

6. Verses 8:12-13 present a transition of sorts that has caused some to regard them as introducing a new section. In this way they are to be joined to verse 14. Others regard them as closing out the previous context that began in 8:1. Arguments can be raised in support of both positions, but appending these two verses to the preceding section appears best for at least three reasons:

- 1) The first is that they continue to interact with the core themes of 8:1-11, namely *death* and *life* and *flesh* and *spirit*.
- 2) The second reason is that 8:12-13 provides a practical implication that naturally and logically proceeds out of Paul's preceding instruction. This pattern of instruction followed by exhortation is characteristic of Paul's writing.
- 3) Finally, verse 8:14 introduces the new theme of the believer's *sonship*, which theme then becomes fundamental to the balance of the chapter.

Together these particulars indicate a thematic break between verses 13 and 14 rather than between verses 11 and 12. Assuming, then, that verses 12-13 are to be connected with 8:1-11, a couple of introductory observations are in order.

First of all, this brief passage represents an *indirect* exhortation. That is to say, Paul was not directly demanding any particular action of his Roman readers. He simply made a declaration to them and followed it with a clarifying pair of conditional sentences. With the insight of a wise father, Paul emphasized to the Romans the ultimate implications of life "in the flesh" and life "in the Spirit," and left them to reach their own conclusion and make their own personal application.

But at the same time, he left no doubt that he intended his instruction in these verses to provide a point of exhortation. He addressed himself directly to his readers, challenging them to consider the significance and outworking of their new lives in the Spirit.

- a. As indicated above, this passage begins with a declaration that summarizes in a practical way Paul's previous instruction. He has demonstrated repeatedly that *flesh* and *Spirit* represent the two mutually exclusive domains in which a person can live out his existence in this world. Furthermore, he has insisted that existence in the flesh is *death*, whereas existence in the Spirit is *life*. The implication is that, just as a person cannot be alive and dead at the same time, so no one can be determined by both the flesh and the Spirit.

All men are "according to the flesh" by nature and birth, and so live out their natural lives in the context of death. Because the Spirit alone imparts life, there is no escape from death except by the exercise of His enlivening power. But like the power of sin, the Spirit's power is *determinative*, so that where He acts to impart life, death is overcome and ceases to be the defining reality of those who are now "according to the Spirit." This is the reason the principle of life that now defines the believer in his spirit will one day extend to his physical body (8:10-11).

These are the core issues of Paul's instruction to this point, and they are crucial to his closing observations in verses 12-13. For it is precisely because the Romans were "in the Spirit" – and therefore no longer "in the flesh" – that Paul could declare to them: "*So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh...*" (8:12).

- 1) The second half of chapter seven made it clear that the flesh exercises unchallenged dominion over those under its jurisdiction. According to Paul, the fundamental reality of being "in the flesh" is *enslavement to sin* (7:14). Whatever may be a person's understanding of righteousness, his approval of it, and his efforts to attain to it, the "law of sin which is in his members" holds him captive as its prisoner (7:22-23), and forces him to serve it as his master (7:25).
- 2) But these same truths apply for those who are "in the Spirit." They have been delivered from the dominion of the flesh – that is, from "the law of sin and death" – in order to be bound over to the Spirit (7:4-6, 8:1-2). No man can serve two masters, and those who have been made alive by the Spirit now serve in the "newness" effected by the Spirit, having their minds set on the things of the Spirit (8:5).

And because those "in the Spirit" are no longer bound to the flesh and its dominion, they are no longer *obligated* to the flesh. Existence according to the flesh is existence under authority; in Paul's language, the man "in the flesh" is a *debtor* to the flesh. This conception is important, for it expresses a core aspect of people's enslavement to sin. It underscores the principle that a slave is obligated to serve his master. He has no independent life of his own, but is the possession of his master, and so has a "rightful" obligation to give himself fully to his service. In this way the slave is properly regarded as a debtor to his owner.

- 3) The obvious point here is that, because the man "in the flesh" is a slave to the flesh, he has no choice but to serve that master. In a perverse sort of way, it is his "duty" to serve the flesh free of distraction or divided allegiance. He is "owned" by his flesh and cannot free himself from it. This being so, he is bound to serve it as a debtor all the days of his life. The person who is *in* the flesh is obligated to *live according to* the flesh in full submission to its authority and will.

But when the Holy Spirit breaks the bonds of this enslavement, the obligation imposed by it is also ended. Those who have been set free from the dominion of the flesh are no longer obligated to its service. To the contrary, for them to continue to serve the flesh as if they were still obligated to it is to effectively deny the new reality of life by the Spirit and the new obligation they have to Him.

b. Though serving the flesh effectively constitutes for the believer a denial of his new life in the Spirit, it is nonetheless possible for him to do so (ref. 6:12-13). This possibility is the assumed premise of verse 8:13, and is the basis for Paul's instruction in it. This much is self-evident, but there is disagreement as to how specifically Paul understood the dynamic of the believer – who has been set free from the dominion of the flesh – continuing in its service.

- Some have seen in Paul's statement an affirmation that the flesh continues to exercise some degree of dominion over the believer. This dominion, in turn, leaves him in a position where two possible outcomes are indeed open to him. Depending upon his determination to either serve the flesh or "put to death its deeds," he will incur the reward of death or life.
- Those who maintain that Paul was presenting in the larger context two options for living the Christian life hold a view similar to that stated above. They, too, affirm that believers are still subject to the flesh to some extent. But depending upon how they view the reality of life "in the Spirit," they embrace different meanings of the terms *life* and *death*.

Some Arminians who believe that a person can lose his salvation argue that Paul was speaking here in those terms. That is, the Christian who continues to give himself to the service of the flesh will reap the outcome that is *spiritual death*; he will ultimately fall away from his saved condition and perish in the "death" that is final condemnation in hell.

Other Arminians who believe in "eternal security," together with some Calvinists, take the position that by death and life Paul was referring to the continuance or end of *physical life*. As such, those who refuse to "put to death the deeds of the body" may well find God taking their present lives, though they will not lose their salvation (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:17-31).

- Still others, noting Paul's previous instruction and the fact that he has spoken of life in the Spirit in determinative and ultimate terms, interpret his statement in this verse in a different way. While they acknowledge the possibility – and even the fact – that believers can still yield themselves to the service of the flesh, they insist that this service constitutes an *aberration* that is neither defining nor determinative. Though the Christian can and does succumb at various times and in various ways to the entreaties of the flesh, he can no longer come under its dominion.

When Paul's teaching to this point is properly understood and considered, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to conclude otherwise than that the last interpretation is the correct one. It is undeniable that every Christian fails to live in perfect freedom from sin's influence. This is the very reason that Paul obligated the Romans to *reckon* themselves dead to sin (6:11). If sin had no presence in their lives there would be no need for such a reckoning.

Christians do continue to sin, but sin no longer defines or determines them as an enslaving principle. The “law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” has delivered them from the “law of sin and death” (8:1-2); sin no longer has ultimate mastery over them because they “are not under law, but under grace” (6:14); they cannot continue in sin as formerly because, through participation in Christ’s death, they have “died to sin” (6:1-4). Death is the realm in which sin exercises its dominion, and the believer has been raised out of death into life. This new, everlasting life by the Spirit therefore means the end of sin’s enslaving power.

These truths are foundational to Paul’s gospel, and so must govern how his two conditional sentences in 8:13 are interpreted.

- 1) Paul’s first conditional statement turns his attention once again to those who “live according to the flesh” (ref. 8:5-8), but in doing so he addressed himself directly to the *Romans*. This is a primary reason that some conclude that Paul was presenting two options for living the Christian life. For he clearly regarded his Roman readers as Christians, and yet he was here warning them about living according to the dictates of the flesh. Nevertheless, the broader context strongly refutes this interpretation, especially given that the stated outcome of living according to the flesh is *death*. For Paul’s constant insistence beginning with chapter six is that the believer has been set free from death. How, then, is he to be understood?

The first thing that must be acknowledged is that 8:13a *is* a warning of sorts directed to his Roman readers. This is clear from Paul’s shift to the second personal pronoun *you* immediately following his address to them as brethren in 8:12. Furthermore, the expression he used shows his intention to convey a warning. Literally, his statement reads: “If you live according to the flesh, *you are about to die*.” This language introduces a sense of immanent foreboding to his conditional statement. All who live according to the flesh are most certainly on the precipice of death.

But if the Romans had already been delivered from death through faith in Christ, wasn’t Paul’s warning to them empty and irrelevant? *In truth, his statement presupposed his confidence in their deliverance*. Because the Romans had been raised from death to life, they could not continue to live according to the flesh as formerly. Their deliverance by the Spirit provided them with the *power* as well as the *obligation* to “live into” their new lives in Christ. In Him they had overcome death, and they were obliged to not continue in its ways. But most importantly, this obligation came with the resource to meet it: the same power that had severed their former obligation to the flesh (8:12) gave them the capacity to resist its continued overtures. To be sure, the saints at Rome could continue to give some ground to the flesh, but to do so would be to *live a lie*; first because it would be to act as if they were still governed by the principle of death, and second because it would deny the Spirit’s indwelling presence and power.

It is oxymoronic for a Christian to give himself to the service of the flesh; *in the end, it is an attempt to order his life according to a false reality.* For this reason it cannot really be achieved in the truest and fullest sense. He is trying to be what he is not, just as is the case for the person “in the flesh” who tries to live “in the Spirit.” As seen, each domain (*flesh* and *Spirit*) is mutually exclusive, defining, and determinative, so that any given person is finally determined by one or the other, whatever his particular conduct at a point in time may seem to indicate. *Thus Paul’s warning to the Roman saints was actually a point of encouragement intended to bolster their confidence in living out the Spirit’s life within them.*

“In a way that we cannot finally synthesize in a neat logical arrangement, Paul insists that what God has done for us in Christ is the sole and final grounds for our eternal life at the same time as he insists on the indispensability of holy living as the precondition for attaining that life...The point of that connection in this passage is the Spirit. The same Spirit that ‘set us free from the law of sin and death’ has taken up residence within us, producing in us that ‘mind-set’ which tends toward the doing of God’s will and resists the ways of the flesh.” (Moo)

- 2) The second conditional sentence contributes to this understanding: “...*but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live*” (8:13b). In closing out the context Paul again emphasized the sharp contrast between those who are “according to the flesh” and those who are “according to the Spirit.” Each serves his own master, and each receives his own reward, and Paul expressed those truths in terms of an interplay between the concepts of *life* and *death*: ***Life according to the flesh is the life of sin, and so also the death of the person. Conversely, life according to the Spirit is the death of sin, and therefore the life of the person.***

The “death” that is life in the flesh is the nurturing of the life of sin; so also the “life” that is life in the Spirit is the putting to death of sin, here called by Paul “the deeds of the body.” This language draws upon his previous observation that the believer’s present life in the Spirit does not end the corruption of his mortal flesh: his *spirit* is alive because of righteousness, but his *body* continues in death because of sin (8:10).

Because the Christian’s mortal body continues to “live” in the state of death, the practices that reflect its ongoing corruption must be “put to death.” And as the Holy Spirit is the One who alone enlivens a man’s formerly “dead” spirit, so His power is the believer’s sole – yet infinitely sufficient – resource for mortifying the body’s corrupt “life.” It is the Spirit who both imparts and perfects life; the flesh profits nothing. *“Holiness of life, then, is achieved neither by our own unaided effort – the error of ‘moralism’ or ‘legalism’ – nor by the Spirit apart from our participation – as some who insist that the key to holy living is ‘surrender’ or ‘let go and let God’ would have it – but by our constant living out the ‘life’ placed within us by the Spirit who has taken up residence within.”* (Douglas Moo)