moment, and then said, “I’m in.” Greg said God changed the trajectory of his entire family. The thing is, we all accept the idea that God could forgive all of the members of Greg’s truly messed up family. Why, then, do we seem to struggle with the idea that he really and truly loves and accepts us?

As Jesus hung on a cross dying, He had a conversation with a man who was being executed alongside him. This man is described as a thief. But the Romans didn’t use crucifixion for every crime. It was only for the worst of criminals and for political offenders. This guy was likely a career criminal of the worst sort. Luke 23:41 says that criminal admitted that he deserved the gruesome punishment he was experiencing. According to Luke 23:42-43 as he was dying he said to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” This man had one moment of faith in Jesus at the very end. And on the basis of those brief moments of faith Jesus said he would not be condemned. Don’t you think if Jesus would forgive him and not condemn him, he could do the same for us?

This is a foundational and life-giving truth. There is no condemnation for those have their faith in Christ Jesus. None. Zero. Ever. In his book, *From Guilt To Glory,* the late Ray Stedman wrote that we say, “What’s the matter with me…why can’t I act like I want to? Though we may condemn ourselves, God does not. He is not angry with us about that. He sees us…as a child in his family, learning to walk. No father ever gets angry with his little son because he doesn’t get right up and start running the first time he tries to walk.”

Our ability to live this new full life in Christ is based on knowing there is no condemnation, no disapproval for us. We will only experience fullness of life to the degree that we are confident of God’s approval of us.

WE FULFILL THE LAW

Verse 4 tells us that God has rescued us through his son, “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” After all of this discussion about how we are free from the Law, Paul then said that the commands of the Law are going to be fulfilled in us! Wait. Paul has spent several chapters of this letter discussing the fact that no one is truly righteous, no one keeps all the commands of the Law, no one will ever be declared righteous by God through the Law, it will only happen by faith in Jesus, so it’s a good thing we are free from the Law. Then he says that God has done all this work of rescuing us so that the Law might be fulfilled in us! Hasn’t he just said that’s not possible? What does this mean?

Verse 1 said there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Paul has already said we have been united with Christ by putting our faith in him. We are now “in Christ.” Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the Law. He is the only one who has ever done it perfectly. But now we are in Christ. His righteousness is attributed to us by God. By him fulfilling the Law, in effect we have fulfilled the Law in God’s eyes.

I think of it as a little bit like being on Jesus’ team. I used to play hockey years ago. I was never good at it, but I enjoyed it. A good game for me was one in which I didn’t do anything that hurt my team too much. I rarely did anything that actually contributed positively to our team winning. I recall one game when I actually scored a goal. I skated around behind the other team’s goal and got control of the puck. Typically, you only have a split second to make a decision and act. I spotted one of my teammates a way out in front of the net. If I could get the puck to him, he might have a chance to score a goal. I fired a pass in his direction. It didn’t get there. Instead, it hit the skate of one of the other team’s defensemen who was trying to make sure I couldn’t pass it out to my teammate. It bounced off his skate and went right into the net before the goalie could react. That was the way I scored goals on the very rare occasion that happened. It was a total fluke. There was another game where our goalie was playing a terrific game and had a shut out going. Late in the game I was playing defense. An opposing player took a shot at our goal. I tried to block the shot. What I actually did was deflect it past our own goalie into the net. I essentially scored a goal for the other team and ruined our goalie’s shutout. Had I done nothing our goalie would have easily made a save on the shot. My point here is that I was not much of an asset to our team. But that team won the league championship. I was credited with winning a championship. It wasn’t because of what I earned. The team would have been just fine, maybe even better without me, but I won that championship as a member of that team. I ended up with the big championship trophy in my office. We may not feel like we’re an asset to Jesus’ team, deserving of a trophy, but we are on his team, and because of that we win the “fulfill the Law” trophy because he did.

But what about the fact that we fail to measure up to that Law? There’s a penalty for that. Jesus, the team captain, took care of that. Paul says in Christ God “condemned sin in the flesh.” In other words, he paid the penalty for us. So all of the Law has been taken care of by Jesus on our behalf, and by virtue of being on his team, we have fulfilled it.

But there is a little more to it. We know that because Paul describes followers of Jesus as those “who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” I’m going to discuss what that means shortly, but he is saying in a sense the way we live as believers in Jesus fulfills the demands of the Law. In this life none of us is ever going to perfectly fulfill the demands of the Law. To do so is to be perfectly good, and that is not going to happen in this life. In God’s eternal kingdom, when we see Jesus, John says in 1 John 3:2 we will be just like him. In other words, we will be truly good. We will be the kind of people the Law orders. But that will not happen in this life. It will some day, but not today.

There is a continuity between what we will be in God’s kingdom and what we are right now. Even now we have a taste of that eternal life and can begin to live a bit of that life that fulfills the real intent of the Law. In other words, in Christ we can see the beginnings of being the people who are truly good as God intended. In Ezekiel 36 God spoke of what would happen in his new covenant, the one we are now a part of. In verse 26 God said he would give us a new heart. In verse 27 he said, “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and to keep my laws.” Our new heart is full of desire to do what God commands. The people in this new covenant would be different because they would have a new heart. You wouldn’t have to give this new heart commands to do what God wants, it would just want to do it. It would be to do God’s will. Why would that make a difference?

Laurie taught voice and piano for many years. Most of her students came to piano lessons because their parents wanted them to learn the skill of playing the piano. The kids would dutifully show up for lessons. Often they were not as prepared as they should have been. Laurie continually encouraged them to practice and work on the things she was teaching them during the week. But who likes to practice and to work? My parents put Jerry and me in piano lessons when we were kids. It seemed like an okay idea to me. But it was something of an interruption in my busy schedule, which was filled with meeting the demands of my first priority, which was to play baseball, football, cowboys, and army. My parents had to be on me continually to practice the piano. I resisted that. They finally grew weary of fighting that battle. They said, “If you won’t practice, then we are not going to pay for lessons. You may quit if you want to, but mark our words. Some day you will be sorry that you didn’t stick with it.” I knew better. That’s the kind of thing parents say to scare you into doing what you know you don’t want to do. I was certain there would never be a day when I regretted playing instead of practicing the piano. So that ended piano lessons for me. To my surprise, a decade or two down the road there was a moment when I realized I wished I had stuck with it and could play the piano.

Many of Laurie’s students were like me. They had to be hounded by parents and teacher to put in even the little bit of practice time that Laurie asked of them. Generally they liked coming to lessons because they liked being with Laurie, but they didn’t like to practice. There were one or two kids that were different. They had piano in their hearts. As they began to learn they found joy in being able to produce even rudimentary music, and they wanted more. These kids would work on piano even if no grown up ever said a word to them. They would work on it even in the summer when there were no lessons, because they loved playing the piano. Who do you suppose became good at the piano? For many of the typical kids, piano would fade out of their lives altogether some time in their teen years, or sooner, just as it did in my life. They were too busy, and their parents, like mine, got fed up with providing external motivation to make them do it. Ah, but those very few who had piano in their hearts, for them piano, music, never went away. It became a part of them and they were the ones who would become best at it.

This is what God was talking about. If our motivation for doing God’s will is external, coming from a law telling us what we must do, we will never become truly adept at it. We will likely quit if given the opportunity. But something happens to those who are in Christ. The external motivation of the law has been taken away. But in Christ it has been replaced with a heart that beats with passion to do God’s will, and that changes everything. It is people like that who will become world class at being the kind of people that the law described, but could never make happen by demanding it from the outside.

We have seen that we have a new life in Christ, a life full of knowing God and all the wonders that come with that. But how do we live that life? Paul says it is by living by the Spirit, not by the flesh. But what does that mean? How do we do that in our day to day lives?

WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT

What is living by the flesh? What does it mean to live by the Spirit? These are terms that get tossed around a lot in the church. But when it gets down to how we actually live in our daily experience, it all is a little vague. Right, live by the Spirit. That sounds like a good, spiritual plan. But what does it mean when I’m at work dealing with employees that seem determined to make life miserable for the guy managing them, meaning me? What does it mean when I’m dealing with my teenage children? How do I do that when my spouse apparently woke up on the wrong side of the bed today? What does it mean when I’m dealing with finances that bear a strong resemblance to the Titanic?

Let’s make this as simple and as practical as possible. The flesh is Paul’s way of referring to our humanness. To live by flesh is to live by our human nature. A shorthand definition of living by the flesh is “everything coming from me.” I do things my way, by whatever I can accomplish in my human abilities. It’s all up to me. The Spirit is Paul’s way of referring to God, the Holy Spirit. A shorthand of living by the Spirit is “everything coming from God.” It is trusting in what God does and what he provides. How does that work in life?

We can start with the most important issue we face, the thing that has been at the heart of all that Paul has been discussing. How can we be declared righteous by God, thus gaining his acceptance and love? Living by the flesh means everything coming from me. So that means that I have to make myself good enough to be declared righteous by God. I have to earn his acceptance and approval. It all has to come from me.

How do I get fullness of life, make the best possible life? If I live by the flesh then it is everything coming from me. In other words, I have to decide in my own wisdom what will make life the fullest possible. Then I pursue whatever path I have decided will provide that life because I must get if for myself. How do I determine what is right and wrong? Living by flesh means it all has to come from me, so I decide in my own wisdom what is right and wrong. What do I do if I am not happy in life? Living by the flesh it’s everything coming from me. So I decide what I have to do to fix the problem and make myself happy, then I do that.

Living by the Spirit is quite different. How do I go about being declared righteous by God and gain his approval? Living by the Spirit means it is everything coming from God. So I trust that what God has done for me in Christ is what is needed and it is all that is needed. I believe God’s promise, so by faith I am declared righteous by God and accepted by him.

How do I get fullness of life? Again, if I live by the Spirit that means the answer to that question is everything coming from God. So I trust that what God supplies will be enough for me to have fullness of life because Jesus said he came that I might have life to the fullest. On those days when life is frustrating, everything is going wrong and it would have to improve significantly to be merely disappointing, it means trusting what God provides is where life is found. It means accepting that life can be full because God loves us and is with us. It means knowing that God is going to use even these hard things to bring about good for us.

How do I determine what is right and wrong? Living by the Spirit means it all comes from God, so I let God rule. I let him decide what is right and what is wrong. What if I am not happy in life? Living by the Spirit is deciding that what will bring the greatest happiness is what comes from God, so I trust him to provide that and focus on obeying him. At every moment of every day we have a choice. We can live by the flesh or we can live by the Spirit. Those two approaches are mutually exclusive. You can do one or the other, but you can’t do both at the same time. At every juncture of life we are either living by the flesh or by the Spirit.

These two approaches to life have very different results. Galatians 5:19-21 says, “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like.” Some of those things are what people typically think of as associated with the flesh. Immorality, idolatry, drunkenness and witchcraft for instance. But hate, discord, jealousy, envy, selfish ambition and factions all are the result of living by the flesh. Wherever you see them, you know someone is living by the flesh. When there is discord, division, selfishness, someone is living by the flesh.

Many years ago another pastor in the area asked if he could meet with me. I was happy to meet with him, thinking we could encourage and pray for each other. It turned that wasn’t exactly his agenda. He told me about his philosophy of ministry and what he was seeking to do in his church. He told me that it was his goal to have the largest church in North County. He was sort of putting me on notice.

Was he living by the flesh or living by the Spirit? Someone might say we can’t judge what’s in a person’s heart. As I listened to him that day that’s what I told myself, because I wanted to give him grace and encourage a brother in Christ. But later I realized that sometimes we can and should judge what is in a person’s heart. His number one goal was to have the largest church in the area. He wasn’t primarily focused on the church of Jesus Christ flourishing and growing. He wanted *his* church to be the biggest. What would you call that? He could put a spiritual label on it, saying he wanted to do something significant for the Lord, but that is nothing but selfish ambition. According to Paul that is a sign of living by the flesh. Is it possible to do ministry by the flesh? You’d better believe it.

What does living by the Spirit produce? Galatians 5:22-23 tells us. It is familiar to most Christians. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance (or patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.” Paul ends that description saying, “Against such things there is no law.” Right, because a person who is truly like that is fulfilling the real requirements of the law.

This is the choice we face every single day. Will we live by the flesh or by the Spirit? Living by the Spirit is the new life God has given us. It is a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I guarantee you, that is the best possible way to live. It is the life we are looking for.

CONCLUSION

REJOICE IN YOUR FREEDOM WITH THE FATHER

The foundation of this new life is knowing there is no condemnation for us before God. Everything starts there. The law can no longer condemn us. The Father sees those in Christ as his cherished children. Nothing can ever cause him to condemn his children. We are free to be open with him, to be who we are, to admit our failures and flaws and to rejoice that he loves us anyway.

LISTEN TO YOUR NEW HEART

In Christ you have been given a new heart. It is there, beating inside you, full of passion for doing the will of the Father. That new heart creates a new mindset in us, and that mindset brings life. The old mindset is death, it is hostile to God. So remember your new heart and follow it.

LIVE BY THE SPIRIT

This is about living by the principle, “everything coming from God.” When circumstances are painful or frustrating, remember it is everything coming from God. He has a good plan, trust him with your life. When you find yourself trying to prove that you have value, that you should be noticed, approved loved, that you are right, remember it is everything coming from God. It is what he has done for you that gives you worth, acceptance, love. When people are disappointing you are giving you grief, remember it is everything coming from God. It is his way of responding that brings life.

Many of you remember Linda Kaechele, who was a faithful member of the Anchor before she and her husband, Alan, moved to Florida. Linda recently told us a story about their experience with how poorly things are working these days. They needed to buy Alan a new suit. They went to a store thinking it would be a simple matter. Nothing is simple these days. To their surprise they discovered the inventory was way beyond limited. They found there was only one suit in his size. Fortunately it was just right, except the pants were too short. No problem, the store could alter them. They went back to get the suit two weeks later and though the jacket fit perfectly, the pants now looked like capris on him. Instead of lengthening the pants they had shortened them! The salesman said, “We can fix this. We still have the material. They can sew it back on and make the pants longer.” They would do it right away. So Linda and Alan waited 45 minutes for them to fix the pants. When they were ready he tried them on, and they were back to the original length, still much too short. They got their money back, and had to go look for a suit somewhere else. They drove more than an hour to the closest Nordstrom. They had 4 suits in Alan’s size, one of them being purple velvet! But the good news was that one suit was exactly what they needed. It also needed to be altered. The pants had no hem so they needed to be hemmed, and the sleeves of the jacket were too short. The tailor told them it would be ready in a week. A week later they went back and Alan tried on the suit. The pants were perfect. But they had done nothing to the jacket, the sleeves were still too short. Once again they left the suit there to be fixed and were told to come back in a few days. As they were driving home Linda happened to look at the claim check the tailor gave them. On it he had written, “Sleeves lengthen. Pants shorten.” He was going to make the pants too short! She immediately called in an effort to head off disaster.

At that point she was faced with the choice of living by the flesh or living by the Spirit. To live by the flesh is to decide it is up to you to get what you want. In that case, it would mean venting frustration over repeated instances of mind-boggling incompetence and the inability to get people to do their jobs properly. It might mean reading someone the riot act because they are making life difficult. Or she could live by Spirit, think about the principle of everything coming from God. They would decide then that perhaps even this frustrating disappointment was from God, that he is in control. And how should they respond? If it’s everything coming from God, then they should respond as God would have him. Trust God, love people, give grace. Linda, I am sure, lived by the Spirit, and was able to tell us a good story with laughter and grace. Let’s live by the Spirit, for that is how we experience new life, full life, in Christ.