

## Who Are You? Romans 8:1-10

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Lent 4 A

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Do you remember the last time you went back and looked at some old photos of yourself? Yeah sure, good times, good memories, but... isn't it a little embarrassing too? I mean, to see who you used to be? Sometimes it's just so different we look at it and think, "Who *is* that person?" It's not entirely our fault, fashion changes and culture shifts and we start to think that what is now looks good and proper and when we look back on what was then...well. You see yourself in some of these old photos and you just have to wonder, "Really? That hair? Those glasses? How was I even let out of the house in that shirt? Urg, and I used to have a few less pounds hanging on me too..." Oh and then the memories of what you were *like* back then can come flooding back. Maybe it's just me, but I've noticed that anytime I look back over my shoulder about 3-5 years back all I can see is how naïve and foolish I was. All I can think about is the dumb things I did because I just didn't know better. I've given up thinking that I'm really that much smarter now, of course, because I know in another 5 years what I'm going to think about myself now.

The point is, it can be a little hard to take an honest look at where we've been and what we used to be. It can be a little embarrassing and more than a little shameful. And that's kind of where our reading for today is coming from. Paul has a lot of good to say about where we're at now but to appreciate who we are now we do have to take a look at who we've been in the past, and it's easy to get hung up on that if we're not careful. <Read text: Romans 8:1-10>.

Some harsh words for us here that remind us where we have come from and who we have been. To start with, this simply reminds us that we have been sinful. We were born in sin, we are by nature full of sin. We look back at who we've been in our lives and among the happy memories are littered all kinds of shameful and embarrassing moments. All the dumb stuff we ever did that got us in trouble, all the moments of weakness that only caused us grief. The stuff we said that we just wish we could take back and make it be like it never happened. Who was that person, really? Looking back at it, that's not who we are today and (we'd like to think, at least) we'd never do anything like that again.

But Paul's words here about that sinful nature we were born with get even harsher than just pointing out that we have sin. It describes who we are at our core by nature and how that affects the most important part of our lives; which is our relationship with God. You see, for all our wanting to bluster that everyone should be equal and no one should just rule over others without their input, that's fine and good when you're talking about humans. But that doesn't apply to God. He's *God*. And God is the only one who has any say in whether you live forever or die forever. So just give up any internal complaints about whether that's fair or not, it simply *is* the situation, and start asking; is God going to be on my side when it comes time to make that decision? The relationship that you have with God is the only thing that matters and so we have to ask, is it one of friendship or hatred?

And that's where what Paul says here comes in. And it's not pretty. "**Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.**" (v8). Cannot. Not just difficult, not with great struggle they might overcome and manage. It is literally impossible for the sinful nature to please God. Everything the sinful nature does is an offense to God and only incites his anger further. There is no way that this sinful person was going to get on God's good side. But it actually gets worse than that when he says, "**The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.**" (v7) It's not even that the sinful nature has some kind of handicap against pleasing God, it doesn't even want to! Who we are by nature is someone who is selfish and egotistical. And the idea that God should have any authority over us, that he should have any say in us doing what we want to do and even worse that somehow we should need his help for anything; that is all just repugnant to that nature. It hates God and it wants God gone.

Of course the end result of an attitude and a life like that should be no surprise. If all a person does is hate God and try to get away from him or offend him, it should be no surprise that "**The mind of sinful man is death,**" (v6). The destination of the one ruled by the sinful nature is eternal death. That is it, end of story. If God decides life and death and that is how we've acted, then death is the pretty obvious outcome.

Of course, as I said when we started, this is looking back at old photos, this is looking over who we were, not who we are right now. Right? Did it really feel that way as you thought about it though? Have the foolish mistakes and the poor choices actually stopped? Has the indignation of needing God to rescue ME really boiled away completely? Have we always been perfectly content under the law God asks us to live or have we chafed? It can be discouraging to think that maybe this isn't as all in the past as we would like it to be. That maybe on some level this is who we still are.

And Paul says here that God condemns sin in sinful man. (v3) That thought makes it less discouraging and more frightening. We were born sinners and even after we come to know our God we still sin. We still defy him, we still disobey him, we still harbor resentment against him. Do these sins mean we still need to be condemned as Paul says?

It is true, that sin in sinful man needs to be condemned. Sin is a violation of God's holy law and because God is a just God, these crimes must be punished. But read again the whole context of what Paul says when he says God condemns sin. He says, **"For what the law was powerless to do..., God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us."** (v3-4).

Do you see the difference that makes? Sin is condemned in sinful man by God. But the sinful man he's talking about is not you or me! It's our substitute, Christ. This is what we mean when we talk about his vicarious atonement. Vicarious means he does it in our place, on our behalf. In fact in a very real sense, in almost every meaningful way, Christ became all of us in his life and in his death. And so by way the swap, we become him. He stepped in to our shoes and lived our lives for us. God the Father was judging his every move from the moment of his conception. And he passed. Then, at the cross, that perfect life was given up and handed over on our behalf. And all of our crimes that deserved punishment were attributed to him. He was counted a sinful man. A sinful man who had committed all the sins recorded throughout the history of the world, past and future. And he was punished for them. Justice was satisfied. Sin was condemned in sinful man, but it was Christ, not us.

And we, meanwhile, are counted righteous. We are counted as Christ, not as we are. We are alive in Christ, we are righteous in him. God sees us not as who we were, but he sees us as who we are in Christ. He looks at you and sees a perfect sinless human being who has always loved him, always done his will and never once done anything against him. The memories of the old, embarrassing self are gone. We are a new creation in Christ.

But it's even better than just appearing like Christ, it's better than just being seen as him. In faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are becoming like him. No, not that we're becoming gods or something silly like that, but we are being made to be more like what God sees us as. We are freed from the sinful nature and its inability to please God. This is a process, but it is a process begun in us when we are brought to faith by the Holy Spirit. And that's what Paul is talking about here when he says, **"...those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."** (v5). At first glance this reading might be a little off-putting to the American mind, Paul seems to be setting up the option of only two possible masters; either serve sin or serve God. We want to know where the option to simply be free is. But that's a case of culture corrupting our perception of reality. There are only two choices. Either we serve sin to our own destruction, or we serve the Spirit and God. There is no in between, no third choice to blaze our own path. To blaze our own path is still the first option. And when you consider that by nature we could only choose sin, freedom is the freedom to deny sin and follow God.

And it's not like serving God is some huge, impossible, grinding task, you know. In fact, it is easily the better alternative. Living for yourself, following the desires of the sinful nature, that may bring you some short term thrills, sure. But that's going to wear out and fade away, it's going to be replaced with heartache and fear, with worry and trouble. It's never going to be enough, it's always going to need more. But **"the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace."** (v6). That's what a life in God brings, peace. And I don't just mean peace in the life to come, it's peace here and now. Not that life never has any problems, but because a life lived in the Spirit doesn't recognize them as problems when the life is lived with full trust in God. A life that prioritizes God sheds so much useless bloat that keeps us worried about ridiculous things. A life that trusts God never worries about what is going to happen to our things or our health. It never worries where food or shelter will come from when God promised to provide. It the peace that a full trust in God for everything brings. Body and soul, he has promised to care for us now and into eternity.

The problem with the sinful nature is it is selfish. But in God we are able to recognize that he provides all our needs completely. And when that is fulfilled, we can be at peace. And what's more, when we don't have to be concerned about our own needs, we are freed to look out for others first. That's what the heart of the Spirit is, a heart that loves God above all and cares first about those around us. And in a completely unintuitive way, a life that is lived for God and for others is the life that benefits us the best.

The mind of the sinful nature wants nothing to do with God and it is condemned to death. That is who you were, but it's not who you are any more in Christ. God has made you a new creation that loves him and wants to do the things that are best for you. In the Spirit of righteousness, in Christ, we are alive. We can live better here and now in Christ and because of him we will live with him forever. Amen.