

Walking in the Spirit

Romans 8:1-8

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

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Real Audio (3 MB)

Continuing in our theme on Walking with God, on this Pentecost Sunday we come to the topic of Walking in the Spirit.

In one of the most vividly remembered conversations of my ministry, a woman once said to me, "The rules, pastor, I just want to know the rules. I'm really good at following rules." She had heard one too many sermons on grace. Or perhaps she had not heard quite enough about it. This grace thing confuses us, because it is so foreign to our experience with the rest of life. What we know about are the rules. Because life has a lot of rules.

There are rules for being a parent: You can't choose which baby in the nursery you want to take home, like you can a puppy. When you take a trip, you can't just stick the baby in a kennel, like you can a puppy. And, you can't take the baby back to the hospital when it keeps you up all night with colic. That's against the rules.

Kids themselves have rules. You can't cheat on tests. You can't give your broccoli to the puppy. You can't complain about the rules, because even that is against the rules. And when kids grow up and leave home, there are lots and lots of rules for adults. My daughter who is studying abroad this semester was surprised to find out that having left the country didn't get her out of having to pay her taxes last month. Confused her. Your employer has rules about when you'll work, how you'll work, and how much you'll do. Families have rules. Every game has rules. Schools have rules, sports, libraries, clubs, neighborhood associations all have rules. Doctors have lots of rules for your life! There are rules for driving and even rules for pedestrians. There are rules for the beginning of life, for the middle and even rules at the end of life.

Our American society began with a Declaration of Independence that included some wonderful aspirations about life and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But in order for us to function as a society, we've had to develop a whole lot of rules, called laws. Laws that regulate how you can go about pursuing that happiness.

And here's the important point: you're doing such a good job following the rules. Look around you today. You certainly don't look like losers. You look like people who have learned how to play by the rules and even win at the game called "the pursuit of happiness." So why don't you feel like a winner? Why aren't you happy, when as this woman said to me, "you're so good at following the rules"?

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome, he spent a lot of time talking about the law, the Hebrew law. That's striking because he wasn't writing to Jews. So why does he devote all this space talking about the rules to the Romans? I think that's because as an Imperial City, Rome had a lot of bureaucrats, like another city I know. People devoted to rules. Roman Law was one of the great achievements of civilization and the Romans were proud of it. The law brought order and peace to the empire. It provided a framework for economic development and expansion. The law detailed responsibilities and it insured individual rights for citizens to have vital responsibilities and rights insured, it detailed responsibilities and insured rights.

The Romans knew all about the law. So it was not a great jump for them to understand what Paul was talking about in our text when he said the Old Testament law will only condemn you. Because even when you obey the law, even when you play by the rules, even when you win at the game at which you are playing, you're not going to find what you're looking for because law cannot give you life. The Romans

were so good at playing by the rules. They wrote the rules. The Hebrews were also good at playing by the rules that God himself wrote. And so are we. In fact, we've gotten so good that we have learned how to manipulate the law, to the point where we can forget the parts about individual responsibility and now make it all about the preservation of my rights.

When Jesus saw the Pharisees doing this, it drove him crazy. They had even developed a tax shelter called the Corban, which allowed them to protect their money so they wouldn't have to spend it on their own aging, needy parents (Mark 7:9-13). It was legal. It wasn't against the rules. But it was an offense to the God who told us to honor your mother and your father. Like the Pharisees, we have gotten good at playing the game and making the rules work for us. You don't have to care about the poor. No rule requires you to be committed to justice. You don't have to give two hoots about the homeless mother who spent last night huddled with her children in the back seat of her car because it was the only place they had.

The rules aren't working for her, but there is no law that requires you to care about that. But if you only use the rules to make a better life for yourself, then life is exactly what you don't get. That's Paul's point in the text today. When you win at that game, you lose. You may get the money, but you don't get the life. By the time Jesus was born, we had so distorted God's law that not even God recognized it anymore.

So the son of God came, conceived by the Holy Spirit, to show us another way, to find life, eternal life. The part about being conceived by the Holy Spirit is what I want to draw your attention to on Pentecost. It is the same Spirit who was present with the Father and the Son at creation. The word for Spirit in the Hebrew is "Ruach." It means wind, the wind that comes from God, or the breath of God. In the beginning it was this Holy Ruach that swept across the face of the deep, pushing aside the darkness and the chaos, creating in its place beauty and life.

And when God created humanity, it wasn't until God breathed Ruach into man's nostrils that he became a living being. So from the beginning, the Spirit has always been the source of life for human beings. That's why it is so important that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. That's why Jesus is our life. Not only was the Spirit the agent of the incarnation of the Son of God, but later that same Spirit descended upon him in his baptism when he identified himself with you and me. Then the Spirit drove him into the wilderness where he was tempted every way, as we were. When Jesus presented his credentials for ministry, he said, "The Spirit of God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, especially the poor in spirit."

That good news is that there is another way of life for those who aren't making it by the rules of the game. Like the poor who are following the rules, but still haven't found life. The good news is that in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit will breathe life into us, as a gracious gift from God, the father who would not abandon you to all the games you've been playing.

After Jesus was raised from the dead and just before he ascended into heaven to be with the Father, he promised that this same Spirit who had been with him would also be with his disciples if they waited and prayed. So the disciples went to the upper room and committed themselves to prayer and waiting. And on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon them with the rush of a "mighty wind," filled their souls and tore their little prayer room apart. That wind filled the disciples' lives, pushed them out the doors of their sanctuary, and confronted them with the waiting world.

Then they began speaking languages they didn't even know they knew. That's so important. They were speaking about Jesus in the tongue of the other. Now, there was nothing in the law that required them to care about the others. There wasn't anything in the law that required them to think and speak globally or learn how to speak in the language of others. No. It wasn't the distorted law, it was the Holy Spirit who gave them life. And the sign of being filled, thus fully alive, is that you are no longer thinking about yourself, but speaking in the language of the other.

The message the disciples gave to the crowds around them at Pentecost was essentially the same message Paul gives us today in our text in Romans: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Condemnation was what we were feeling because we were condemned if we failed at the game and we were condemned if we won at the game. We couldn't find life, not even by winning. "For the law of the

Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death." What Christ does is free you from the game of the law of death, the game that was killing you. Now you don't have to just pursue happiness. Now you can get out of that game. Now you can receive a life. He frees you from life.

"Walk not according to the flesh, but walk according to the Spirit...to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Walk in the Spirit. Set your mind on the Spirit. There it is. This is how you find what you are looking for - "life and peace" How do you set your mind on the Spirit? How do you do that. You open your heart to receive the Spirit's gift - Jesus Christ the Savior. You stop setting your mind on winning the games, but setting on this gift of life, Jesus. And you set your mind by confessing how much you need it by asking for forgiveness for your sins. The sins God was dying to forgive on the cross of Christ. The sins you committed when you broke the rules, and the sins you committed when you followed the rules.

You may not be the prodigal son who squandered everything in hedonistic living. You may relate more easily to the elder brother who's been playing by the rules, but that doesn't mean you have not sinned. Sin is anything that keeps you from the arms of the Father, including the rules. Remember the point of that parable is to get into the Father's arms. Only the Holy Spirit can bring you there. The Spirit will do that only through the grace, the gift of life, in Jesus Christ. As we confess, the spirit rushes in to this open part of our heart that the confession creates and the spirit brings us home to the father. You can only get there by grace.

And as Pentecost proclaims, when the Spirit gives you this life, you become so alive in Christ that like Jesus you find that you become concerned about the lives of those for whom the rules do not work.

Lord God, set us free from this crazy game to which we have become devoted. Breath on us with your Holy Spirit, that we may become alive in Christ.