

Romans 8:1-2, 11
Exhibit D: Renewal
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Throughout this season of Lent, we have looked closely at three chapters from Paul's letter to the Romans. Chapters 5-8 read a bit like a courtroom argument. Like a skilled attorney, Paul examines two witnesses: one is the first human (Adam), in him we see our own struggle with shame and guilt, and bondage to sin. The other man on the stand is the new man, the second Adam (Jesus Christ), the one who invites us out of our sin and out of our prison cells of shame and condemnation, and to consider the hope we have in Jesus Christ our advocate. This morning, we come to the climactic chapter 8—one of the best known and most beloved chapters in all Scripture.

I invite you, as you are able, to stand with me out of reverence and respect for the authority of God's Word, and let's read aloud, together, these three verses from Romans chapter 8.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

A 2003 SI article by Michael Lewis began this way: The Jeremy Brown who steps into the batter's box in early October is and is not the fat catcher from Hueytown, Alabama, whom the Oakland A's had made the most unlikely first round pick in recent memory.

That's a bizarre sentence. What he is doing is inviting you to consider who Jeremy Brown is. Which Jeremy Brown stepped into the batter's box that day?

By one set of statistics, Jeremy Brown appears to be a guy who has no business there. He was short, 5 foot 8; overweight at around 215, which is rather rotund for a professional baseball player of his height; slow footed; and a catcher, which meant that he was doubly slow. By those statistics, he's not doing so well.

But as he steps into the box and the pitcher winds up, Jeremy Brown, know it or not, faces a turning point in his life. He takes the first few pitches, and then on the third pitch, he swings, and he connects—perfectly. And as the ball goes sailing out into center field, Jeremy takes off toward first base. To him, it feels as though he's flying down the baseline, but to everyone else he's slowly lumbering along. When he finally looks up, nearing first base, he sees the center and left fielders converging near the wall. And what's interesting is that Jeremy Brown is about to do something he never does: he goes for it. And so lowering his shoulder, he charges toward second base, but then all of a sudden, he Charlie Brown's it, a back flop. Then he rolls over and scrambles back to first, and just as he reaches his hand out for the base, he looks up and sees his teammates roaring with laughter. Oh no. Just what he feared. His worst nightmare coming alive in front of an entire stadium.

This may be a familiar story for you. It was a scene in the book by Michael Lewis called *Money Ball* and a scene in the movie with Brad Pitt. But Jeremy Brown is about to realize why his teammates are

laughing; Jeremy Brown is about to realize that the ball went 60 feet over the fence. He'd hit a home run and he didn't even realize it.

Back to the original question: who is this guy? Well, on the one hand, from the outside, he is the short, fat, slow-footed, not terribly impressive catcher. But from another perspective, he is a dangerous right handed hitter. You see, statistics show he hit .314 with a .444 ops and .535 slugging percentage, in 55 games, his 40 home runs. From another perspective, Jeremy Brown is a slugger.

You see, the truth is, we all live in a series of competing narratives. And the question is which narrative, which reality, will we live into? The Apostle Paul has spent the last three chapters laying out this dichotomy, these two narratives. Through one man came sin and condemnation and death; through another man life, justification, peace. The Law of Moses condemns, but law of the spirit gives life. In our baptism, we are buried with Christ in death, and in that same baptism raised to new life with Christ.

Even though there are two competing stories in our lives, there is only one that is true...only one that leads to life. Even still, like Jeremy Brown, we struggle with condemnation. We struggle to believe the truth of the freedom we have in Christ. Do you want to know how I know this is still true, even for people like us, people who hang out in churches? In 2016, one study found that companies in the US alone spent over 17 billion dollars on advertising and marketing. 17 Billion dollars telling us why our lives don't measure up, how we are deficient without... How happiness must be evading us because we don't have...

Paul understands this, and is deeply pastoral in that respect. Paul struggles, honestly and openly, in chapter 7 when he says, **"I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."**

This struggle is and is not the Apostle Paul. These competing stories are and are not you and me. There is much more going on than we know. His life, your life, has a factor, a truth present that changes the entire equation. Through the cross and resurrection, we are joined to God, *in Christ*. And when we are in Christ, the metrics of what is possible are vastly different.

I have a childhood friend. The two of us grew up in school together, and from an early age, he approached school, reading, and testing with a slower, more methodical pace. He was labeled LD. And because we went to a high school of about 3,000 students in one of the highest achieving parts of Minnesota, he was streamlined into the LD track. He was surrounded by aids and was told that he learned differently. What he heard was that he had a disability. For years, he allowed that fleshly designation to dictate what he did or didn't do, and what he could and could not do.

But a few years ago, he began to follow Jesus in his life and all of a sudden he began to realize that Jesus has given him the power to shed these labels. Now, instead of seeing his identity through the lens of a perceived deficiency, he views his life as the Spirit's work in him. He said to me recently, "If God can raise Jesus from the grave, he can certainly free me from the label that has followed me." Now his life is defined by a calling rather than a crutch, a vocation rather than a limitation, a destiny rather than a deficiency. Don't tell God what is and is not possible in Christ; he raised his Son from the dead. How could we think God won't, or worse God can't, help us with our perceived limitations?

You who are in Christ are free from every form of condemnation, self-imposed or society-driven. And those who are in Christ live by the law of the Spirit. But what is the law of the Spirit?

Throughout Romans, Paul articulates what the Spirit does.

- 1:4 Power of the resurrection
- 5:5 Pours love into our hearts
- 7:6 Source of new life
- 8:2 Sets us free from sin
- 8:6 Gives us peace
- 8:14 Leads us
- 8:13 Puts to death that which is old and weighing us down
- 8:27 Teaches us to pray

Living in the Spirit means that we have the vitality, the life, the power of God within us. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach*, breath. It's the same word that is used in the creation hymns as God's *ruach* brings life out of non-existence. The spirit/*ruach*/breath that lives in you has the power to bring life from desolate places. In Ezekiel 37, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, speak to the dead lifeless bones, speak breath and life to the lifeless places in your midst and breath/life will come into them and they will stand.

What are those dead lifeless places in your life? Are you living with a false narrative? Are you believing the lie that the only way you will be loved and affirmed is by working 100 hours a week? Or that the most important thing about you is how you look... Or that you must have the perfect family, or security in retirement, or a life of leisure? Are you trapped in the false narrative that because you are old, you no longer have anything to offer the community around you? Are you trapped in the false narrative that you are not deserving of love because of the decisions you've made in the past?

Paul makes it clear that these are real struggles and, on your own, you are incapable of freeing yourself, incapable of justifying yourself. But Paul says in verse 3 that **God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.**

You see, the Holy Spirit living inside you can change you from the inside out. Christ did not come so that you could feel better about yourself; Christ came to give you NEW life. When we accept Christ, a transformation takes place. We are no longer a slave to our old masters – trying in our own strength to fight against temptation, depression, burnout. No, once Christ comes in, we now have the God of the Universe living inside of us. It is HIS strength, HIS power, HIS love alive and at work in us.

Here is the hard part: once we have received our new identities in Christ, we try to put the old grave clothes back on. We revert to thinking we are incapable. We forget. The enemy brings the old lies back up – I've got to make friends with the right people, I need them to affirm me. I need to make enough money, because I won't be happy without... I've got to host the right party, or belong to the right social gatherings.

It's exhausting and utterly depleting. It's not how you were meant to live. This is not what flourishing looks like. Later, in verse 15, Paul says, **You did not receive the Spirit to fall back into fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption as sons when we cry Abba Father.**

Living into the Spirit is the most free and easy feeling in the world.

A few years ago, we went to the park and brought Christian's tricycle. At three-and-a-half, he was very independent. His favorite saying was "Bubba do it."

While we were there, he wanted to ride his tricycle up a hill. Making it about a third of the way, his legs gave out and rolled back down. Standing on the pedals, sweating, he began to tear up. Exasperated he cried, "Daddy." That's when I came to the rescue. I'd been waiting for that call. He'd been pushing himself against the grain, against the wind. When we got to the top, we turned around and saw where we'd been and that the best part was ahead. Riding with the wind at his back, rolling, pedaling freely and easily, Christian kicked back his head, weeee!

Like my son, we try to do it on our own and fail. We get exhausted and emotional. But our God is waiting in the wings for us to ask for help. And when we do, the Holy Spirit swoops in and comes to the rescue. His strength becomes our strength. And as we ride with the wind, life becomes a grand adventure. We, too, can throw our heads back and enjoy the ride. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.