



When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

“All in the Roman Family”

Romans 8:12-17

While we in America continue to struggle with what legally and morally constitutes the family unit, Paul’s first century readers understood it very well.

The Roman *familia*, with its *pater familias* (head of the family), was deeply ingrained in their minds.

We’re going to see Paul appeal to the Roman family to make an incredible claim to Christians in God’s family.

Romans 8:12 Therefore, brethren, we are debtors - not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

Paul said we are “debtors.” There is something we owe; something we are obligated to pay. But there is also a creditor that tries to collect when we have no obligation.

This wasn’t the first time Paul used the term “debtor.” It might help us to understand who or what we ought to be in debt to. In the first chapter of Romans he said,

Romans 1:14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise.

Romans 1:15 So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Paul thought of himself as having a debt to pay. He was talking about his calling as an apostle. This obligation arose from the favor that God had shown him in appointing him to this work. He was specially chosen as a vessel to bear the gospel to the Gentiles and he would not feel that he had discharged the obligation until he had made the Gospel known as far as possible among all the nations of the earth.

There is also a debt we should *not* pay in verse twelve - “to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.”

As we press forward in the Christian life we are hindered by a disturbing creditor. It is the flesh – that principle within us that tends toward satisfying natural lusts in sinful ways. Like any creditor who hasn’t been paid the flesh seems to bother us and harass us all the time – at home, at work, in school.

We no longer owe anything to the flesh! It no longer has a valid claim on us. Why not?

Death cancels your obligations to creditors. My death with Jesus Christ cancelled any obligations I have to satisfy my flesh.

When you are tempted by the flesh to give in to its demands you can tell yourself you are under no obligation and ignore its demands. You’re dead!

Romans 8:13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

In what sense will you die if you “live according to the flesh?” Here are a couple of ways we can understand this:

1. Paul might be reminding us that before we were saved we had no choice but to live according to the flesh. We were headed toward death. We were going to die physically and then die a second death at the Great White Throne Judgment. We would have been cast alive for eternity into the Lake of Fire.
2. Paul might be telling us that when we, as Christians, are debtors to the flesh what we bring forth through our lives kills rather than blesses. It is dead works.

When the flesh ‘calls’ demanding to be paid, by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body. You follow the influences and impulses of the indwelling Holy Spirit. You refuse to do the deeds the flesh is demanding.

You can refuse because, as we saw last time, the Holy Spirit who is in you is powerful. We think of the outcome of the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit as doubtful when in reality the flesh is no match for the Spirit.

Unless we decide to yield ourselves back as debtors!

“You will live,” Paul said. He was talking about really living – living the way God intended for a man to live.

To describe the kind of living Paul meant he drew from an analogy his readers would understand perfectly but that we do not. He compared believers to children who were adopted into the Roman *familia*.

Romans 8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Paul wasn't suggesting you cease to be a "son of God" if you yield to the flesh rather than be "led by the Spirit of God." No, he was saying that since you have God the Holy Spirit in you, and can be led by Him, it is evidence you are "sons of God" in a very special sense.

He gives you that very special sense of sonship in the next verse.

Romans 8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

I found a very informative article on Roman adoption. Let me give you the highlights.

[In Rome] the *patria potestas* was the father's power over his family; that power was absolute; it was actually the power of absolute disposal and control, and in the early days it was actually the power of life and death.

In adoption a person had to pass from one *patria potestas* to another. He had to pass out of the possession and control of one father into the equally absolute control and possession of another.

There were two steps. The first was known as *mancipatio*, and it was carried out by a symbolic sale, in which copper and scales were symbolically used. Three times the symbolism of sale was carried out. Twice the father symbolically sold his son, and twice he bought him back; and the third time he did not buy him back and thus the *patria potestas* was held to be broken.

After the sale there followed a ceremony called *vindicatio*. The adopting father went to the *praetor*, one of the Roman magistrates, and presented a legal case for the transference of the person to be adopted into his *patria potestas*. When all this was completed the adoption was complete.

There were four main consequences [of adoption].

1. The adopted person lost all rights to his old family, and gained all the rights of a fully legitimate son in his new family. In the most literal sense, and in the most legally binding way, he got a new father.
2. It followed that he became heir to his new father's estate. Even if other sons were afterwards born, who were real blood relations, it did not affect his rights. He was inalienably co-heir with them.
3. ... The old life of the adopted person was completely wiped out. For instance, legally all debts were cancelled; they were wiped out as though they had never been. The adopted person was regarded as a new person entering into a new life with which the past had nothing to do.

4. In the eyes of the law the adopted person was literally and absolutely the son of the new father.

This is what Paul had in mind. Once we were in the absolute possession and power of sin and death but God adopted us as we were. He has brought us into an entirely new way of living. Our old way of life, indeed our old life, has no claim upon us anymore. Debts are cancelled and instead we inherit all things pertaining to our Father.

The word “bondage” (in verse 15) is suggested by the analogy of the Roman household. Those in bondage were the household slaves. Paul contrasted the adopted son with the household slaves. “You did not receive the spirit of bondage” means you are not a fearful slave in God’s household of faith.

So much of what passes for biblical Christianity is really some sort of fear and slavery. I’d apply this to the Emergent Church. The Emergent Church is the current movement within Christianity to join a multitude of faiths and denominations in a new 'reformation' that challenges the authority of scripture, the traditional structure and doctrines of the Church, discounts prophecy, and encourages a socio-economic agenda above salvation through believing on Jesus Christ.

Part of what is going on in the Emergent Church movement is a return to ritual and ceremony. But that is not how children discover and enjoy their dads!

It’s not an advance to return to rituals and ceremonies; it’s a retreat into a relationship of bondage and fear.

Yours is a full, and fully privileged, relationship. You cry “Abba, Father.”

- “Abba” is an endearing expression of intimacy.
- “Father” is an expression of full adoption.

Even before the recent popularity of the Emergent Church movement there has been a movement towards greater formalism in the church. I reject it all as a denial of my adopted sonship.

Romans 8:16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

The presence of God the Holy Spirit in us “bears witness with” our regenerated “spirit” that all these things are true.

Since all this is true, then why is it we sometimes misunderstand or even refuse to be led by the Spirit? One answer is that we are still on the earth, in the household of faith, and are not yet home with the Lord. Verse seventeen addresses the tension between what we are and where we are.

Romans 8:17 and if children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

An adopted child was a full heir of the future inheritance. Since God is our Father, we are “heirs of God” and are going to inherit Heaven and all that goes along with it for all eternity!

All this was made possible, of course, by Jesus Christ when He came to earth as God in human flesh. Jesus in His humanity still looks forward to receiving the full inheritance promised Him for His sacrifice on the Cross.

In the Revelation we read,

Revelation 11:15 Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

It is in the future that the Lord will receive the kingdoms of this world. In fact, the Revelation tells the story of how Jesus receives His full inheritance at His Second Coming and (finally) at the creation of the new heaven and the new earth.

In order to claim the "kingdoms of this world" as His own, Jesus suffered as a man.

We can expect no less. We suffer now, in God's household of faith on the earth, but will be glorified in the future.

It is the suffering, the distress, the tragedy, the difficulty, that interferes with our receiving the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.

Or I should say, it is what we allow to interfere, thinking that suffering is somehow a strange thing for the believer.

It is not. It is our portion now and we should understand it.

For example. When Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, He called Him "another comforter."

Let me ask you this. When do you need a “comforter?” It’s when you are uncomfortable!

The very designation of the Holy Spirit indicates we will be uncomfortable in this life as we journey homeward.

Nevertheless, we are the adopted sons and daughters of God, heirs and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ.