

## **Romans 8:12-17**

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls

The Word of the Lord from Romans 8: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Our text from Romans 8 calls you three different things.

First off, it calls you a debtor. You're in debt to someone or something, but who? And what exactly is it that you owe?

Meditate upon this carefully, because the one whom you owe, owns you. In New Testament times, this was meant quite literally: many who were in debt became slaves in order to pay off the debt. So whom do you owe, and what? This is vitally important, because in the context of the epistle, this is also true: whatever is your master will also be your god.

It is easy to be a debtor to the flesh: it's perfectly natural – according to your sinful nature. But the flesh is a master that cannot save you. Examine yourself for your favorite sins and persistent weaknesses, for even while you think you're in control, they may well be the master that you pay.

If your favorite sin is vanity, the debt is clear: if you are vain, you owe it to your master to look after yourself above others. You're not at the top of the heap though: your vanity owns you. Vanity is a cruel master, though: in a world of sin and decay, it's impossible to keep it happy. As you start to falter, it demands that you pay with bitterness and resentment toward God and others. It destroys your faith, which wants to serve others instead of yourself. Worse is this: eventually when you die, vanity cannot raise you from the dead.

If your favorite sin is pride, the debt is equally obvious: you owe it to your master not to admit wrong or fault. You owe it to your pride to create reasons why sins really aren't sinful or why your stupid argument is actually the right one to double-down on. Pride is a lonely master, because eventually no one wants to hang around. Worse, in refusing to admit fault, you refuse to admit the need for forgiveness. Thus it destroys your faith, because you refuse the forgiveness that gives you life.

If your favorite sin is lust, then you owe it to your master to indulge in whatever vice compels you. Whether the lust is for the carnal, chemical, material or otherwise, then you'll be willing to give up your honor, reputation, clean conscience and integrity as payment to serve it. That's quite a debt to pay to a master that will only demand more and more until you're completely ruined.

You can run a test to examine yourself if you like. Make a list of potential masters, match them against each other and honestly answer how it plays out in real life. Do you usually fill your mind with things you lust after, or fill your mind with godly things? Would you rather be in church on Sunday morning or doing something you find personally more enjoyable? Do you actively read and meditate upon God's Word, or sit back and grumble that His Word is unexciting? Whichever you prefer is vying to be your master.

All of these sins are common enough, and all of them are terrible masters. Each demands that you debase yourself and deny your Savior. Each requires great sacrifices without ever giving anything back. Each is a false god, no more alive than a rock with a face carved in it, which means simply this: none of these can raise you from the dead. You understand, then, that the wages of sin is death – and that is what is required of you if you are to be a debtor to the flesh. Death never stops collecting what's due.

Do not be a debtor to the flesh, warns our text. We've mentioned internal sins up to now, but we should note that these sins are often dangled before us by others made of sinful human flesh. Think of the educator who says, "You'll do fine in my classroom as long as you deny God's Word." Think of the potential soul-mate who says, "We can have a great life together if you only lighten up on your commitment to Jesus." Think of the fishing buddy who says, "It'd be great to go fishing with you, but I can only do it on Sunday mornings if you skip church." Think of the boss who says, "You're going to have to give up some ethics and get a little dirty to close this deal...or else." Think of the family member who says, "For the sake of family peace, you're going to forget that part of God's Word." Some of these statements are threatening – others are sincerely inviting. All of them require a payment: all of them say, "You have to sacrifice something, pay something, to be with me." Whoever says this tries to make you the debtor and himself – or herself – your master. But none of them can give you what you need most – grace and salvation. All of them will also die, for they are debtors too; and none of them can raise you from the dead.

Thus our text: do not be a debtor to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. If you live according to the flesh, you will die.

As a Christian, you're still a debtor – just not to the flesh. You're a debtor to the Lord. For one thing, He made you, and it is only right that we serve Him who made us. He continues to give you life and all that you need. There's more than that, though. The Lord has also saved you. He has redeemed your life from the pit. He has saved you from sin, death and hell. He's conquered the world and the devil for you. He's given you forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. He gave all this to you at your Baptism. He still comes to you and gives it to you in His Word and His Supper.

Clearly, you owe Him your life. Forever. You're in His debt. Thus you are a debtor.

And what is it that you owe? What debt does the Lord require of you for such blessings? Nothing. It's free: at least, it's free to you. You were bought with a price. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became flesh for you. He lived for you, living a life that served no master except His Father in heaven. He owed no debt to any sin – and yet He paid the wages of sin by dying on the cross. For who? For you. For you, and for the whole world. And now He is risen from the dead. Now He showers forgiveness and life and salvation upon you – absolutely free, because the debt has already been paid. The only sacrifice left for you is a sacrifice of praise, of saying thank you for all that God has given.

What of good works? Do you owe Him good works? I would encourage you to think of this another way. Good works would be the opposite of bad works – of sins. Jesus has rescued you from all of those sins that demand the debt of death. He's set you free from them. By the work of the Holy Spirit, you repent and you're forgiven: thus you put to death the deeds of the body. If you're set free from sin, from "bad works," what's left to do? Good. You do these good works not because you have to, but because you can. You're set free to.

So, there's the first thing the text calls you. It calls you a debtor. If you devote your life to the flesh, your flesh will require your life in payment. If you're a debtor to the Lord, then the price is paid and eternal life is yours – all for Jesus' sake.

Our text doesn't just call you a debtor. It calls you a son. Remember: debt makes you a slave to the one you owe. But God does not want to be known as a slavemaster or tyrant. Since the debt is paid, He doesn't call you slave. He calls you a son. Look! By Holy Baptism, He has adopted you into His family; and by the work of the Spirit, you call Him, "Abba." Abba! "Abba" is an intimate word for a father – the English equivalent would be something like "Daddy." Behold the love of God for you. He doesn't call you a wretch that He's decided to let into heaven for Jesus' sake, but you better spend the rest of eternity groveling. He doesn't call you a slave who owes Him big-time for Jesus' crucifixion. He doesn't even call you the black sheep of the family that He tolerates. He calls you a son who gets to call Him "Daddy." He can't express His deep love for you much more clearly than that.

All believers, men and women, are sons of God. In part, it's because you're forgiven for the sake of God's only-begotten Son; and when God looks upon you, He sees His Son's righteousness. Along with that, however, sons are heirs, and all believers are heirs of heaven.

That's the third thing you're called in our text: an heir! At times in history, one son inherited everything while the other sons had to find a fortune elsewhere – as a soldier, a merchant, a monk or something else. Jesus, the firstborn from the dead, has not just won salvation for a few sons of God. If you are forgiven, you are a son of God; and if you are a son of God, then you are an heir to the kingdom of heaven. God's kingdom is yours forever: the Spirit Himself bears witness to this each time He delivers forgiveness to you for Jesus' sake – for every gift of forgiveness renews in you God's Word that heaven is yours.

You're not a debtor to the flesh. You're a debtor to the Lord – but the debt has already been paid by Jesus on the cross. Therefore, you are a son of God and an heir of the kingdom of heaven. Be warned: the devil, the world and your sinful flesh don't take kindly to this Good News. They want you indebted to them. Each day, they'll tempt you with all those would-be flesh masters that we mentioned before. And as you refuse, you can expect to suffer for it. Behold how the world treated your Savior – your Master. Expect the same for you. That is why our text concludes that we will "suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him." It is not that we earn salvation by suffering or must pay a debt of pain for forgiveness. Forgiveness and salvation are already yours, bought and paid for. But the devil, world and your sinful flesh hate that news, and so they must attack you since they cannot defeat your Master.

Your Master is Jesus, and He has conquered these enemies by His death and resurrection. He does not call you a slave, but a son. And if you are a son, you are an heir of God and all of His kingdom. Rejoice in this, dear Christian friends: the debt is paid! You are sons of God and you are heirs of God, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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