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HEARING THE MUSIC OF THE SPIRIT

Romans 8:9-17

It’s hard being weird. I’ve been weird all my life. It’s not all my fault. Carissa did a science project in her younger days in which she proved that I am in a class of people called “Supertasters.” That means I taste things more intensely than most people. The result is that lots of things you love are unpalatable to me. There are lots of herbs and spices that just slay me, like sage, rosemary, oregano, and of course, the dreaded cilantro. It’s not uncommon for me on the rare occasion that we go to a high end restaurant to find there is not a single thing on the menu that appeals to me because they do something that is weird to me with everything on the menu. Often my best option would be to order off the kids menu, if they have one. Excuse me sir, but you don’t look like you’re under 12 years old. I’ve been to a few places where I would even have trouble finding something I like on the kids menu! This has a long history. I grew up being the only kid who didn’t like either Coke or Pepsi. I didn’t like Dr. Pepper, RC Cola or Root Beer either. Now I’m adult and I don’t like coffee or tea. And don’t even get me started on rotted grape juice, also known as wine. To me, the whole world is weird. How can people eat and drink these awful things? I don’t get it. But I have had to accept the reality that all of them aren’t weird, I am. I’m the one who is out of step with “normal” people. Have mercy on my poor, coffee loving, wife.

We were watching a TV show and one of the characters talked about how weird it is to use a handkerchief. Guess what I have in my pocket, and always have with me. Like I said, I’m weird. It's inconvenient to be so out of step like that, but not a big deal because it’s just food. It is a much more significant issue to be out of step with most people about matters like truth and morality. Watching television or movies is to be bombarded with messages that what I believe is archaic, backward, ignorant and wrong. In our culture today if you believe that something someone does is bad for them and for others then you are bigoted. If you express that thought you are guilty of hate speech. You could even be accused of a hate crime, even though you don’t hate anyone. By that logic, when you see the terrible things done by Putin’s troops in Ukraine and say this is bad and it’s wrong, you clearly are bigoted against Russians. If you say that you are guilty of hate speech against them. More and more I find that we who follow Christ are swimming upstream in our culture.

Years ago our family had a memorable moment when on vacation when we rented kayaks to paddle on a river. We started out going up stream. That was hard work because we were battling the current the whole way. But we consoled ourselves that the trip back would be easy, as we could drift with the current. This particular river ended at the ocean. We went in the middle of the day not realizing that late in the morning the wind shifted and began to blow from the ocean up the river. So as we paddled back, though we were going with the current, we were also paddling against the wind, and it proved to be just as hard as fighting the current. If we are going to follow Christ in our culture today it is going to be like that. We will be paddling against something no matter where we go. The question is, as we live out the new life in Christ that we have learned about in Romans, what can help us deal with the sometimes daunting and tiring business of going against the stream? In Romans 8:9-17 we will learn of some powerful aids we have in Christ.

WE HAVE LIFE INSTEAD OF DEATH

Many people think of religion as dour, serious, heavy on guilt, sapping all the fun and joy out of life. That can be true of religion in general, but nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to faith in Christ. In Romans 8:6 Paul had said, “The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.” Here Paul reiterates that truth.

Verse 9 tells us that if we have faith in Christ we have the Spirit of Christ. There are some people who seem to think you can believe in Jesus, but not have his Spirit. Paul says this is not possible. If you belong to Christ, if you believe in him, you have his Spirit in you. Sometimes people question this because it may not “feel” like the Holy Spirit is in them. I will come back to that a bit later, but for now I ask, what would it feel like to have the Holy Spirit? That’s usually pretty vague for most people. Remember that the Gospel is about believing God’s promise. Did it feel to Abraham like he and Sarah were going to have a child when they were both too old? No, but he believed the promise, and God credited that to him as righteousness. That’s what it means to be declared righteous by God, through faith. When God says if we believe in Jesus he puts his Spirit in us, we believe his promise, regardless of whether it feels like it or not.

Now the question is will we live by the Spirit whom God has given us? We saw what that means in the first part of this chapter. Living by the Spirit is believing what comes from God is what matters. Living by the flesh, the fallen human nature, is all about thinking what comes from us is what matters. In verse 12 Paul says we don’t have to live by flesh. We have a strong compulsion to do so that sometimes feels irresistible. But we don’t owe it to our flesh to obey it. Paul reminds us in verse 13 of a crucial truth. “If you live by the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

What does it mean to “put to death the deeds of the body”? That sounds like becoming a monk, going and living in a cave and doing nothing but meditating on religious things. For most people it sounds unappealing. It’s sort of in the category of crawling up the steps of some cathedral on your hands and knees to cause yourself pain in hopes of ridding yourself of all desires that have anything to do with the body. Maybe you’ll live, but you won’t like it.

Eating is a deed of the body. So is sleeping. So is exercise. So is going to the bathroom. Are we supposed to do away with all these deeds along with all our desires? If so, then the holiest person around is a corpse, because they don’t desire anything and don’t do any of those things. Stop eating, sleeping, exercising and you’re going to become that holy person. You’ll soon be a corpse.

Paul talks about living by the Spirit, putting to death the deeds of the body and in verse 14 being led by the Spirit. These all mean the same thing. Paul varied his terminology for the sake of variety, as any good writer might do. But they all mean the same thing. He’s telling us to live by the Spirit, not by the flesh.

The message is that living by flesh is death, and living by the Spirit is life. This is the exact opposite of what the flesh and the world around us tell us. What do we think gives people life? It’s doing things I want to do. It’s fulfilling whatever my desires are. It’s getting the things I want for myself. Today people think it is being rich and famous. It means because I have the resources, I can indulge myself in whatever I desire. Now that’s the life! It is often depicted as being a jet setting person who vacations at the finest resorts, has the best clothes, eats the finest foods, has several homes, owns fleets of awesome cars, as well as a massive yacht and a private jet.

Our little grandson, Wesley, is absurdly cute. Recently he has been greatly enjoying bringing his toy trash truck to the playground and sending it down the slide, and following it up himself. He wants Laurie to use her phone to video this event. He will do that then say to us, “This is really fun.” Then he says, “Wesley watch Nana’s phone.” He wants to watch himself on her phone. He will do it over and over and over. He never gets tired of it. He loves seeing himself.

Is he a narcissist, obsessed with himself? Is he a big problem waiting to grow into an adult sized problem? No, he’s a 2 year old, which by definition is a narcissist, because they haven’t even attempted to civilize human nature which is all about self. It believes that true life comes from having whatever I want, doing whatever I choose, and taking care of me regardless of how that affects others. As we mature we learn to corral that beast. But it’s always there. When we look at a picture of a group we are in, what do we first look for? We want to see how we look.

What does it mean to really live? Does the life full of pleasure, excitement, possessions, live up to its billing? Are those who have that life satisfied and joyful? I’ve observed a few people that have been pretty close to having that life. What has surprised me is that the lifestyle has not given them the life they wanted. By that I mean they don’t have true satisfaction, real peace, unlimited joy. In fact, they all have had stress, anxieties, just like everyone else. They are no more happy, no more at peace, no more joyful than other people.

I have known a couple of people who have lived totally committed to self. They have just been about living totally by the flesh, doing whatever they want. That pursuit has not produced an enviable life. In fact, it has destroyed those people’s lives. They end up with broken relationships, loneliness, and a lot of bitterness. I doubt that’s a life any of us want.

What does it mean to really live? What is the life that we would all desire? It has little or nothing to do with circumstances. It has to do with what is inside of us. It is to be at peace, to be joyful, to be happy and grateful, it is to have a life filled with love, it is to be connected to God and people and to know one’s life is bursting with significance and meaning. If we had that, we would feel like we have true life no matter what may be going on in our circumstances.

In these verses Paul tells us that life is possible. But it doesn’t come from living by flesh. It comes from living by the Spirit. I repeat, the best life, the fullest life, the life we want and need, comes through living by the Spirit, not living a life of self indulgence, which is living by the flesh.

WE HAVE A SPIRIT OF FREEDOM

Verse 15 says a crucial truth. “The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again.” Literally Paul wrote, “You did not receive a Spirit of slavery to fear again.” Note the word “again.” His assertion is that before having the Spirit of Jesus we were slaves to fear. The Spirit of Christ has set us free.

If really living is being full of peace and joy, then it is the opposite of being dominated by fear. Is fear really that much of a problem for people? How can Paul say we were once slaves to fear? Fear is a big deal. Writer Frank Herbert, who wrote the sci-fi classic *Dune*, said, “Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration.” Fear is like a little death. Living in fear is the farthest thing from being truly alive. Another writer, Hunter Thompson, said, “There is no such thing as paranoia. Your worst fears can come true at any moment.” Well that’s reassuring. No matter how far fetched your fears, he claimed, they could happen and it could occur at any time.

I will use little Wesley as an example again. He laughs and smiles a lot. He’s a blast to be around. But he is also a timid little guy. Around people he knows he is a ball of fire. But when someone he doesn’t know well shows up, he goes into a shell. He is quite wary. I don’t think his parents are going to have to teach him about stranger danger. He already has it. He’s a total contrast to his cousin Ella, who thinks that every person on the planet is her best friend. Wesley also has very good hearing and is very much aware of sounds. We were at the park and the house right next to it made a couple of popping sounds. I think the house was warming up in the morning sun and as it expanded it made these noises. They weren’t very loud, but immediately Wesley said, “What’s that noise?” He was concerned about those noises and what they meant. He was a bit afraid of what was going on. He is not going to be truly free until he no longer has that level of timidity and fear.

Are people really slaves to fear? What fears do we deal with? In Romans one of the main fears in Paul’s mind was one that every human has to deal with. It is the fear of not measuring up, not meeting the standard, whatever that standard might be. With that comes the fear of condemnation, which ultimately is to be declared to be of no worth and to be rejected. It means not being accepted into God’s eternal kingdom. But even right now it means being worthless, which is something we cannot bear.

One of the things we all fear is that we really aren’t enough. New age guru and would be politician Marianne Williamson says, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” Is that your deepest fear? I can tell you without a shred of doubt, my deepest fear is not that I am powerful beyond measure. The truth is that I do fear I’m not adequate, and I think I’m not alone.

Have you ever had an experience where someone seemed to seriously overreact to something you said to them? What is that about? It is quite likely because you touched on a place in their life where they feel insecure. The reaction is all out of proportion. You can’t understand it because you don’t know how inadequate, how insecure they feel about whatever the topic was.

What do you fear? Fear can control us. Our fears are myriad and they are powerful. We fear pain, loss, rejection, embarrassment, failure and much more. Those fears enslave us. We will never be free until fears don’t control us. And if we are not free we cannot truly live. Why are the Ukrainians fighting so hard and paying such a price? They are like Patrick Henry, saying “give me liberty or give me death.” To truly live we must be free, including being free of the enslavement of fear.

Laurie made a comment this week as she was preparing some food by heating up in the microwave. She said, “What would I do without my microwave?” I knew some people who feared microwaves. They were afraid that the energy of that machine would do them harm. That fear kept them from experiencing the freedom and joy Laurie experiences.

The great news is we don’t have to be enslaved by fear. The Spirit of God is not the author of fear. He comes to set us free from fear. The more we live in the Spirit the more we will be free from fear that God will condemn us and reject us. We will be free from being worthless. This is huge when it comes to paddling up stream in our culture. We don’t have to fear being different, being seen as weird or foolish, we don’t have to fear what people will think of us. That fear does not come from God. As we live by the Spirit we will be freed of fear.

WE HAVE ADOPTION INTO GOD’S FAMILY

Verse 15 says we have been given the opposite of a spirit of fear. We have been given the spirit of adoption as children of God. It is this Spirit that enables us to cry out, “Abba, Father.” Abba was the Aramaic word for “Daddy.” It means we can have confidence that God is our Father who actually cares about us, is interested in us and loves us.

Paul’s use of the term “adoption” was purposeful. When a person is adopted that meant that they were not originally and naturally a part of a family. But when adopted they become a full member of that family. In their case it is not by nature, it is by choice. My parents didn’t choose me to be their son. They were basically stuck with me. But a person who is adopted knows that his or her parents actually chose them.

These truths are significant for us. We are not naturally a part of God’s family. We don’t deserve to be in his family and to have him as our Heavenly Father. But God has deliberately chosen us to be his children. When someone is adopted it is not a result of their own actions. It is a result of the choices and the actions of the adoptive parents. That’s how it is with us. We are not in God’s family because of our choices and actions. We are in it because of God’s choices and his action to rescue us and bring us into his family.

This becomes the core of our identity. One of the things that was a primary focus in Laurie’s and my approach to raising our children was to give them a sense of identity and security. We wanted them to know they were loved unconditionally and that nothing would ever change that. We wanted them to know wherever they went that they were loved by Mom and Dad and also know that we were proud of them. We rejoiced in who they were and in calling them our children. That was a big deal for me because my parents had done that for me.

Again, we will never be really free to live the whole full life until we know who we are, until we have a firm grip on our identity. It is our identity that enables us to just be who we are, to make choices that are for our best, to not be controlled by what other people think or do. In Christ, more than anything else, who you are is a child of God. He loves you and is with you and never stops loving you. He is happy you carry his name with you. And knowing these truths is what makes us secure and able to stand firm, whatever else may be happening.

WE HAVE THE CONFIRMATION OF THE SPIRIT

Verse 16 says the Spirit “testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” This is where we can get a little fuzzy. What does that mean? How do I know the Spirit is testifying of that in my heart? How does the Spirit testify to our spirit that we are God’s children? The *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament* says the word “testify” could be translated “confirm,” and I think that’s right. The Holy Spirit confirms for us that we are God’s children.

One day some time ago when I was working in my study at home Laurie called to me and said, “What’s that music you’re listening to on your computer?” This was a bit confusing for me because I wasn’t listening to any music. I informed her of this, but she said, “But I can hear it.” I said, “Are you sure you’re not hearing things? Are you hearing voices in your head?” I was kidding, but shortly after that she said, “This is weird, but it seems like the music is following me around. I can hear it wherever I go in the house. I think it’s Josh Groban singing.” Now I was starting to get concerned that she really was hearing things. Then she started laughing. This was a classic Laurie moment. I said, “What are you laughing about?” She said, “I just figured out the music is coming from my pants. My phone is in the back pocket of my jeans and somehow, without intending to do it, I guess I activated the Pandora app on it.” Josh Groban was indeed serenading her from the pocket. How is the Spirit going to make himself known to us? Are we going to hear his voice following us around? Maybe he’ll sing to us. Will he sound like Josh Groban?

No, we’re not going to hear a voice. If you’re hearing voices following you around I urgently suggest you should seek help. But if he isn’t going to speak to us like that, in what way does the Holy Spirit manifest himself in our hearts? How should we expect him to testify to our spirit that we are children of God? First, the Holy Spirit makes us able to believe in Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul wrote, “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, but considers them foolishness.”

What do you think those without the Holy Spirit think of the idea that Jesus was God in the flesh? How do they view the idea of the Trinity or think about Jesus rising from the dead? How do they think about the reality of God when they can’t see him, hear him or touch him, and when they have prayed to him asking him to do something significant in life and it didn’t happen? They think all of that is foolishness. But you believe Jesus was God in the flesh. You believe he died for our sins, but rose from the grave. You believe that God is not just real, he is the ultimate reality. You don’t understand how the trinity could be, but you believe it. You have prayers that are not answered but you trust God anyway.

Why are you different from so many people? Why do you believe these things? Is it because you are more gullible and superstitious? Is it because you were taught them when you were a kid and haven’t grown out of them? Is it because you are smarter than other people and can see what they can’t? The Scripture says you believe because of one truth. The Holy Spirit has guided you into truth just as Jesus said he would in John 16:15. If you did not have the Holy Spirit working and confirming in your heart, you would not believe.

As Paul has said, he confirms for us that we are God’s children, that God relates to us as a heavenly Father. Think about how ridiculous this is. Almighty God, Creator of the immense universe, loves you and knows you as his own child. He has a relationship with you and is deeply interested in and involved in what happens in your life. Have you thought about how absurd that is?

I recently was irritated by filling out our tax forms. Our tax situation is quite simple and it drives me crazy to go through the gymnastics I have to in filling them out. Take line 29 and subtract it from line 27, then find the least common denominator of lines 30 and 31 and multiply that by your age, and add that to the result of subtracting line 29 from line 27. I actually have a solution for that business that I think makes all kinds of sense. Suppose I call President Biden to give him my solution to this modern pestilence. How’s that going to go? “Yes, please let President Biden know that Rick Myatt is calling and really needs to talk to him because he has the solution for our taxes.” That’s going to go nowhere in a hurry. “Rick who? I’m sorry, but if you wish you can send an email. You can find the address on the White House web site.” What they don’t say is the President will never, ever, see that email. I don’t matter to the President. He has no idea who I am and could care less. Yet you believe Almighty God, who is infinitely greater and controls infinitely more than the President, knows and cares about you?

Last Sunday was a wonderful day, but a busy one for Laurie and me. Of course there was church in the morning and on Easter we really want things to go well. Then we had to pack up all the equipment, go home and unload in time to have our big Easter lunch with family. At the end of the day after all the celebrating was over we realized we had a couple of items missing. One was my I-Pad, which had my sermon notes on it, and the other was a TV sound bar remote. Laurie had seen Wesley carrying it around our house. Uh oh. We searched everywhere for those two items and couldn’t find either. I wracked my brain trying to remember what I’d done with the I-Pad, to no avail. All I could conclude was I must have left it at the hotel where we meet. Laurie called the hotel and they said they would look for it. Man I was bugged by that. I drew a complete blank on what I’d done with it. After looking and calling the hotel all we could do was pray. I really need that tablet computer, so we asked God to help us find it.

Can you see how ludicrous this is? There are almost 8 billion human beings on this planet. When you encounter termites in your house do you find yourself deeply concerned about the life and issues of one particular termite? That would be more reasonable that the Creator and King of the entire massive universe caring about trivial matters in the life of one puny human being. Why would Almighty God have any interest in that one puny human being’s utterly trivial catastrophes like misplacing his tablet computer? And yet, I believe God is my Father and he actually cares about my petty little worries. I believe it enough to talk to him about them. We did find the remote, after we had bought a replacement. Wesley had stashed it in a Barbie car we have tucked away in a cabinet. On Monday my prayer about the I-Pad was answered. I found it in our garage. I had set it down in a totally random spot as I was helping unload the car. I believe that I am a child of God and he cares about me and my miniscule concerns because the Spirit of God tells me it is true.

The Spirit makes God’s word make sense to us. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul said that the things of God are “discerned only through the Spirit.” Have you ever noticed that you at times read the Bible and you are profoundly struck by what it says to you and how it relates to your life? Do you find that at times it is comforting, or gives you badly needed encouragement or hope? Or maybe it gives you wisdom on how you need to live or behave in a given situation? In other words, have you noticed how it seems to almost be alive?

There are many people who find the Bible to be as dry as chalk. It seems totally irrelevant to them. It’s the thoughts of a bunch of ancient people that seems mostly peculiar at best, or totally out of date at worst. Why does it have so much power for you? It’s because the Holy Spirit is at work in your life. In making God’s word relevant and powerful he is confirming that you are actually a child of God.

There are other ways the Spirit confirms for us we belong to God. He convicts of sin, according to John 16:8. He creates a bond with other believers according to Ephesians 4:3 He prompts us and guides. He gives us the mind of Christ according to 1 Corinthians 2:16.These are some of the ways the Holy Spirit confirms for us that we are children of God. This causes us to have a powerful sense of our identity, of who we are and what our lives are about. It is this identity that is crucial to being able to stand firm in this world.

WE HAVE THE HOPE OF AN INHERITANCE

Another thing we need to is hope. In verse 17 Paul says because we are children of God, we are heirs of an awesome inheritance. Laurie and I have friends whose lives have been significantly improved by receiving an inheritance. We also know that our children and their families are some day going to receive sizeable inheritances, maybe even some from us, we hope, but surely from the in-laws. But the unfortunate thing for us is, we are going to get exactly zero as an inheritance. We have no hope of inheriting anything. Oh, wait, except for the biggest thing ever. We have an immense inheritance that we are going to receive from our heavenly Father, an inheritance worth more than anything on this planet. That is a hope that we have in Christ, and that hope is huge. It strengthens and encourages us. We will see more about this hope next week.

CONCLUSION

Remember what true life is and where it comes from. It is not from circumstances, not from having “the good life” as the world sees it. It is something inside us. It is a life of peace, joy, love and hope, and that comes through living by the Spirit.

Let the Spirit of Jesus Christ free you from fear. Being free of fear is absolutely essential to true life. When you find yourself controlled by fear, realize in some way you are living by the flesh. Go back to living by the Spirit.

Always remember who you are. In Christ you are a child of God. That is your real identity, more than any other way you think of yourself. And it is the source of real freedom and life. When you rely on any other identity you lose freedom and life.

Don’t doubt the work of the Spirit in you.

The Ringer is a website that focuses on sports, pop culture and podcasts. One of their writers is Jonathan Tjarks. He grew up an atheist who thought religion was nothing but superstition, a leftover from more primitive times. He lived by his own standards He says, “I partied, drank, did drugs and looked for fulfillment in other people. None of it made me happy. I wasn’t content, no matter what I did.” To his surprise he eventually opened up to the possibility of faith in Christ. Ultimately this led to a conviction that Christ is very real and is the answer he needed. He became a follower of Jesus. He said it hasn’t always been easy. But he says, “I had spent my life searching for meaning in a million different places: career, girls, popularity, money. I got my identity through what other people thought of me. I was haunted by a fear that I was never good enough. Now my identity comes from Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. Once I internalized those words, I was free.”

As we internalize these words, living in the freedom, the identity, the hope, the Spirit of Christ, we too will be free.