

MARKS
OF THE

True

BELIEVER

GIL RUGH

Marks of the True Believer

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Marks of the True Believer

Many commentators view Romans 8 as the greatest chapter in all the Bible. It is a chapter that is of special importance and significance to each of us as Christians. I truly believe that if we had a better understanding of what Paul is teaching under the direction of the Spirit in Romans 8, many of the difficulties that we face as believers would be resolved.

In this chapter we see the tremendous personal transformation that is brought about when God accomplishes His work of salvation. When a person comes to believe in Jesus Christ, God totally transforms that person from the inside out. And the ministry of the Spirit continues on, for the Spirit of God takes up residence in the life of anyone who comes to believe in Jesus Christ.

In this chapter, Paul points out the tremendous contrast between those who are “in the flesh” and those who are “in the Spirit” (see Romans 8:1-11). A man living “in the flesh” is living under the authority and control of his fallen sinful nature. The boundaries of his life are firmly planted in this physical, tangible world. The man who is “in the Spirit,” however, is living under the control of God Himself. God is the authority in his life.

This transformation only takes place in believers, for the person who has not experienced God’s salvation is unable to please God in any way. In Romans 8:8 Paul says, “And those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” The unsaved man is unable to live his life in obedience to God in any area. His is a life of continual, unrelenting rebellion against God.

In contrast is the life of the believer. In Romans 8:9-11, Paul explains what it means to be “in the Spirit.” We note at least five characteristics:

Every believer is in the Spirit because every believer has the Spirit dwelling in him. This relationship is permanent and unchanging. From the point of salvation through the rest of our lives as believers, there is never a time when we are not “in the Spirit.” Even when we sin we are “in the Spirit”—because “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him” (Romans 8:9).

Every believer walks according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh. This does not mean that a believer never sins. It means that the pattern and course of the believer’s life is led according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh. At times, we all fall into works of the flesh. We all sin. Yet we walk according to the Spirit, because we are believers. We are those who walk according to the Spirit. He is the authority in our lives.

Every believer sets his mind on the things of the Spirit, not on the things of the flesh. Paul said, “The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6). We have had a total reorientation in our lives. The focal point has been changed. We have a different mindset from that of the unbeliever, for our minds are set on the things of the Spirit.

Every believer is still afflicted with a body that is beset by death. The work of redemption is not yet complete, in a personal sense. Make no mistake—Christ has *completely* accomplished our redemption. But we still have physical bodies that are under the penalty of physical death. Our bodies still suffer the same kind of physical pain and affliction the unbeliever’s body experiences. Believers die of cancer; unbelievers die of cancer. One step remains: glorification.

Every believer has the assurance of the glorification of this mortal body. By virtue of the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God, every believer will experience a change—the glorification of the body. This event is yet to come, but the believer is confident that it will indeed come to pass.

As you can see, a believer’s life is radically different from what it was before he experienced God’s redemption. That is why we live different lives. We are new creatures—living under a new authority, controlled by God Himself.

Debt, Death and Deliverance

In Romans 8:12, Paul develops some of the implications of this life we have in Christ: “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—”

This word translated “obligation” means *to be a debtor*. Paul used it in Romans 1 when he says he is under obligation to Jew and Gentile alike, to proclaim the Gospel. In other words, he has a debt to pay.

That is the picture here in Romans 8:12 also. We are debtors, but not to the flesh. We owe nothing to the flesh—to our fallen, sinful human nature and the passions that it arouses in this physical body. To live according to the flesh means to be obligated to the flesh, and that is not an option for the believer. Why? “For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die” (Romans 8:13).

A clear indication of the end result of sin is death (see Romans 6:23). Those who live according to the flesh must die—plain and simple. This death goes beyond just physical death, which all of us will experience should Jesus Christ tarry. This death is the separation from God for all eternity. Those who live according to the flesh must die, in that death is the overwhelming characteristic of their lives. They *are* the dead, moving toward death.

In contrast, Paul writes, “But if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). We have died with Christ. This was established clearly in Romans 6. When we believed in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we were identified with Christ in His death, His burial and His resurrection.

Though we have died with Christ, there is an ongoing activity of “putting to death” (present tense) the deeds of the body. In a body that has not yet been redeemed, there is a battle that goes on within. We see this at the end of Romans 7.

So what is my responsibility as a believer? *I am to be putting to death the deeds of the body*. I am not to allow my body to be used for sinful activity. I will not indulge my body in sin.

The Marriage of Sin and Death

This doesn't mean that there won't be temptations—that there won't be occasions where we feel a tug and a pull toward sinful

things. Paul would not tell us to be putting to death the deeds of the flesh if there was no pull toward fleshly activity. But those who are putting to death the deeds of the body will live.

In Romans 6:6 our body is called a body of sin: “Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.” Our flesh is always yearning to give expression to the fallen nature. It is drawn, like a magnet to steel, toward sinful activities.

In Romans 7:24, Paul exclaims, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” Here, he equates the flesh with death. Not surprising, since sin and death are inseparably linked. The body of sin is a body of death.

The world naturally avoids associating sin and death. I recently watched part of the funeral service of a well-known celebrity. What impressed me is that no one talked about sin or righteousness or judgment. Even when confronted with *death*, the world will not face reality. All that was said was how wonderful this person was—how missed he’ll be, and how we must “commit ourselves to his ongoing memory,” etc.

So empty! So futile! Does anyone bother to consider *why* death is present in this world? No! Why not? Because to do that you have to talk about sin, righteousness and judgment. And the world would rather just avoid thinking about any of those things.

Consider Yourself Dead

So how does the believer go about “putting to death the deeds of the flesh”? Colossians 3 tells us that since we have died with Christ, “therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry” (Col. 3:5).

This idea is dealt with in some detail in Romans 6: “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness” (Rom. 6:11-13).

This is putting to death the deeds of the body. We view ourselves as dead toward sin. We are nonfunctional in that realm.

But there's more to it than that. Note carefully what Paul says in Romans 8:13: "If *by the Spirit* you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (emphasis added). We have an obligation and a responsibility to put to death the deeds of the body, but it is crucial that we understand this fully. How do believers put to death the deeds of the body?

You may think, "Well, now that I am a believer, I have the strength and power to resist sin. I'm able to put sin down."

Wrong. You have a resource within you that is able to put to death the deeds of the body—that is able to empower you to resist the allurements of the flesh. That is the Person of the Holy Spirit. *It is by the Spirit that you put to death the deeds of the body.*

How? By submitting to Him! You allow Him to control and exercise His authority in your body. Will the Spirit lead you into sin? Can the "Holy" Spirit sin? Can *God* sin? Of course not!

The Single Step Method

It is simple to understand, but we Christians have gotten it hopelessly muddled. We have courses on how to deal with *this* sin and *that* sin, but do you know what God's course is? "By the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body."

"But Gil, my problem is immorality. I need two years of specific input on my specific sin."

No, you need about a minute and a half with Romans 8:13.

"But you don't know how I was raised—you don't know what's happened in my life!"

No, I don't and it is not necessary for me to know, because you are not going to put to death the deeds of the body by Gil Rugh. You put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit of God, Who knows you far better than anyone ever will, including a counselor!

We have developed all kinds of excuses for not dealing with sin. Your sin is not greater than the Spirit of God. There is no sin, no matter how strong its influence, no matter how great its appeal, that is more powerful than the Spirit of God Who dwells in you. As you submit to Him and allow Him to assert His control and His authority in your life, that sin will be put to death.

You don't need 32 steps to get it right. It is simply a matter of

submission. Are you willing to deal with your sin by submitting to God or aren't you?

"Well, let's just talk about it."

There is nothing to talk about! The Spirit of God doesn't want to talk about your continuing in sin. The Spirit wants you to submit to His authority, thereby putting to death the deeds of the flesh. That is the characteristic of the Christian. Those who live according to the flesh will die. Those who, by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the body will live in an eternal relationship with the Living God.

But What About the Sinning Believer?

What about the person who is living according to the flesh, yet claims to be a believer in Jesus Christ? According to the Apostle John's evaluation, he is a liar (1 John 2:4). Why? Because the definition of a Christian is one who does not live according to the flesh, but who, by the Spirit, is putting to death the deeds of the flesh. So if you live in the realm of the flesh, you are not a child of God. A Christian is one who is led by the Spirit.

"Oh," you say, "but I thought a Christian was one who believed in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Yes, that is one way to describe a Christian. The other description is "one who is led by the Spirit," because all who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God.

Is this true because Gil Rugh says so? No! It is true because *God* says so. I don't have the right to decide who is or isn't a believer, but God does. I *do* have the authority to share with you what God has said: Those who live according to the flesh must die, but those who, by the Spirit, are putting to death the deeds of the flesh shall live. They are two clear-cut categories.

To make it even clearer, Paul writes, "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:14).

Romans 8:14 explains verse 13. Verse 13 talks about putting to death the deeds of the body. Verse 14 talks about being led by the Spirit of God. They parallel one another. What does it mean to put to death the deeds of the body? It means to be led by the Spirit of God. When you submit to the control of the Holy Spirit, He manifests His power in your life.

One commentator says: “The daily, hourly putting to death of the schemings and enterprises of the sinful flesh by means of the Spirit is a matter of being led, directed, impelled, controlled by the Spirit.”

Though the active participation of the Christian is involved, the putting to death of the deeds of the body is fundamentally the work of the Spirit. The phrase, “being led by the Spirit” is in the passive tense—it is something that is being done to us. But when we are being led by the Spirit, we are putting to death the deeds of the body.

The “Carnal” Christian

There has been some confusion among Christians on passages such as this. We begin to think, “All right then, we have Spirit-led Christians and we have Christians who are not Spirit led.” And suddenly the distinctions between believers and unbelievers that Paul has drawn in Romans 8 are blurred beyond meaning. We don’t know what a Christian is anymore.

But confusion is not the intention of God’s Word. Paul says, “All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). A little later in Romans 8:16, Christians are called the “children of God.” So what is the characteristic of God’s children? They are led by the Spirit of God. *There is no such thing as a non-Spirit-led Christian.*

“Whoa,” you say. “So that means when I sin, I am Spirit-led? Isn’t that contradictory?”

Yes, it *is* contradictory. That is the point! When a believer sins, it is totally out of character. A Christian, by definition is someone who has been set free from sin. But a Christian who sins has not stopped being a believer—he has not stopped being a child of God—he has not stopped being a Spirit-led person.

Believers are Spirit-led people. When we sin, we are functioning out of character. Sin is an aberration in the life of a believer. On the other hand, if the *character* of my life is sin, then I *am* in character—because a person who is characterized by sin cannot be a child of God at all!

This is terribly important to understand. Many, many people

have deluded themselves into thinking that they are on their way to heaven when actually, in light of the description of believers in Romans 8, they are on their way to hell. They think that, because they made a decision at some point in time, it is all taken care of. Now they can live the way they want and still go to heaven on the basis of that “decision.”

The Bible doesn't support this idea. On the contrary, those who are on their way to heaven are Spirit-led people who are putting to death the deeds of the body. These are the sons of God. They shall live! The rest are in the flesh. They shall die.

“But,” you say, “I'm so bound up into this sin that I can't get out!”

That cannot be true of the believer. Paul writes in Romans 8:15: “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ ”

The Spirit of God is not a spirit of slavery. He does not lead us into the bondage of sin. We have received a Spirit of adoption. The work of the Holy Spirit is to place believers into the family of God. As He leads us, He enables us to function as part of that family.

For a believer to be living in sin—well, obviously something is terribly wrong. There is no justification for it, but that doesn't stop some Evangelicals from trying to justify it anyway. One popular Christian writer explains this situation by saying, “Well, you see, not all Christians are the sons of God. Some believers are not the sons of God.” I wonder, has this man ever read Romans 8?

Other popular writers maintain that a person can be a true Christian and not have one single shred of evidence to back it up. In fact, an item I read just recently said that a true Christian can be an atheist! He is still on his way to heaven because he made a “decision for Christ.” No way!

We need to take these sinners to Romans 8 and talk about the basics of salvation. We need to find out if they have really experienced liberty and freedom in Christ. A true believer is one who is led by the Spirit, controlled by the Spirit and released from the bondage of sin.

God the Father of All True Believers

“You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ ” (Romans 8:15).

Believers have been brought into a unique relationship with the Living God. We can call Him “Abba”—a word that communicates warmth and intimacy. But don’t get the wrong idea. This word is not equivalent to our diminutive terms “daddy” or “papa.” Keep in mind that Paul is writing to the Romans. At this point in Roman history, the father had the right of life and death over all the members of his family. Sometimes we emphasize the warmth and intimacy of our relationship with God at the expense of the respect and honor that is due Him as our Heavenly Father.

The emphasis of this statement is not on the warmth of our relationship, but the *uniqueness* of our relationship. We have not received a Spirit of slavery, but a Spirit of adoption! We call the Almighty God, “Father!” Only believers have this kind of relationship with God.

Note also that the Spirit does not cause us to cry, “I am God’s Son!” but rather, “God is my Father!” The Father is at the center. The believer looks at God instead of contemplating himself.

Our Position as Children of God

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16).

The work of the Holy Spirit is to bear witness to the spirit of the believer. This explains the inner peace, confidence and assurance that we have in calling God, “Father.” Some would see this as presumptuous. “How *arrogant!* That you should think of God as your Father!” But He is! In light of what the Word of God says, and in light of the work of the Holy Spirit to my spirit, I am moved and motivated to cry out to Him as Father.

What does it mean to be a child of God? Consider Romans 8:17: “And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.” If we are children, we are fellow heirs with Christ. We are not children who are kept out on the fringe, as in some stepfamilies where certain members are left on the outside. When God says I have been placed into the family by the Spirit, then I am a son, a

child, in the fullest sense of the word. I am a fellow heir with Christ!

Does this mean that I am the same as Christ? No. We must be clear. Jesus Christ is God; I am not. I never will be.

Paul has already used this concept of our inheritance as children of God. “For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified” (Romans 4:13, 14).

Because of his relationship to God through faith, Abraham was promised that he would inherit the world. And that promise comes to all those who have the faith of Abraham, and thus the righteousness of Abraham.

I take it that Paul is speaking of the same concept in Romans 8. We are heirs of the world. And that fits with what Paul says about Christ. What is Christ’s destiny? To come and assert His rule over the world, to take possession of this world as His own. And what does Revelation 20 tell me as a believer? That when Christ returns, I will rule and reign with Him.

Our Identity in Suffering

We are fellow heirs with Christ. That is the promise. But there is more to it. “And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him*” (Romans 8:17, emphasis added).

This time Paul is not talking about our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. He is talking about our ongoing identification with Him in our day-to-day lives. This becomes clear in the next verse which speaks about the sufferings of this present time (see Romans 8:18).

The point of this verse is that now that we are living under the authority and control of the Spirit, we will experience suffering because of our association with Christ.

Jesus spoke at length of this. “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:18-20).

Here, Jesus says that if you are in the world, the world loves you. Romans 8 forms a parallel with this idea. If you are in the flesh and of the flesh, then you fit in with those who are in the flesh.

But as believers, our identification with Christ is so complete that we have been taken out of the world. We have been placed in the Spirit and identified with Christ. That means that the world will hate us. There will be an ongoing, unrelenting opposition between the world, the flesh and the believer.

This brings about suffering. We are headed in one direction, while the whole world is rushing in the other. The world will not tolerate this. The world cannot accept a Spirit-led person in its midst any more than the world could accept the Son of God in its midst. Why did they crucify the Lord of Glory? Why didn't they just ignore Him and go on their way? Now, I realize that Christ's death was God's eternal plan to bring about our redemption, but the world didn't understand that. Why did they kill Him? Because they could not tolerate the presence of the Son of God.

The world is not willing to tolerate any Spirit-led people in its midst. Because of this, Christians will suffer. It is a characteristic of a believer that he will suffer in his identification with Christ. There are certain things that believers will not do that the world does, and that makes our life in the world more difficult.

A good example is the biblical role of women. The Spirit-led Christian living out the biblical truth concerning the role of the woman has a much harder time in the world. He faces pressure to conform to the world's standards. The world makes it more and more difficult to obey God's design. This brings suffering. We need to recognize this as believers, and to glory in it. If we suffer with Him, we shall also be glorified with Him.

Our Hope of Glory

In 2 Corinthians 1:5 Paul says, "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ." Paul had suffering in abundance because he was a child of God who was led by the Spirit. He faced ongoing conflict

with the world, which resulted in much suffering.

Though suffering is ours in abundance, Christ brings comfort as well. “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:12-14).

Suffering with Christ is an honor, not a curse. It is a privilege—a blessing. And the end result is glory. Paul expresses the purpose of suffering in Romans 8:17: “if indeed we suffer with Him *in order that we may also be glorified with Him* (emphasis added). God has ordained not only that we be identified with Christ spiritually in His death, burial and resurrection, but also in His suffering. It is essential that we suffer so that we may be glorified with Him.

We are on our way to glory, but the cross precedes the crown. There are many who would like to jump on the Christian bandwagon and escape hell, but they also want to avoid the identification with Christ that brings suffering. That is not an option. God is not giving out various “package deals” for you to decide which one you want to take to glory. There is only one road.

What About You?

In Romans 6-8, we see the completeness of our identification with Jesus Christ—from His death, His burial and His resurrection, to His suffering and glory. *No one* gets to glory who does not come by way of identification with Christ in each of these areas.

In these things, believers stand out from the rest of the world. *True believers*—those who have experienced God’s redemption and transformation—are a strange and unique people. They don’t fit in with the world. They don’t live in the flesh. They are identified by the Almighty Spirit of God with the Eternal Son of God.

God’s Word tells us that: 1) Believers are putting to death the deeds of the body. 2) Believers are led by the Spirit of God. 3) Believers will live eternally. 4) Believers are sons of God. 5) Believers call God “Father.” 6) Believers have the witness of the Holy Spirit to their spirit. 7) Believers are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

8) Believers suffer with Christ. 9) Believers will be glorified with Christ.

Praise God that there is such a marvelous, complete and total difference between a believer and an unbeliever. Praise God that it is not just that someone made a decision and someone else did not. *It is that someone has had his life transformed, and someone else has not.* One is living in a totally different realm than the other. One is dominated and controlled by the world and the flesh and sin and one is dominated and controlled by the indwelling Spirit of God.

Consider your own life. Are you a believer? You must come to see yourself as a sinner—deserving of nothing less than an eternity in hell. You must come to realize that there is one and only one sacrifice. Jesus Christ, God's Son, died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin. That is how serious your condition is. God Himself had to become a man, die on a cross to pay the penalty. He was raised from the dead because He finished what He came to do. You must place your faith in Him as your Savior. At that instant of time, you are cleansed and forgiven of all sin. The Spirit of God comes and takes up residence in your life. He makes you a new person. He takes you from the realm of the flesh and places you in the Spirit. He removes you from the control of sin to the control of the Spirit. He identifies you with Christ as you walk through this life.

That identification brings suffering. But many people are suffering terribly in this life and are on their way to an eternity of suffering. Suffering does not make you a believer. But believers will suffer in their identification with Christ.

Don't take for granted your relationship with the Living God. It doesn't matter whether you have attended church for 20 years or ten or five years—what matters is, "Do you have a relationship with the Living God?"

Are you a child of God? God knows. You won't fool Him. If by His grace you will submit to Him, you will know whether you are or not. Examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. Redemption has been accomplished, and it is found only in the Savior who makes all things new.

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