

Led By the Spirit

Romans 8:12–14¹

Therefore, We Are Debtors.

Romans 8, verse 12 begins with a little Greek conjunction, variously translated into English as “so”, “then”, and “therefore”, depending on the translation being used and also the context. In Greek, it’s the same word every time—all 46 times in the case of Paul’s letter to the Romans—but in English, we don’t like to use any word quite that often in the space of 16 relatively short chapters, so we mix it up a bit. The thing is, this is, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, “one of the most characteristic words of this Apostle.”

He always lays down his doctrine first, and then he applies it, by using this word “therefore”²

(or so, or then, or so then, as the case may be). In truth, this is simply how the Apostle thinks and writes. He’s an apostle, of course, and writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but as the human author of this letter, he thinks and writes like a logician. Every point is based on the previous point and all on the main premise, because this is the gospel, this is the Word of God—the power of God—for salvation to everyone who believes.

Now faith requires the work of the Holy Spirit (it is the gift of God, not a result of human effort³), but the Lord who breathed out His Word by His Holy Spirit, and who works salvation through the Word of the gospel, has so arranged it that His Word is reasonable. It is logical. It makes sense. In fact,

...this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely...everything one must believe to be saved...

and

...the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length...⁴

so, the problem for those who do not believe is not that they cannot follow the arguments; the problem is that they willfully suppress the truth by their unrighteousness,⁵ as the Apostle Peter wrote, “of this they are willingly ignorant.” It’s not an intellectual problem then, it’s a moral problem. It’s not a matter of understanding what the Lord requires of us in His word; it’s simply a matter of not wanting to be obedient to Him.

Here too in Romans 8, verse 12.

¹² So then... Romans 8:12 ESV

1 All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

2 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans (Volume 7): The Sons of God* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 91.

3 Cf. Ephesians 2:8–10.

4 “The Belgic Confession, Article 7”, ed., CRCNA (Christian Reformed Church in North America), *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 82.

5 Cf. Romans 1:18.

(therefore)

...brothers, we are debtors... Romans 8:12 ESV

(we have an obligation)

...not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. Romans 8:12 ESV

This, of course, being completely counter-cultural in an age that insists that you do you, follow your heart, and this above all, to thine own self be true, and other such nonsense. No. Absolutely not. First of all, these clichés are just that. They are clichés and can be dismissed out of hand.

Beyond that, no Christian person could ever live like this. We have an obligation, yes—we are debtors—but not to the flesh to live according to the flesh. We have an obligation, but not to ourselves. Not only is this bad philosophy, because, if everyone in the world were to just live for himself, the world would be, well, hell, but also because, verse 13:

¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die... Romans 8:13 ESV

Because,

²⁵ There is a way that seems right to a man... Proverbs 16:25 ESV

(“just follow your heart”, for example)

...but its end is the way to death. Proverbs 16:25 ESV

Just ask Solomon, who wrote those wise words. You’ll find his answer in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Not to the Flesh.

And then there’s our text this morning...

¹² So then... Romans 8:12 ESV

(therefore)

...brothers, we are debtors... Romans 8:12 ESV

Well, why “So then”? Why “therefore”? Because the book of Romans, everything that we’ve seen so far, but especially chapter 8, verses 1 – 4:

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ 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*, ⁴ 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. Romans 8:1–4 ESV

Therefore—because of this one great central reality in the book of Romans—*therefore*, we have an obligation, but not to the flesh. The New International Version says, “not to the sinful nature”, and to the extent that the two terms might be somewhat interchangeable, fine. Not to that either.

⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death... Romans 8:6 ESV

because,

⁷ ...the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law... Romans 8:7 ESV

so,

⁸ Those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God. Romans 8:8 ESV

They simply cannot. It is just not possible. But, as we noted last Lord's Day,

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Romans 8:9 ESV

and if you are in Christ—if you are a believer, if you are a Christian, if you are saved—then the Spirit of God does dwell in you, because

Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. Romans 8:9 ESV

There is no two-tiered spirituality in Christianity. If you are in Christ, then the Spirit of God dwells in you, and

¹⁰ ...although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. Romans 8:10 ESV

Therefore—because of this—

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors... Romans 8:12 ESV

—we have an *obligation*—but

...not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. Romans 8:12 ESV

We have an obligation, but not to ourselves, to live for ourselves and our own pleasure and fulfillment

¹³ For if you live according to the flesh... Romans 8:13 ESV

(if you live by its standard⁶)

...you will die... Romans 8:13 ESV

Now, that's not to say that you *can* live according to the flesh, at least not if you are truly in Christ. Some have taken it so. Those who want to see the possibility in Romans 8 for a

⁶ Cf. William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 12–13, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 254.

person to be saved but not sanctified—what we used to call a “carnal” or fleshly Christian—might say that this is Paul talking about the sin unto death, referred to in 1 John, chapter 5. They imply that if a Christian is just a bit too carnal—a bit too oriented toward the standards of the flesh—he will die physically, “though, of course, he will not lose his salvation.”⁷

But whatever John may be speaking of, that’s not what the Apostle is saying here. We’ve seen this before. Verses 7 and 8:

⁷ 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. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Romans 8:7–8 ESV

And this is not a state of being that is even possible, at least not long term, for a true child of God. You are not in the flesh if you belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ, but in the Spirit, and therefore the Spirit of God dwells in you. In view here is *not* the idea of a Christian who is living in the Spirit versus a Christian who has not yet attained that lofty goal. In view here is what Hendriksen refers to as “The Inescapable Alternative”.⁸ We are either in the Spirit (and the Spirit is in us), which is to say that we are now, already and always the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, or we are not, and we are then “in the flesh” and we cannot by any work or merit of our own please God in any way.

As Boice wrote:

Paul is saying that if you live like a non-Christian, dominated by your sinful nature rather than living according to the Holy Spirit, you will perish like a non-Christian—because you are a non-Christian. “If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die.” On the other hand, if you really are a Christian, you will not live according to the sinful nature. Instead, you will acknowledge what you actually are in Jesus Christ and live accordingly.⁹

Led by the Spirit.

So, we are debtors, but not to the flesh. To whom then? How should we live in the light of Romans 8, verses 1 – 11 (and, indeed, Romans chapters 1 – 7 inclusively). Well, Paul did not say, we are debtors, but not to the flesh, rather to the Spirit—not directly. Rather, he set the contrast between living according to the flesh and being led by the Spirit of God. We could turn this around and make the point that to live according to the flesh would mean to be led by the flesh, to be dragged around by our appetites from one pleasure to another, always thirsty, always searching for the next big thing that hopefully might satisfy. And, of course, never finding it.

But those who are in Christ are not led around by the flesh, rather, they are led by the Spirit of God who is in them. And what does this look like? Well, we’ve already seen it in the contrast. Verse 7 said:

⁷ Cf. James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: The Reign of Grace*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991–), 826.

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 255.

⁹ Boice, *Romans*, 826–827.

⁷ 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. Romans 8:7 ESV

We can assume then that the mind set on the Spirit—the mind that is life and peace, according to verse 6—is a mind that can submit and in fact desires to submit to God's law. If those who are in the flesh cannot please God because they cannot submit to His law, then it stands to reason that those who have been born again, given life by His Spirit, find that in His power they can.

As always, we need to emphasize that this is not for even a moment to suggest that a person can be made righteous by the works of the law done in the strength of the flesh. In the first place, we simply cannot do the works of the law in the strength of the flesh. It is not possible. It is

⁵ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy [Spirit]; ⁶ [whom] he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior... Titus 3:5–6 KJV10

And if that is not proof enough, there are countless other scriptures that speak to this very thing.

But we are speaking of what happens *when* the Holy Spirit is shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior. When that happens, He not only saves us, but also He sets us apart—He makes us holy—giving us the righteousness of Christ as a gift, and then working out that righteousness within us as day by day He draws us nearer to the Father. In the passage I just quoted from Paul's letter to Titus, he goes on to explain, that God did this—he poured out His Spirit upon us:

⁷ ...so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Titus 3:7–8 ESV

So that being justified by His grace, we might be saved, in other words, but He went on.

⁸ The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, **so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works**. These things are excellent and profitable for people. Titus 3:7–8 ESV

As we have noted so often before, we were not saved to go to heaven when we die. The hope of eternal life is a promise, and the Spirit was given to us as a guarantee of that very thing, but that is not the extent of it. We were saved by grace through faith, and given the Holy Spirit to dwell in us so that we can be careful to devote ourselves to good works.

¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 ESV

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: King James Version*., electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), alterations, set off in brackets, mine.

And, since time is short, let me refer you to the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 91. “What do we do that is good?”

Only that which arises out of true faith, **conforms to God’s law**, and is done for His glory, and not that which is based on what we think is right or on established human tradition.¹¹

God’s law is the very definition of the good works that God “prepared beforehand” that we should walk in them. And this is what it looks like to be led by the Spirit of God.

We’ve considered the positive exhortation of verse 13 before and only need to mention it here.

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. Romans 8:13 ESV

Of course, all of these together are what it means—what it looks like—to be led by the Spirit. It is not some magical, mystical experience where we receive some sort of direct guidance. Rather, it is to put to mortify—to put to death—the flesh and its deeds; to set the mind (the heart) on the things of the Spirit, to strive for the holiness, and to be led in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Because Jesus Himself was led by the Spirit, then to be led by the Spirit of Christ is

⁶ ...to walk in the same way in which he walked. ¹ John 2:6 ESV

worthy of the gospel of Christ;¹² worthy of the calling with which you have been called.¹³ As those who have died to sin, and been made alive to God in Christ Jesus,¹⁴ this is now our obligation—we are debtors, but not to the flesh, rather

¹⁰ ...to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; Colossians 1:10 ESV

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. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Romans 8:13–14 ESV

¹¹ “The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 91”, *Ecumenical Creeds*), 54.

¹² Cf. Philemon 1:27.

¹³ Cf. Ephesians 4:1.

¹⁴ Cf. Romans 6:11.