

“SONS OF GOD” AND THE ROAD TO GRACE (ROMANS 8:12-17)

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I. INTRODUCTION

I had just entered my second year of seminary when I was given an assignment to do an exegetical paper on Rom 8:12-17. While writing and researching the paper, I experienced a great deal of difficulty over a particular issue. I did not realize it at the time, but this passage, and the difficulty I encountered, produced my first step towards adopting a grace theology.

The class in which this assignment was given was on the Book of Romans. I did not know much about the book, but we had covered the first seven chapters in class before I started writing my paper. Even in my ignorance, it seemed clear to me that chapter 8 was a chapter on Christian living. In fact, all of chapters 6 through 8 seemed to deal with sanctification.

In these chapters, the Christian is given a choice. In chapter 6, Paul commands the believers at Rome to “not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts” (v 12). In v 13, the apostle tells them that they are not to “go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness.” To the contrary, they are to “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”

The believer has the choice as to whom he will serve. He can serve sin and experience death, or he can serve God and experience righteousness (6:16). In very plain language, Paul makes it clear that the believer has this choice. In 6:19 he once again commands them to “present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”

In chapter 7, Paul discusses his own struggle. While some maintain this chapter deals with Paul’s experience as an unbeliever, it is much more likely he is referring to his struggle as a believer. It would be

strange for him to discuss his life as an unbeliever in a section that deals with Christian sanctification. In addition, 7:21-22 can hardly describe the struggle of an unbeliever.

Chapter 7, then, describes Paul's experience dealing with the issues he discussed in chapter 6. How does a believer present the members of his body as instruments of righteousness resulting in sanctification? Specifically, Paul considers whether the Law is a means of achieving this goal.

Paul's conclusion and experience is that the Law is not the answer. He could not keep the Law in his own power. Our flesh is weak. Furthermore, as the apostle will state in 8:3, the Law does not provide the believer with the power to obey.

If the Law is not the answer, what is? In chapter 8, Paul tells us. We present our bodies as instruments of righteousness and experience sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every believer has the Holy Spirit (8:9). With the Holy Spirit, the believer has the power to obey. The successful Christian life is one lived in that power. In the Majority Text, v 1 adds that *those who walk according to the Spirit* are those who experience no condemnation. Since this is a section that deals with Christian living/sanctification, we should not understand the word *condemnation* as referring to hell. Instead, it refers to the consequences of sin in the life of the believer that Paul has been discussing throughout this whole section.

So, Paul gives the believer a choice. He can live according to the Law, in the power of his own flesh and power, or he can live according to the power of the Spirit. The former results in failure, while the latter results in success. In 8:6, Paul once again tells the believer of the choices as well as the consequences of the choice made.

Through my study of the Book of Romans both in class and privately, I was convinced of a couple of things. The Christian has the option. Success in the Christian life is not automatic. He can live in and walk according to the power of the Holy Spirit or he can live in and walk according to the flesh. The Spirit brings righteousness, sanctification and success in the Christian life, while the flesh brings failure.

With these assumptions I started my paper. The section of Scripture I was assigned presented no problems at first. In 8:12-13, Paul once again speaks of the choice the believer has. He can live according to the flesh or he can live according to the Spirit. It provided a summary of all that he had been saying in chapters 6-7. It was also clear that Paul was address-

ing believers. He calls them “brethren” and includes himself (“we”). Because we as believers can now obey God through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have an obligation to do so. We now need to go do it!

While I did not completely understand how the believer could experience death if he lives by the flesh (v 13), this did not present an insurmountable problem. I knew that this “death” was not hell because Paul had said he had an experience of death when he lived according to the flesh (7:9, 11, 13). It was enough for me to understand that the Christian who lives according to the flesh experiences death, while the believer who lives according to the Spirit experiences life. These are things the believer experiences *in this life*.

When I arrived at v 14, however, I ran into a theological brick wall. Paul states, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” I wasn’t sure what this meant. In class I was told that the phrase “sons of God” refers to all Christians. Therefore, all Christians are led by the Spirit of God. It is automatic. I did not know the terminology at the time, but this was the Lordship view of the Christian life.

This, however, did not make sense to me. How could Paul say that all Christians are automatically led by the Spirit, when he had just spent over two chapters exhorting them to choose that kind of life? Why did he say in the previous two verses that believers have an obligation to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh if they automatically lived according to the Spirit anyway (vv 12-13)? If it was automatic, why did Paul struggle with it in chapter 7? If it was automatic, why in my own life did I struggle with it? Why did other believers struggle with it? What about believers in the Bible who did not live according to the Spirit, like some believers at Corinth (1 Cor 3:1-3), some believers addressed in the book of Hebrews (Heb 5:11-12), and believers in the seven churches in Revelation 2–3? Finally, how often, or to what degree, does a person have to be led by the Spirit in order to know he is a believer?

Verse 14 however, seemed to say that all Christians live according to the Spirit. I equated being a Christian with being a “son of God.” This view, however, was contrary to the context as well as personal experience. I was eager to check the commentaries. Fortunately, the syllabus of the course provided me with a long list of commentaries that I could find in the library.

Unfortunately, the commentaries did not solve my problem. Every one of them agreed with what was said in class. All Christians live according to the Spirit. If a person does not live according to the Spirit,

he is not a believer. In fact, we can identify a Christian by how he lives his life.

Godet, for example, says that one becomes a “son of God” at justification. He sees the sanctification aspect of the passage, but says the verb “are led” carries with it the idea of a “holy violence,” and that the Holy Spirit drags the believer to where his flesh does not want to go.¹ Murray also equates being a “son of God” with being a believer.² Being a son of God is the guarantee of eternal life. In addition, he implies that the believer does not really have a choice in the matter because the phrase “led by the Spirit” places the emphasis on the Spirit and the believer plays a passive role.³

My readings, then, only added to my confusion. In studying the passage, however, I found a detail that I initially thought would shine light on the problem. In v 16, Paul says that we believers are the “children of God.” If the “sons of God” in v 14 referred to all believers, why does he change words and call us “children?” Was there a difference between being a “son” (*hious*) and being a “child” (*tekna*) of God?

While I held out the hope that this distinction would help clear up my confusion on the passage, once again the commentaries I checked provided no light. Cranfield says that there is no distinction between the word “son” and the word “child.”⁴ Bruce agrees with Cranfield and says that the argument Paul makes in this section makes it “perfectly clear” that Paul uses the two words interchangeably.⁵

Even though it did not make sense to me, I adopted the view of the passage that I was taught in class. I felt that the “weight” of the evidence was overwhelming. My professor, as well as the commentaries I read, pointed in the same direction. In addition, I saw no other alternative. All believers are sons of God. Therefore, all Christians are led by the Spirit. It is an automatic process. If a person claims to be a Christian, but is not

¹ Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 308-309.

² *Ibid.*

³ John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 295.

⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 396.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 167.

experiencing success in his Christian life by walking in obedience, his claim is not valid. As I wrote the paper, it reflected these points.

However, there was a gnawing uncertainty as I finished the paper. The only way I could teach this passage in the way I was presenting it was to ignore the context of Romans 6–8. Also, experience taught me that this view of the passage would lead to many questions about the assurance of one’s justification. It would have to lead to a self-inspection among believers: Am I led by the Spirit? Am I really a believer? At times, the believer might feel fairly good about his prospects, but at other times we would all have cause to question our reception of eternal life.

At the conclusion of the paper, I took a pen and wrote in the margins my concerns about the passage. I wanted the professor to know that even though I had taken the views I had in the paper, I did not really believe them. I told him I was confused and that the passage did not make sense.

When the paper was returned to me, the grader had written next to my handwritten remarks that he appreciated my honesty. In addition, he stated that we have to accept a certain amount of tension in this instance.

In a seminary environment, this was my first exposure to what I would later learn is a Lordship theology. At that time, I would have defended that position but was also uneasy about my views. I did not think there was another option. Fortunately, my uneasiness allowed me to entertain another view when it did present itself.

II. INTRODUCTION TO GRACE

The Lord was gracious to me by allowing me to have classes with Craig Glickman and Zane Hodges after my experience in Romans. These men started me on the journey of understanding that there was another way to view Rom 8:12-17 (and many other passages!) that made sense of the context.

The key to understanding this passage is to see that there is a difference between being a son of God and being a believer. They are not synonymous. In the context of Romans 6–8, we see that the believer has been set free from the power of sin. He no longer has to serve it. Whereas the Law did not provide the means by which the believer could obey God (8:3), the Spirit does (8:2). When we live according to the Law, we are trying to obey God in our own power—in the flesh. When we do, we experience defeat and death (8:13). Paul gives us his experience of this way of life in chapter 7. It is only when the believer lives by the Spirit that he has the power to obey God.

Immediately after Paul gives the believer the two options—living by the flesh or living by the Spirit—he makes the statement in v 14 that all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. He has just said that believers can live by the flesh so not all believers are led by the Spirit. Therefore, the phrase “sons of God” cannot be the same thing as “all Christians.”

Only those believers who live by the Spirit can claim the title “sons of God.” These are believers who realize who they are in Christ and realize that they have been set free from the power of sin and the Law as a rule of life (6:11, 14; 7:6). Through the Spirit, we have the option to obey. The Spirit-led believer operates under a different Law—the Law of the Spirit (8:2).

The title “sons of God” refers to those believers who are led by the Spirit. Perhaps we could say that they are mature believers, or that they are “sons” in the sense that they reflect who they are in the inner man (7:22). An infant does not reflect the character of his father. However, a grown “son” often does. After a child sits at the feet of his father and learns from him, he can then emulate his father’s behavior. The believer who is led by the Spirit walks in obedience and therefore reflects the holy character of his holy Father.

It is the desire of the inner man, who the believer is in Christ, to obey (7:22). The obedient believer, who obeys through the power of the Spirit, is doing what his inner man desires. He is free to do as his inner man desires, therefore it is a life of freedom and not slavery (8:15). The Spirit-led believer, the “son” of God, lives a life that reflects his birth-right.

III. PARALLEL PASSAGES⁶

A. MATTHEW 5–7

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord shows the distinction between being a believer and being a son of God.⁷ In Matt 5:9, the Lord says that

⁶ Editor’s Note: Another text showing that only some believers are *sons of God* is Rev 21:7. It reads, “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be My son.” Persevering believers are overcomers (cf. Rev 2:26) and will be sons of God in the life to come.

⁷ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Pub. Co., 1992), 384.

peacemakers are blessed, for they shall be called *sons of God*. In Matt 5:44, He exhorts His disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. If they do, they will be called *sons of God*. Not all believers are peacemakers. Not all believers love their enemies, experience persecution, or pray for those who mistreat them. These are not requirements for obtaining eternal life, but the believer who does these things is being like Christ. He is being like his heavenly *Father*. He is reflecting who he is in the inner man. He can claim the title *son of God*.

It is also instructive that in the context of Matthew 5, Jesus says that believers who are sons of God will be rewarded for their actions (5:12). The word *reward* carries with it the idea of wages earned. This is not the reception of eternal life, for that is a free gift from God. While all believers have eternal life, the “reward” in Matthew 5 is not something that all believers receive. Only *sons of God* will.

B. GALATIANS 3–4

Galatians 3–4 also contains references to “sons of God.” In 3:25, Paul says that the Galatians are no longer under a tutor since they have come to faith, and this makes them sons (v 26). Then, in chapter 4 he explains the part the law played in the OT. Prior to the coming of the Spirit, the Jews were under the Law. The law was a tutor or guardian (4:3, 5). But when the Spirit came, believers entered into a new era—one of adoption as sons—where we are “sons” (4:5-6). There is a difference between being a child (4:1, 3) and being a son (vv 5-6).⁸ The son is grown up and no longer needs a tutor/guardian/babysitter. The problem with the Galatians was that they were going back to the Law as a means of living and justification (4:9-10).

A child (4:1) is still an heir of the father. However, the child needs a guardian or a babysitter until a future date (v 2). Only when the child no longer needs the guardian is he a “son.” (vv 5-7) This passage shows that the word “son” can be used to denote a mature child.⁹

⁸ Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1992), 104.

⁹ It needs to be stated that in Galatians 4, Paul does not use the same word for “child” that he does in Romans 8. In Galatians 4, he uses *nepios*. He uses it in 1 Cor 3:1 and 13:11 to clearly denote very young children. Moulton and Milligan give examples of the word to describe very young children as well. Even though the word for “child” is different in Galatians 4 and Romans 8, both passages show that the word for “son” can be used to indicate a mature offspring

The point in Galatians 3-4 is that we no longer need the law as a babysitter, for we have the Spirit that empowers us to live. We have grown up, why would we need a babysitter? It is the believer that lives by the Spirit that is the mature son, not the believer that goes back to the Law. The discussion in Galatians 3-4 is not about believers versus non-believers. There were believers under the law in the OT as well. The discussion is how we live our lives. If we live by the power of the Law, we are like little children that need a babysitter. When we live by the Spirit, we are like mature, grown sons.

In Romans 7, Paul spoke of his attempts to live by the Law (as a believer) and how that is really living according to the flesh. It is by the Spirit that we grow spiritually and produce fruit. Living by the Law is really trying to live in our own flesh. Every believer has the right to be a “son”, he has received this adoption. However, when we try to live by the Law (like the Galatians were doing), we are like a child who says – I don’t have the ability to do that, I need a babysitter.

There are a number of parallels between Gal 4:1-7 and Rom 8:12-17. Galatians 4:5-6 is parallel with Rom 8:14-15. The context of both passages deal with Christians attempting to live under the Law (Romans 7 and Gal 4:9-10, 21). In them, Paul makes a distinction between being a child and being a son. In Romans, the “son” is the believer who does not live the Christian life by the law by the power of the flesh but by the power of the Spirit. In Galatians, Paul says they are sons because Christ has set them free from the Law. However, if they go back to the Law as a way of life, they will become enslaved and thus be like a child (4:1-2, 9).

While the words son and child can perhaps be synonymous in some contexts, there can also be a distinction between them. The word *child* can simply denote physical descent. The word *son* can carry with it the meaning of a mature child who demonstrates certain moral characteristics, and thus has certain privileges.¹⁰

instead of simply a child/infant. James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 426.

¹⁰ W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.) 1070-71. Vine sees a distinction between a child and a son of God in Romans 8. A son, among other things, reflects his likeness to God’s character by his actions. However, Vine does not specifically indicate whether he feels all children are also sons of God.

IV. THE PRIVILEGED SONS

In Rom 8:12ff, there is a difference between being a Christian and being a *son of God*. In v 16, Paul says that the Spirit bears witness to our Spirit that we are the “children” of God. Unlike his discussion on the topic “sons of God,” there are no conditions on the believer being a “child” of God. Paul uses a different word (*tekna*) when he describes what is true for every Christian. There is a reason he does so. All Christians are the “children” of God. They have experienced the new birth from above. They are part of His family. But only those children who are led by the Spirit, and reflect the character of their heavenly Father, have the right to be called mature sons of God.

Once I saw the distinction between a “child” and “son” in Rom 8:12-17, I was able to look at the passage in a whole new light. This light enabled me to understand the verses in a way that did not do violence to the context of Romans 6–8. All Christians, by faith in Christ alone, are the “children” of God (v 16). However, those who present themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit can claim the title of sons of God (v 14). They are the ones that experience life in the Spirit in their present lives (v 13).

The understanding of this distinction also helped me see another truth in this passage that was formerly hidden to me. The passage ends with the promise that those who suffer with Christ will also be His fellow heirs. They will be glorified with Him (v 17b).

While all “children” of God will live forever with Christ, in this context we see that something else awaits the sons of God. Christians who are led by the Spirit, and are sons reflects the character of their Lord. The Lord is seen in the life of those believers. As the world hated the Son par excellence, so it will hate the son through whom He is seen. The promise in v 17b is that such believers will have eternal rewards in the world to come. The son will not only live with, but reign with, the Son.

The reward for the sons of God takes us back to Matthew 5. The Lord says that the believer should be glad when he is persecuted on His account (v 11). Such believers have a great reward (v 12). Here, in seed form, is what Paul teaches in Rom 8:12-17.

V. CONCLUSION

In Rom 8:12-17, there is a difference between being a “child of God” and being a “son of God.” All believers are children of God by faith in Christ. All believers have eternal life and cannot forfeit it. The child of

God then has the option to be led by the Spirit and present his body for obedience. He can then claim the title of mature “son.” The “son” obtains rewards both in this life and in the world to come.

There is a tendency within the Lordship and Free Grace debate for some to say it is just semantics. We must avoid this tendency. As mentioned above, Rom 8:12-17 started me on my journey towards a grace theology. What a difference semantics make in this passage! When I had adopted a Lordship way of understanding it, it left me with confusion, questions about my possession of eternal life, and an interpretation that did extreme violence to the context.

Grace changed all of that. Romans 8:12-17 tells me that I will always be a child of God. Obedience to the commands of God does not prove I am a child of God. Obedience does not automatically characterize the life of the believer. However, God has given His children the Spirit, and thus the power to obey Him. It is the wise child of God who presents himself for this leading. It leads to the experience of life in this world and great reward in the next.