

Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.

“Life in the Spirit”
Isaiah 55:10-13
Romans 8:1-11

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 16, 2017

Isaiah 55:10-13

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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.

“Life in the Spirit”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week y'all had a great service. I hate that I missed it, but I made up for it by watching it on our website. By the way, like us on Facebook or bookmark our homepage so you can be kept up-to-date about our goings-on. Our very own Ron Coleman shared with us a little about his life and a lot about the Law. In Christ, we have *frreedom*, as Sir. William Wallace said, freedom from the law. This is a perfect introduction to a mini-series from the Lectionary. For the next few Sundays, we're going to dive into the eighth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans. This Epistle is paramount to Christian faith and life, and so much of our theology comes from the Book of Romans.

Ron very succinctly told us that the Law does not provide salvation. In truth, the Law condemns us. It reveals to us our fallenness. I'm going to reshape Ron's example of traffic laws, if that's okay? You don't know if you're going dangerously over the speed limit or dangerously under the speed limit until you know what the speed limit is. Let's say, your whole life you may have traveled at 35 MPH. Thirty-five seems absolutely normal and acceptable to you. Then, one day, for the first time ever, you see some guy from VDOT post a sign "Speed Limit 60." So you walk up to the guy and ask him, "Why did you bump up the speed limit?" He responds, "It's always been this limit, there just hasn't been a sign here." So, for however many years, you've been breaking the speed limit by traveling dangerously slow. You never knew that until the law revealed it to you.

Sin is antithetical to the Law of God. The Law, therefore, reveals to us what sin is and how we engage in it. Sin is so ingrained in us, it's so much a part of who we are, that, try as we might, we will never fulfil the Law. Which is why the Law does not provide salvation. Now, Paul is not saying we shouldn't follow the Law, he's telling us that we should not put our trust and our hope of our personal salvation in the Law or in completion of the Law. Instead, our hope, our trust and faith, are to be in Christ Jesus. In him is our salvation. And this is the thrust of these first eleven verses.

Paul writes, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." What a bold statement. Contrary to what some believe, the Apostle here isn't giving folks a free license to do whatever they want. He isn't saying, "Once saved, always saved," in the sense that a born again Christian can now break all the Laws he or she wants. To understand Paul we have to understand his language and how he uses words. The word used as condemnation is *katakrina*, which is a legal term. Paul is using courtroom language, and here he doesn't mean "judgment-free," as in we escape God's judgment because of Christ. Rather, we do not receive the punishment due for that judgment. Now I know that sounds like we're splitting hairs, but in the final analysis, it's very important. We are judged before God and God has found us guilty. That's our inheritance from Adam and Eve. But because of Christ, our condemnation, that is our punishment for sin, which is death, is wiped away from us. Christ took our punishment, our *katakrina* upon himself.

This is why Paul says in verses two and four, "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death...that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." You see, the Apostle is talking about a judicial situation. Paul's theology isn't some philosophical musing, nor is it just an emotional condition. In today's climate and culture we like to talk about judgment-free zones where people are able to express their opinions or lifestyles without prejudice. This is an understandable position and by no means should we cast prejudices on other people. But the hard truth is, there is no judgment-free zone with God. Now don't hear my wrongly, God loves us, we are his very good creation. If God did not love the human race, he would not have sent his only son into this world. But God is not judgment-free. God does not like sin. He does not like our continual desire for sinning. Paul says as much in verses six and seven: "For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and

peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot."

Like Ron mentioned, there is no freedom under the law. Rather, under the law we have guilt. Guilt is another one of those words, when someone mentions it, may produce different images in the mind's eye. When we think of guilt, the first thing to come to mind is the emotion or psychological condition of feeling guilty. In today's world, people don't like it when they are made to feel guilty about believing or doing something. As if guilt is something an individual produces within herself. Biblical guilt is not just a psychological condition, although it can become one. It is a legal standing. When the foreman of the jury in a trial speaks the word "guilty," she is not commenting on the feelings of the accused. Rather, she is pronouncing a verdict. She is saying that the accused has been judged to have committed the crimes with which he was charged. The accused is guilty and will be treated accordingly—regardless of his feelings.

Our feelings, or lack thereof, neither increase nor lessen our guilt. Our guilt is first and foremost a personal standing before a holy God, not psychology or emotions. Being guilty before the eyes of God is a very real thing. God is the righteous judge and the human race is accused of betrayal. God uses the prophet Hosea to physically live out this drama of the people's broken relationship with God. God tells Hosea to take for himself a wife who is a prostitute, and God tells Hosea that his new wife will be unfaithful. She will sleep around with other men, she'll even leave Hosea's house to live with another. And through all of this, God tells Hosea that he is to remain faithful to her. The microcosm of Hosea and his wife Gomer reflects the treachery of the Church and God's steadfast love for her. Just as Gomer was guilty of adultery, so too are we guilty of sin.

I hope you noticed there are two parts in that equation. While I was in seminary, a Lutheran friend told me the formula she uses for sermons is to first beat down the congregation with the Law, then raise them up with the Gospel. That's precisely what Paul does here. He first tells us that we are dead to God because of sin. We are subject to death and a separation from God because of our unruly and impenitent behavior. Under the Law, we are condemned and found guilty. But—the great cosmic "however" —those who are in Christ Jesus are no longer condemned as guilty. The punishment we rightly deserve was put upon Christ when he hung from Calvary.

Think about that for a moment. Jesus Christ, the only sinless person on earth, went to the cross to bear the weight of our condemnation. The human race was so separated from God that there was no way any sacrifice we could ever offer would fully quench God's justice. So God, out of his great love for his creation, sent his only begotten Son to die in our stead. In the Apostle's Creed, one of the lines says, "He descended into hell." Christ Jesus experienced the torments of hell on earth and was utterly forsaken by God. He did this to take upon himself our punishment. Guilt is not a medical condition or an emotional state. It is a spiritual and legal reality. It concerns our standing before God. But the message of the Gospel is this: God can forgive you, and he is willing to do so. First, however, we must be brought to a place where we can say, "I am guilty." Jesus did not deserve to die. Me and you should be on that cross, not Jesus; we are the guilty parties. Until we acknowledge our sin and guilt, we will never come to discover that it can be forgiven. But when we do, actual forgiveness begins to give rise to an awareness of forgiveness

psychologically, spiritually, and physically. With that comes an increasing sense that the bondage of guilt has been broken. At last, we are set free. Wonder of wonders, we discover that at the very heart of the gospel is this fact: God has taken our guilt upon himself in his Son, Jesus Christ.

And Paul is very forward about the benefactors of Christ's sacrifice. In the second half of verse nine, he says, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." The indwelling of the Spirit is absolutely necessary for the removal of our guilt. When we do open our hearts to the Spirit, even though we live in sinful flesh, the Spirit imbues us with righteousness. Before the indwelling of the Spirit, we were all dead to God, lumps of mortal flesh wandering about. God's Spirit, who offers us forgiveness, brings us life, brings us into life with Christ. And this life in the Spirit is one where we gladly look to the Law for our guidance. The Law no longer has the effect of condemning us, because we are no longer condemned. Rather, the Law has the effect of building and establishing relationships. When we follow the laws of Christ, we are fortifying our faith in God and our relationships with one another. Because of the Spirit, we do this with joy in our hearts and song on our lips. Life in the Spirit is not about checking off rules on a list, it's about giving all glory to God and our love to our neighbors.

Let us pray. Holy God, we know that without you, we are dead. Enter into the hearts of those who wander about in death. Bring into them a sense of life and hope through Jesus Christ. Open them to the one Spirit of rebirth, so that they may join us together in the newness of life. Be with us, we who have your Spirit, for we know the path is not an easy one. We are assured that our guilt is wiped away because of Christ's work, but so often we are overwhelmed by the concerns of this world. Encourage and embolden us to live in faith, in obedience to your commands, not because our obedience will save us, but because we are saved. Let us be a light in the darkness of this age. Guide our steps so that we may be witnesses of your Good News. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.