From Slaves to Sons
Romans 8:12-17

Paul's letter to the Romans is recognised as one of *the* great pieces of literature. And of all its chapters, chapter 8 is probably the greatest. And one reason for that is the way it speaks to the realities of life.

Because did you notice how today's passage addresses two mutually exclusive outcomes of life? And it doesn't matter whether you're secular or religious, one is the outcome you want, while the other is the outcome we're all desperately trying to avoid. Verse 13: 'You will die… [or]… you will live.' And Paul's not just talking about end of life, eternal outcomes, but about living a life that's either a living death - You will die - or one that's full of life - You will live.

And you know which one you're looking for. Which one we put all our efforts, all our job seeking or job-changing, all our earning or our spending, all our searching for romantic partners or holiday destinations into. We all want *life.* The question is: how do you get it? How do you live a life that's overflowing with life?

And that's where any consensus falls down, doesn't it? Because in traditional cultures the way to life is to subjugate your desires to those of your family, your tribe, your nation. While in our modern, progressive cultures it's the opposite, because to really live, you need to break those chains of tradition and be your authentic self. And you should never subjugate your dreams and desires to anyone else's. Instead, you need to put yourself first and grab hold of the life you really want.

But in today's passage, Paul is arguing that Christianity says something very different from either of those alternatives. Because, in contrast to more conservative cultures, there really is overflowing life, freedom, individual identity to be had. *But*, you won't find that by living for yourself. It's the opposite. You have to die to yourself *and* have the way you see yourself wonderfully, radically changed.

So that's what we're going to look at: What You do, Who You are, and How it's Possible to really live a life overflowing with life.

What You Have to Do
Verse 12, 'So then, brothers…'

Which means that what he's about to say flows out of what he said in the passage before. 'So then… because of what Jesus has done for us, because those who trust in him are no longer in the flesh, no longer caught up in a life turned in on self - but have the Spirit of God living in them… so then…', v12 again, 'We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.'

Think what it means to be a debtor. Let's say you borrow some money from the bank or a friend. Now you're indebted to them, aren't you? You have certain obligations to them. You might even say they have some control over you. Because if the bank says, we want you to repay this much, you've got to do it. Or if your friend says, 'I'd really like you to do this for me', you feel duty bound to do it. Why? Because you owe them.

And Paul is saying that because of what God has done for you in Jesus, you're in debt, *but not to your flesh*. You don't owe your flesh anything.

But it will tell you you do. Because imagine you've had a bad day at work, and you come home and you are stressed. But the kids are playing up, or your room mates have left the place like a dump, and you explode, you let them have it. Why? Because you don't deserve this, you deserve better than this. They owe you respect, or some peace and quiet, or a clean kitchen, and when you don't get it, you allow your anger space.

What is that? It's your flesh - your curved-in-on-self nature - demanding what's owed it. And it may not be anger. Maybe when you're under pressure and you tell yourself you deserve some relief, you open a bottle, or head to the fridge, or click on some link. It's your flesh demanding what it tells you is owed it - payback.

But Paul is saying, 'because of Jesus, we owe the flesh *nothing*.'

And not just nothing. Indulging it will never give you the life you're actually looking for, Paul says. Verse 13, 'For if you live according to the flesh you will die.' Eternally, for sure, but you'll also shrivel up and die in this life.

And you know how that happens. Because meet someone who constantly puts themselves first and there's no room for anyone else, is there? And relationships and actions become increasingly self-centred. And today we might call that 'self-care', but in the old days we called it *self-ishness*. And selfishness always robs you of what makes life truly wonderful.

So, Paul is saying, live according to the flesh and it will result in a slow and steady disintegration of your life. And your self might grow bigger and bigger - but your life will grow smaller and smaller. As you find yourself alienated from God and others; living in an echo chamber of one.

But, he says, there is an alternative. Verse 13, '*But* if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, *you will live*.' Notice what he doesn't say. Because he *doesn't* say, 'we're not debtors to the flesh, so don't live like you are, *but we are debtors to the Spirit.*'

Why doesn't he close the circle of his argument? Why not say 'we're debtors to the Spirit'? Or at least 'to God'? Because we can hear that and immediately think, 'I need to repay him. I need to repay God.'

But the grace of God is a gift, not a loan. And when you understand the sheer scale of that gift, you know you could never repay it. Instead, your heart will be filled with gratitude and love - and that will radically change how you live.

And what you discover is that true fullness of life does not come by indulging ourselves, but by denying ourselves.

Because look again at v13, 'But if by the Spirit you *put to death* the deeds of the body, you will live.' And the verb Paul uses for *to put to death* means… *to put to death*. To execute. It sounds kind of violent, doesn't it? And what are we supposed to put to death? 'The deeds of the body': anything we do with our bodies - anything we look at with our eyes, listen to with our ears, touch or click on with our hands, go to with our feet - anything that curves us inward rather than points us up and outwards to God and others. Kill it Paul says.

Because of all that God has done for you in Christ, Starve your sin of oxygen. Deprive it of life. Give it no food or water of encouragement. Don't indulge it, stroke it, tolerate it or give it any space. Take no prisoners, Paul says. Instead, put it to death.

Why? Because as Jesus said, it's in losing our lives that we save our lives. It's in dying that we live, it's in giving up that we receive, it's in blessing that we are blessed, and it's in humbling ourselves that we are lifted up.

As John Stott the British pastor and theologian wrote: 'There's a kind of life that leads to death *but there's a kind of death that leads to life*.'

There's a funny part in Augustine's Confessions where he's describing his coming to faith. But he knows that if he's going to become a Christian he's going to have to give up his sexual sin. And he wants to give it up… but he doesn't. And looking back he realised that what he was praying was, 'Lord, make me chaste [make me sexually pure]… but not yet.' Because I really want to enjoy my sin just a bit longer.

But Paul - and the older, wiser Augustine - are saying: you'll never find life that way. Because sin's a thief and a robber. It promises you life but it gives you death. It says, 'make yourself no. 1 and the world will be yours' - and you end up isolated and alone, and without hope and without God in the world.

Instead, Paul says, put the neck of your sin and selfishness on the executioner's block, and you'll begin to live life as you were always meant to.

And you can't be passive about it, Paul says, hoping God will do it - we have to put sin to death. And yet, we cannot do it without him. Verse 13-14, '*by the Spirit*… put to death the deeds of the body… For all who are lead by the Spirit of God are sons of God.' And so in the flow of Paul's argument, being led by the Spirit is *not* wondering, 'ooh what would the Spirit have me do today? Should I put my left sock on before my right? Or should I ask that girl out on a date?' It's to be led by him in our fight against sin, as he points out, not just our sin, but the roots of it.

So let's say you do respond with anger to something someone says - and the Spirit convicts you of that. But he also works on you to have you reflect on *why* you got angry. Or maybe you feel the temptation growing inside you to look at something you shouldn't or buy something you really don't need - and the Spirit makes you aware of that, bringing it into the light. But he'll also have you consider what it is, what desire, what need, you're trying to feed, that ultimately only Christ can meet.

But the Spirit does more than convict you sin. He gives you the desire to say 'no' to it. As Paul writes to Titus, 'The grace of God has appeared… training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions' (Titus 2:11-12). And so as the Spirit reminds you of the immensity of Christ's grace to you, your love for Jesus grows, and with it your hatred of sin, and you find a sword in your hand to slay your sin. And as you do, you live. Instead of anger you become more patient; instead of bitterness, more forgiving. Instead of lust, more loving. Instead of criticism, more grateful and joyful. You're beginning to live.

Who You Are

Now when it comes to your identity, what does our current culture tell you you've got to do if you really want to live? Find yourself, by looking inside yourself, and then express that to the world.

Now, I don't know about you, but finding myself and coming face to face with myself - what I'm really like on the inside - sounds horrific! And as some of the young couples know, when Su and I do marriage prep, one of our favourite quotes is from a young husband who said, "I used to think I was a great guy, and then I got married, and realised I'm a total jerk.' Why? Because marriage confronts you with the real you.

And the Bible says you'll never find life by looking inside. In fact, you'll never become who you were created to be, until you look up and out. Verses 14-15: 'For all who are lead by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, *but you received the Spirit of adoption as sons*.'

Which means no-one is born a child of God naturally, you have to be reborn, supernaturally. By nature, Paul says, we're slaves. It's only by adoption that we become sons.

And think what adoption would have meant for the Romans Paul's writing to. Because if a Roman citizen had no son, he would choose one of his servants, and adopt him as his son, and heir of all his wealth.

And so an adopted son was once a slave but who is now free. And not just free but who has a whole new identity and incredible future ahead of him.

And Paul is saying, if you're a Christian that's what God the Father has done for you. Whether you're male or female, you're a son. Because today, daughters can inherit. But not back then. Only sons could receive all that the father had. And you are that son, Paul is saying.

And with that change in identity come incredible privileges.

Firstly, a deep security. Verse 15 again, 'For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption as sons.' You see, a slave might very well live in fear. Like the fear of punishment. Make the smallest error, or cross his master in a foul mood, and his back and the master's whip would know it. Or the fear of having his weakness or needs made known - because what would his master care for his needs? Or fear for the future - because when old age came and he was of no more use, would he be thrown on the street?

And think how you can have a slave-like mentality toward God. Fear of punishment, that when you sin, God will punish you, *or* that the difficulties you're currently experiencing in life *are* punishment. So you obey out of fear.

Fear - or at least reticence - to approach God in prayer for your needs and your weaknesses - because who are you that God would listen to you? And fear for the future - because *have you* been good enough, done enough, or like a slave cast out on the street will God cast you out on the last day?

But Paul is saying, when you became, or become, a Christian, you're no longer a slave! God has chosen and adopted you as a son. And when you know that, it gives you a huge sense of security.

Because secondly, being a son brings intimacy and boldness. Verse 15, 'You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"'

Now, a slave keeps things formal. But being a son is all about relationship. A slave keeps his distance, but the love of a father for his son draws the son in. And if a slave serves out of fear-filled duty, a son obeys out of love; and an adopted one out of deep gratitude.

Because, as Paul says, by the Spirit we can cry 'Abba! Father!' And *Abba* was the everyday word for father in Aramaic. So why does Paul use it, when the people he's writing to speak Greek or Latin, not Aramaic? And yet, he's clearly expecting them to read that and go 'yeh, that's exactly how we address God!' So why would Gentile Christians, living in Rome, be using a word for Father from a language thousands of miles away? Probably because they knew it was how Jesus prayed to his Father. That in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he was about to face the ultimate battle with sin, he cried out, "Abba, Father" (Mk 14:36).

And, Paul is saying, because of all that Jesus has done for you, you can pray to God the Father, through the God the Spirit, in the same way as God the Son prayed. Because that's who you are: A chosen and beloved son.

And when you know that, you begin to live. Because you know you're loved and can take anything to him in prayer, and so the hard things of life won't wreck your life. And you know you already have your Father's approval, so you don't need to be fragile and needy or thirsty for others' approval. And you won't get puffed up by your successes because you know they're his gifts to you. But you also won't be broken by your failures, because you know his love for you is not dependant on your performance.

Thirdly, you can live with real assurance. Verse 16, 'The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' Now, where and when does a witness appear? In a court of law, in a trial. And sometimes your heart can feel like that, can't it? That *you're* on trial. And you're accuser points the finger, 'you're not a Christian! Look at all the evidence against you.' But then Christ, your defence attorney, calls his star witness - the Holy Spirit, who steps into the witness box and says, 'Oh I can assure you, you really are a beloved child of God.' That as you pray, 'Abba, Father', the Spirit speaks deep in your heart, 'God really is your Father and you really are his child.'

And fourthly, that will give you a steadfast hope. And if anyone is going to thrive and flourish in life, they need hope. Verses 16-17, 'We are children of God, and if children, *then heirs* - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.'

And an inheritance is all about your future, about the wealth coming your way. And for a Roman slave, adopted as a son, the whole estate would one day be his. Think how that would transform the way they saw their past, present and future.

And Paul is saying, if you're a Christian, you have been made a joint heir *with* Christ. And Christ has been promised the world! So like a young prince who has to endure the rigours of military

training, and go to war, but can do so knowing that one day the kingdom will be his, you can face what you have to face *with hope* - knowing the best *by far* is yet to come.

You see, commentators argue that when Paul writes that 'we are heirs of God' he doesn't just mean we're heirs of God's riches. It's that God himself is the riches. He's the inheritance. You see, in Psalm 73, the psalmist is struggling with envy. He sees bad people enjoying the good life, and it hurts. And he wonders, is life meaningless? Am I a fool to live the way I do? So how does he come to his senses? By coming before God, and realising, 'God is the strength of my heart *and my portion* [same word for inheritance] forever.' (Ps 73:26).

And when life is hard, you can have hope. Because God in all his beauty and all his grace will be yours - because you are his!

And that means, fifthly, you can handle the trials of life with dignity. Verse 17: 'Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him* in order that we may also be glorified with him.'

You see, if you have a slave mentality toward God you'll see suffering as punishment, because 'I've not prayed enough, I've not given enough, I've not been holy enough.' But a son sees hard things as the loving discipline of a loving father. Which means you can face the cost of following Christ with poise because you know the cross always comes before the crown.

So finally, and very briefly…

How It's Possible

Think again about the two ways of life Paul sets before us: v13, 'You will die… [or]…you will live.' And the message of the gospel is that the Lord Jesus, the ultimate Son of God took the road that led to death so that you and I can take the one that leads to life.

And in Philippians Paul tells us that in coming into the world, Jesus took on the nature of a servant: that he's the Son who became a slave - so that we slaves could become sons. And the ultimate heir of all things gave up his glory, so that we might become joint heirs of his glory.

And at the cross, in the ultimate battle against sin, he became sin for us. And as darkness engulfed him, he cried out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?', so that we might cry out 'Abba, Father!' He was cast out, so that we might draw near. He was put to death so that death itself might die. And he was raised so that we might live - and have the power to put our sin to death.

It's in him you'll find life, Paul says.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, see how Christ gave up his life, to give you life: a secure identity, and a deep security; intimacy with God, hope for your future and dignity and poise in difficulties. So repent, believe and begin to live.

And if you are a Christian, all of that is true for you. So this week, live in the good of it, and when the Spirit convicts you of your sin, put it to death, because you're a son beloved by the Father.