

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “The Spirit in You: Pneuma”

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*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 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 to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

*But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.*

*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—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. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

*Romans 8:1-17*

We're in the middle of our series “The Spirit in You” that Pastor Rachel has put together. If you haven't been with us, you can probably guess just from the series title that this is all about the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit of God. Over the past few weeks, we've been dropping in at various points in Scripture and looked at how the Spirit has been tragically neglected in the practice of the Christian faith, at least in many Protestant or Presbyterian circles, even though the Spirit is promised as a gift, as a comforter, as an unmistakable power able to bring about something good from even the most hopeless of situations.

Today we come to one of the densest, most awe-inspiring chapters, I think, in all of Scripture: Romans chapter 8. If Paul's letters were a mountain range, this chapter might well be considered Everest. And you know what it's about? Life in the Spirit, and in it Paul tells us just how the promise of the Spirit frees us into a life we never could have imagined. Let's go to God's Word.

[Read passage.] Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Did you know that humanity is one of the most plugged-up species in all of creation? When it comes to breathing at least, one of the most plugged-up species in the world. If you were polled which animals have the hardest time breathing, I don't know, my guess is that we'd answer something like those pug dogs with scrunched up noses, and I'm sure those are on there, but I'm not sure we would've guessed people, human beings. The reason for that, some scientists believe, is because over the past few hundred thousand years, the human mouth and sinuses have actually shrunk significantly, compared to where they had been. Now, it's to the point that human beings are the only species that have more permanent teeth than room for them in our mouths. So they come in crooked, or we have to take some out. Add it all up and it means that humans have a particularly hard time breathing. Whether it be due to things like asthma or sleep apnea, or due to illness—I mean my goodness, the biggest danger connected to Covid has been breathing or the difficulty of getting enough oxygen—breathing, or difficulty in breathing affects everything. It's this automatic, almost unnoticeable act—I mean how often do we take notice of our breathing unless there's something wrong?

Back when we were in Memphis, a member of the church there was a sleep doctor. I told him I didn't understand why his field would be so challenging. If anyone was having trouble sleeping, no problem. Just play some sermon recordings, and they'll be just fine. But I remember him sharing with me at one point all the many ways that abnormal sleep patterns can affect everyday life, but also just how much of those sleep problems can be helped just by learning to breathe better, and how patient after patient testified to there being a night and day difference between their sleep before and their sleep after, and if their sleep improves, their quality of life improves, all due to breathing better. Seems kind of an obvious point: breathing is essential to life—not least of all because if you stop breathing you stop living—but also because if your breathing is compromised, the way you live would probably be limited too.

You might be wondering why it is we're talking so much about breathing today, and the reason is because as we come to this passage in Romans 8, we're looking at the Spirit's quality as *pneuma*. "Pneuma" is the Greek word for "Spirit," but as we talked about last week, it's also the word for wind or breath. So as we talk about the Spirit, we ask what it means for the Holy Spirit to be the "breath" of God, and how that "breath" gives life.

The life in the Spirit takes center stage in this chapter in Paul's letter to the Romans. (And if you ever thought that the Holy Spirit was just an afterthought of Christian theology, think again. Here we have what many consider to be the pinnacle of Paul's writings, and it's all about how the Spirit infuses and indwells the lives of the faithful.) There may come a day when we do a whole series just on this one chapter, because a slow, close reading of Romans 8 could be really fruitful for us, but sometimes it's also good to hear the whole symphony at once, even if we might not catch every nuance of every note in one sitting.

So the first thing I'd offer for us is what Paul is setting up in comparison, and the really simple way to think about it would be a life breathing heavy and a life breathing easy.

Starting in v. 1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh." Now there are lots of words in there with loaded meanings: sin, law, flesh. But the point Paul is making is building on what he's been writing in this letter up to this point: that there is a power at work within us, one that does not lead us into wholeness or right relationship with God or with each other or with creation. That power is sin, and there's nothing we can do to rid ourselves of it.

This is the life spent breathing heavy. Just go to the very end of chapter seven and you'll see Paul wrestling with the frustration of not wanting to be subject to this power any more but still seeing it at work in his life in what he does. The sad and tragic thing, according to Paul, is that it is the law, that is, God's law, God's Word given to Israel, the Torah, was meant to lead his people into a life of wholeness, a life of righteousness, a life in right relationship, but the power of sin was so twisted that the law, even though the law is good, just became an instrument that revealed how sinful humanity was.

It's like this. Growing up, my mother had a white Chevy Blazer. I forget how long she had it, but I remember her saying, "I am never buying a white car ever again." And you know why? It's not because she didn't like white cars. It's because, and if you happen to drive a white car you know this all too well, white cars show everything. A bit of mud, a little scrape, a layer of pollen, it's right there, plain to see, and it stands out. Nothing wrong with the white paint on the car, in fact a clean white car can look great, but it just means that if you're not really consistent about keeping that car clean, it'll only reveal every blemish, every flaw that much more clearly.

*That* was the tragedy of the law of God. It's not bad, in fact it's very good, Paul says, but because of the twisted power of sin, the most it could do for humanity was reveal just how far from clean we really are. And under the law, this law of sin and death, as Paul puts it, there could be no life, or at least not life how it was supposed to be. It was only life breathing heavy. And that was our lot. That's what we are left with when we're left to our own devices.

But in Christ Jesus, God has made another way. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." In other words, there's a new sheriff in town. Where the power of sin had set up shop, in every heart, tainting every relationship, every action, every word, every corner of creation, a new law had come. And how does Paul describe it? "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." There's a new sheriff in town. And it's in this law of the Spirit that the good news of the cross and the resurrection actually becomes good news for us.

Have you ever thought about that? I mean, in church or just in churches, we talk a lot about the gospel or the good news of the cross and of the empty tomb, but have you ever stopped to wonder why exactly that's good news *for us*. Jesus died on the cross, gave himself up for us. Okay, that sounds pretty bad for Jesus, but things still seem pretty rough around here, so how is that good news exactly? Seems a lot of trouble without much benefit. Or, Jesus rose from the dead. Okay, that sounds pretty good, but it sounds pretty good just for Jesus. He was dead, now he's not dead anymore. Hurray for Jesus. That's a good result for him, but what does that have to do with me? How is that good news *for me*?

The Spirit is the reason it's good news *for us*. The Spirit is the reason Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection actually end up more than just an inspiring tale. The Spirit is how the world-changing, creation-renewing, life-giving power of Christ's resurrection actually affects each one of us. Paul writes in v. 11, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you." This is an amazing thing; it's how the resurrection actually means something tangible for us. It means that after a life of breathing heavy, now because there's a new sheriff in town, because there's a new law at work, because the Spirit of life has set up shop within us, every resurrected breath that Christ takes when he walked out of the tomb is a breath that we take. The life that is in Christ is the very life that is in us. And how does this miracle happen? The Spirit in you.

Some of you know this already, but when Jack was born, he came a few weeks early, and as is often the case, the biggest concern was whether his lungs had developed enough for him to breathe on his own—everything

ended up fine, thank God. But along the way monitoring Jack's development, Frances and I are watching ultrasounds together, and they're pointing out, oh see the heart beating here, and see the blood flowing there, and you can see the fingers and toes and arms and legs starting to move, but you know one thing that wasn't working yet? The lungs. Jack's not breathing—at least not the way he breathes now. It was Frances, it was the mother who breathes for the child. The air the mother breathes is what gives the child life. That's something of what it's like to have life in the Spirit. Because of the Spirit, the life, the resurrected breath that is in Jesus is the same life, the same breath that is in us.

Realizing this can be quite a powerful thing, realizing that this is what we need, this is what has been missing.

I had a good friend in college who had been pretty good at whatever he put his mind to. President of this group or that group. Did well in his classes. Got the right internships. Was well-positioned for his professional life. Checked all the right boxes. Was kind of a study hard, work hard, and play hard sort of guy. And to look at his life, it seemed there was a lot that made sense, a lot that was working out.

But for him, even before I really could see it, there was something gnawing at him. Something that made him always feel like he wasn't quite good enough. No matter what success he had in the classroom or in organizations or professionally or socially, it was as if every success only revealed something else he wasn't excelling at, some other shortcoming. And it was exhausting him. And he was on that road through the end of his school years, and honestly my assumption about him was that he'd probably go on to have some good professional success, raise a family, be a good decent guy. But then twenty years down the road, when he's in the heart of his professional career, when his kids would be growing up, I feared he would take stock of his life, ignore all the successes he had enjoyed and only see where he had fallen short. And then I assumed that's when things would start to crumble. The mid-life crisis they call it. He was a prime suspect for it, to my mind at least.

But then a few years ago, I heard from another friend about a weekend he had spent camping with this guy. It was in fact a bachelor's party weekend, but instead of going to Vegas or something like that, this group went camping for a weekend. The guy who was getting married was and is a pretty devout Christian and wanted that faith to be a part of this weekend away with his guys, so instead of binge drinking and bar hopping, there were times of pretty frank sharing between them.

And at one point over that weekend, after hearing the testimony shared by others, my friend who had spent his life checking the right boxes, achieving the right successes, building the right life, broke down, acknowledged that he had built a life that only revealed how far short he was falling, and that he was exhausted with it. But then, surrounded by his friends, he breathed in something new, a life that sets us free from the law of sin and death, free from what can only remind us how flawed we are, and instead frees us into a life in which we are forgiven, in which we are redeemed, in which we are loved as we are and transformed into how we should be, and claimed as children of God in Christ Jesus. The Spirit came to my friend that day. A new sheriff was in town, and he's breathing easier as a result.

That same Spirit could set you free too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.