

The Trinitarian Christian Life

Romans 8:12-17

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Our text is the New Testament reading from the book of Romans. It may not be immediately obvious as to why, but this is a standard Trinity Sunday reading. The last two weeks we've seen the Trinitarian shape of our salvation. Here we will look at the Trinity and the Christian life. The big point is simply that the reality of God as Triune is basic, and it is essential to Christian existence and to Christian destiny. We will make three points. Liberty in vv. 12 and 13, Sonship in vv. 14-16, and Inheritance in verse 17. Liberty, Sonship, and Inheritance.

I. Liberty

First, then, liberty. The apostle begins by saying we are debtors, we have an obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. Flesh here means not simply body – Scripture does not despise the human body or view it as evil. Flesh means the whole order of things, as turned away from, and resisting God. Here, it refers to the human person as fallen, as belonging to this fallen order of things, this age. Flesh belongs to this present evil age. We owe the flesh nothing, for as v.13 says; if we live according to the flesh, we will die. Death here means judgment and separation from God.

The implication, which the apostle does not explicit state, is that we are debtors to the Spirit. We are obligated, to live and walk in the Spirit. The Spirit who is the power of the age to come. Thus, in the second half of v.13, the contrast to living according to the flesh, is stated as follows: but if, *by the Spirit*, you put to death the (mis)deeds of the body, you will live. Every Christian person is locked into mortal combat. Either sin – and Paul sees sin as a malignant, monstrous power which seeks to enslave – either sin will triumph – or God, in Christ, through the Spirit, shall liberate you (Trinitarian liberation).

There is no placing this combat on hold, there is no resigning from it, there are no days off from it, there is no being discharged from it. There are no stalemates or draws. The Christian life is thus a life of a thousand daily crucifixions. It is either kill sin or be killed by it. And Paul here calls on us to put to death, to execute, the deeds of the body (sin in our members).

But note, that while this is something we actively do, it is not a mere human achievement. The text says if, BY THE SPIRIT, you put to death the (mis)deeds of the body. We are to, by means of the Spirit, become the executioners of sin in our lives. The Spirit is the instrument for killing, slaughtering, executing sin. (It is the power that fastens sin to the gallows where Christ hung in our place)

Now, Paul is assuming something here, that he's already covered elsewhere – and it's crucial. Namely, the Christ has destroyed sin, and its power, in his cross and resurrection, and that you have been united to him, in his death and resurrection, through baptism. Paul says in Galatians that those who belong to Christ Jesus HAVE CRUCIFIED the flesh and its passions. So, what we are called to here, is not an additional work, but an appropriation of what God in Christ has already done.

The Christian life is not: Jesus did something great for you, now try and be disciplined and live accordingly. Try to respond appropriately. It is our lives being drawn into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. This is why we can be happy warriors in the midst of the fierce battle. Ignore this battle, you may be happy, but you won't be a warrior. If you don't fight this battle on ground Christ already conquered, you may be a warrior, but you won't be happy.

Christian existence is, for us, continual mortification (putting to death) and vivification (quickenings) or being made alive WITH Christ. And that death & resurrection, and your union with X in it, are the secret, mysterious power, the divine provision for, and the key to, your victory.

What we are up against in life, in our disordered souls, will not yield to anything but heavenly, supernatural, eschatological power. It is impervious to our best efforts, our resolutions, our grit and discipline. Only because, as Paul puts it in Colossians: you have died and been raised with Christ, so seek the things which are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God --- It is only because that is the place, the vantage point of Christian existence, that Paul can go on to say: therefore, put to death what is earthly in you.

Practically, it looks something like this: we are to take our sinful tendencies, and our temptations, and – laying hold of the Spirit – we are to count ourselves, to reckon, to think of ourselves, as dead to sin. We are to say to sin: I put you to death (not as an act of sheer will but) in the death that I died (to you) in Christ's death. By the Spirit -in holy ruthlessness- we direct sin to where it has already been put to death, namely the cross of Christ. And as you do that, you will live – that is, you will mysteriously partake of Christ's resurrection life. You will be made alive -even as he was - to God the Father.

Let me give an expanded paraphrase of v.13:

IF – by the SPIRIT – you put to death – you unite to the cross of Christ - the misdeeds of the body – you shall – through the resurrection of Christ – live – even as he did- unto God the Father.

This is the Trinitarian form of Christian liberty and victory. The Spirit unites us to the Son, crucified and raised, and in the Son, by the Spirit, we present ourselves to God.

II. Sonship

Our second point is Sonship. V.14: For those who are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons (children) of God. This is a crucial verse in clearing up a lot of modern confusion. To be led by the Spirit here, is not to have some mystical sense of the Spirit telling you what to do. It has little to do with the way many speak of the Spirit leading them. It means, in context, to be using the life and power of the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the flesh. Where you have a Christian struggling, by grace, to walk in holiness, you have a Christian being LED by the Spirit. And thus, you have a son or daughter, a child of God. All God's children are thus led by the Spirit. There are no non-Spirit led Christians.

This sonship is further elucidated in v.15 which says that the Spirit which we received is not a spirit of slavery or fear. Rather we have received the spirit of adoption. The Holy Spirit is the one who, the text says, brings about our adoption to sonship . The language indicates the full legal rights of a male heir in Roman culture. Through the Spirit, uniting us to the Son, we become sons, ourselves children, of God. We obtain, by the Spirit uniting us to Christ, all the rights and privileges of the children in God's household.

So, you can see the Trinitarian beauty and shape of this, at the very basic level of being a child of God. The Spirit unites us to Christ, the Son, and we too become sons, children of the Father.

I'm going to guess, it's been a long time since a testimony or a conversion story was actually told with this shape and texture. Again, God in general, will do for most of how we speak, even how we speak of our conversions. So, whether we see it, or understand it, or can articulate it or not, the glorious reality is that we are embraced in the life, indeed in the orderly life, of the three-personed God at every moment of Christian existence.

The Spirit, then, not only unites us to Jesus' death and resurrection (first point), but He brings you IN and THROUGH Jesus, unto the Father. Thus, the latter half of v.15 says, that by the same Spirit that unities us to the Son as adopted sons, we cry out Abba, Father.

Abba is an Aramaic word, used by children to address their fathers. Remarkably, it is used by Jesus in Mk. 14. to address the God of Israel. The word does not mean daddy (as commonly asserted). It's just the Aramaic word for father, and the adult Jews of Jesus' day would have used it of their parents. Daddy is too casual and could border on presumption or irreverence. God is our Father – but he is our Transcendent Father IN HEAVEN.

Nevertheless, there is a warmth, and an intimacy, in the address as Jesus used it. And even more wonderful is that His people are, by the Spirit, to have the same cry upon their lips. This is Christian adoption: to address the Creator of heaven and earth, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with this intimate word, Abba, Father. Luther has a wonderful comment on this:

This is a little word, yet it comprehends all things. The mouth speaks not, but the affection of the heart speaks after this manner.

Although I be oppressed with anguish and terror on every side, and seem to be forsaken, and utterly cast away from thy presence, yet I am thy child, and thou art my father for Christ's sake.

Wherefore this little word, Father, conceived effectually in the heart, passes all the eloquence of Demosthenes, Cicero and the most eloquent rhetoricians that ever were in the world.

This is the heart – the deeply, fully Trinitarian heart, of Christian life. To, by the Spirit, in union with Jesus, call His Father, our Father. Better: it means we are, by this Spirit brought into the mutual love that exists between the Father and the Son. We can love the Father (or begin to) as the Son loves him, and we can be loved by the Father as he loves his Son. The result, in v.16, is that the Spirit bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. Such that, in accordance with the OT, the two witnesses, our Spirit and the HS establish the reality of our adoption as children of God.

III. Inheritance

Finally, third, inheritance. Salvation is, as we know, already and not yet. It is a present reality, and it has a future consummation. Paul will say – just a tad later in this chapter – that we are waiting for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. In other words, to taste the life and light of the Holy Trinity is to yearn, to groan, to wait eagerly for the end. We get a glimpse of this logic in v.17:

If (we are) children, then (we are) heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ. We shall come into possession of all that God has for His children, because we are children – and children inherit. And primarily, it is God himself – in a renewed cosmos to be sure – but God himself, is our inheritance. Revelation 21 and 22

display the eternal state as one where the central feature is glorious, face to face communion with the Triune God in/as the city of God.

Whom have I in heaven, but thee? The Psalmist asks - and there is none upon the earth, that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion (inheritance) forever more.

And how this occurs is seen in the phrase: fellow-heirs with Christ. We are sons in the Son. And this we are joint heirs with the one who will inherit all things. All that the glorified and exalted Christ now possesses – in heaven, and all that shall come to him - is your sure and certain inheritance.

But notice this: The Spirit, which makes us sons, children, is also called, elsewhere, the down payment, the earnest, the pledge, of our inheritance. The communion we have now in the Spirit, by which we cry Abba/Father, is just a foretaste of the communion we shall have in the new creation, in the age to come. Even your inheritance, your future, is fully Trinitarian. You are heirs by the Spirit, joint-heirs with Son, inheritors of all the wealth and riches the Father shall bestow on his children.

Yet, there is a condition here. Recall Paul stated by saying IF we, by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the flesh, we will live. And here he returns to the ongoing battles of life. If indeed we suffer with Him (share his sufferings), that we may also be glorified with Him (share his glory). Suffering always precedes glory. As it was for the Lord, so it is for His body, the church. Heirs are called to suffer. Even here the sufferings are not something we do isolated from, or in addition to, Christ.

Notice – this is a sharing *in his sufferings*, a mysterious drawing, by the Spirit, into the Son's sufferings, from which we also cry Abba/Father. Even our sufferings are Trinitarian sufferings. They are a conformity to his death, that we might know the power of his resurrection life unto God. To do what our text opened with in v.13 – to, by the Spirit, put to death the sin in our bodies/twisted natures, is to suffer. It is to share Christ's sufferings, that we might share his glory.

But we are not to be morbid. For the sufferings of this present time, are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed to us. With this we must heartily agree. Because as we have seen, the glory to be revealed to us, is, first: the glory of Trinitarian liberty. I urge you to, BY the SPIRIT, execute the deeds of the flesh, that you might LIVE. The glory awaiting us is, second, the glory of Trinitarian Sonship. And I exhort you to cry out Abba/Father in every state of life, for in Jesus, you have access to and intimacy with the Father. This is to be the cry of your heart. And the glory awaiting us, is, finally, the glory of our Trinitarian inheritance. I encourage you – do not let it drop from sight, it is worth suffering for. It is the glory of the Trinity itself as our life and portion.

This is your destiny as the children of God. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, Glory to the One God in three persons, now and forever. Amen.

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