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SIGNS OF TRUE ASSURANCE

Romans 8:14-16

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Romans Lesson 47

Signs of True Assurance Romans 8:14-16

Assurance of salvation is a problem in two opposite ways. Some think that they are saved when in reality they are not. When it is too late to repent, they will hear the shocking words, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). They thought that they had saving faith, but they were mistaken. So they have false assurance.

Others are truly saved, but they wrestle with doubts about their salvation. Their uncertainty causes them a lot of anxiety and grief. They're like insecure children who live in an unloving home with a mean father who threatens to disown them. They miss out on the joy of experiencing the Heavenly Father's love. They are unable to come to God with the assurance that He will welcome them into His loving arms. They need true assurance.

Romans 8 is all about assurance of salvation. If you are walking in the flesh but think that you are saved, this chapter will jar you into examining your heart. Only those who walk according to the Spirit can have true assurance that they belong to Christ. One ministry of the Holy Spirit is to assure us that we are His children.

In the New Testament, assurance rests on three pillars. First, have you abandoned all trust in your own good works so that you're trusting in Christ alone for right standing before God? If you answer yes, then the question arises, "How do you know that your faith is genuine saving faith?"

That leads to the second pillar: If your faith is genuine, then you possess new life in Christ and that new life always manifests itself in changed thinking and behavior. There will be evidence in your life that God has changed your heart. You love God and desire to love Him more. You want to please Him by a life of obedience to His Word. You hunger to feed on His Word. You're growing in godly character and behavior, as summed up by the fruit of the Spirit.

The third pillar is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, who testifies that we are children of God (8:16). Although some would dispute any subjective element in this, it seems to me that this is a subjective, experiential matter. But, as I will explain, it is based on the objective promises of the gospel as revealed in God's Word. In our text, Paul is giving us the signs of true assurance:

If the Spirit is leading us to kill our sin and confirming to us the promises of the gospel, then we can be assured that we are children of God.

Note two main things:

1. If the Spirit is leading us to kill our sin, then we can be assured that we are children of God (8:14).

Romans 8:14: "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." It is important to note the first word of that sentence: "For." Paul is explaining verse 13 and showing how it applies to the matter of assurance. In the context, he is not talking about how the Spirit may lead you to go to one college or another or to one career or another. Rather, Paul is saying that if the Holy Spirit is leading you to put to death the sinful deeds of the body (8:13), it is evidence that you are a child of God.

No one who is living according to the flesh kills his sin on the heart level. Some legalists or ascetics may control their sin outwardly, so that they can look good to others (Gal. 6:12-13). But they are filled with pride about their performance. They don't kill their sin to glorify God, but to glorify self. But here Paul is saying that if the Spirit is leading you to kill your sin on the thought or heart level out of a desire to please and glorify the God who saved you, that is evidence that you are His child. To be led by the Spirit of God means to have the whole direction of your life determined by the Spirit, so that His fruit is growing in your life (Gal. 5:18-23).

Note that the verb is passive: "led by the Spirit of God." As Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], p. 422) explains, this "suggests that the Spirit is the primary agent in Christian obedience, that it is his work in believers that accounts for their obedience. Although this does not exclude the need for believers to follow the Spirit, it emphasizes that any human obedience is the result of the Spirit's work." John Murray (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 295)

expresses the balance: "The activity of the believer is the evidence of the Spirit's activity and the activity of the Spirit is the cause of the believer's activity." This is the mystery that we saw in verse 13, where by the Spirit we kill our sin. God gives the power but we must take action to obey.

So Paul's point in 8:14 is that if the Spirit of God is leading us to kill our sin, then we can be assured that we are "sons of God." Some commentators see significance in the fact that Paul changes from "sons" (8:14, 15) to "children" (8:16, 17), but I agree with the majority who say that there is no significant difference. But it is significant that this is the first time in Romans that Paul mentions this wonderful truth, that we are children of God. We have been born into God's family through the Spirit who imparts new life to us (8:2, 6, 10). And, we have been adopted into God's family as His chosen heirs (8:15, 17).

Charles Hodge (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 265) points out three implications of being "sons" of God: (1) There is similarity of disposition, character, or nature. After commanding us to love our enemies, Jesus explains (Matt. 5:45), "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." Sons reflect the character of their father because they share his nature. (2) "Sons" are the objects of special affection (Rom. 9:26; 2 Cor. 6:18). I love all children, but I have a special love for my own children. God has a special love for His chosen children (John 13:1; 14:21). (3) "Sons" have a title to some peculiar dignity or advantage. They are heirs of the riches of their father (Rom. 8:17). They have special access to his presence that others lack. If the President is greeting a crowd, the Secret Service will prevent unknown children from breaking through the barrier and running up to the President. But his own children can be right at his side.

We could probably come up with many more privileges that are ours because we are God's children. Paul's first point is that if we are killing our sin on a daily basis, that didn't come from us. It is an indication that the Spirit is leading and governing our lives. John Piper puts it ("The Spirit-Led Are the Sons of God," on DesiringGod.org), "When you fight sin by trusting in Christ as superior to what sin offers, you are being led by the Spirit." And that is a sign that we are sons and daughters of God.

2. If the Spirit is confirming the promises of the gospel to us, then we can be assured that we are children of God (8:15-16).

Paul goes on to explain some of the implications of 8:14. First (8:15), he shows that the gospel has given us the Spirit of adoption as God's sons so that we are on intimate, childlike terms with the Father. Then (8:16) he shows how the Spirit confirms the gospel promises to us through His inner witness. He follows (8:17a) by showing the implication, that if we are God's children, then we are heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ. Then in 8:17b he responds to an anticipated objection: If we are God's beloved children, then why does He allow us to suffer? This theme runs like a thread through the rest of the chapter. I originally planned to cover 8:17 in this message, but it will have to wait until next time.

- A. The Spirit confirms the gospel promise that through adoption we become children of God (8:15).

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!'"

There is a difficult interpretive matter in this verse that we need to tackle before we apply it: How should we understand the two "spirits"? Some (such as the NASB) take both to refer to the human spirit in the sense of an inner attitude or disposition. But in light of the context, where the Holy Spirit is prominent and the parallel in Galatians 4:6, which clearly refers to the Holy Spirit, most understand the second reference in Romans 8:15 to refer to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of adoption. The Spirit brings us into this relationship as adopted sons of God.

But what about the first "spirit"? It could refer to the human spirit of unbelievers, in the sense that people are in slavery to sin and in fear of God's judgment. But not all unbelievers fear God's judgment. Or it could refer to the general spirit of those who were under the Law, which was a yoke of bondage that brought condemnation and fear of judgment (Acts 15:10; Gal. 4:7, 21-31).

But many argue that it is unlikely that Paul uses "spirit" to refer to both the human spirit and the Holy Spirit in the same verse. If it refers to the Holy Spirit, it may refer to way that He worked

during the era of the Law (similar to the second view above). Others apply it more specifically to the work of the Spirit when He uses the Law to bring conviction of sin just prior to conversion (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: The Sons of God* [Zondervan]. Pp. 197-205). And still others contend that Paul is saying, negatively, that the Spirit we receive at salvation is not a Spirit of bondage, but a Spirit of adoption. Because of Galatians 4, I think that Paul is referring to the human spirit of bondage and fear that the Law brought (Heb. 12:18-24). By way of contrast, the Holy Spirit now transforms us from slaves to sons through adoption.

There are two ways that the New Testament speaks about our becoming sons of God: through the new birth and through adoption. Adoption is relatively rare, occurring only three other times with reference to Christians (Rom. 8:23; [9:4, the Jews]; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). The last reference attributes our adoption to God's predestining us "according to the kind intention of His will." Like justification, adoption refers to a legal transaction that results in a change of status. Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 315) says, "It signifies being granted the full rights and privileges of sonship in a family to which one does not belong by nature."

William Barclay (*The Letter to the Romans* [Westminster Press], rev. ed., p. 106) explains the consequences of adoption in Roman society, from which Paul borrowed this concept:

- (i) The adopted person lost all rights in his old family and gained all the rights of a legitimate son in his new family. In the most binding legal way, he got a new father.
- (ii) It followed that he became heir to his new father's estate. Even if other sons were afterwards born, it did not affect his rights. He was inalienably co-heir with them.
- (iii) In law, the old life of the adopted person was completely wiped out; for instance, all debts were cancelled. He was regarded as a new person entering into a new life with which the past had nothing to do.
- (iv) In the eyes of the law he was absolutely the son of his new father.

When the Holy Spirit enables us to believe in Christ and to understand our new standing as adopted sons of God, all of these privileges apply to us and result in a great change in us. We have a

new legal status before God, but also we have *a new relationship* with God as Father. Paul says that the result of our adoption is that by the Spirit we cry out, "Abba! Father!" "Cry out" is an emotional word, used about 40 times in the Psalms (LXX) for crying out to God in urgent prayer (e.g., Ps. 3:4; 18:6). God's adopted children often cry out to Him as their Father when they are in need.

"Abba! Father!" combines the Aramaic and the Greek words for Father. Jesus addressed the Father in this way in Mark 14:36 as He prayed in the Garden just prior to His arrest. He taught His followers to pray to God as "Our Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). When Paul applies "Abba! Father!" to us as God's adopted children, it means that we can draw near to God in our distress or time of need with the same sense of intimacy and assurance of being heard that Jesus had!

James Boice (*Romans: The Reign of Grace* [Baker], 2:841) points out that in the Old Testament, *father* was used of God only 14 times and never in a personal sense. In Jesus' time, God's name was so revered that the Jews would not even pronounce it. They would substitute "Lord" instead of "Yahweh" when they came to it in the Scriptures. But Jesus always addressed God as Father, except for when He cried out on the cross as He bore our sins (Mark 15:34), "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" And, astoundingly, He taught us to pray, "Our Father."

Some have picked up on *Abba* by addressing God in prayer as "Daddy," since it was the word that little children used in Aramaic to address their daddies. I confess that I'm a bit uncomfortable with that because Jesus adds that we should acknowledge that our Father is *in heaven* and that His name is to be *hallowed*, or set apart as holy. In other words, while *Father* or *Abba* connotes intimacy and dependency, we must also remember as we draw near that He is the sovereign of the universe and that His name is holy. So we should come to Him as a little child does to his father, knowing that He loves us and that He delights to meet our needs. But we also must come before Him reverently.

J. I. Packer has a wonderful chapter in *Knowing God* [IVP, pp. 181-208], "Sons of God," on the subject of our adoption as children of the Father. He writes (p. 182),

You sum up the whole of New Testament teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as a revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. "Father" is the Christian name for God.

So the Spirit assures us by confirming the promises of the gospel to us, teaching us through the Word that we are God's adopted children and that, as such, we can cry out to Him in any need as our loving Father, knowing that He cares for us.

B. The Spirit confirms the gospel promises to us through His inner witness (8:16).

Romans 8:16: "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." There is some debate here as to the meaning of the verb. Strictly interpreted, it means "to testify or bear witness *with*." Thus, there would be two witnesses, our spirit and the Holy Spirit. Many reputable commentators understand it in this way, but I confess that I do not understand how my spirit bears witness to me *apart from* the Spirit's bearing witness.

But the verb can also mean "to bear witness *to*." C. E. B. Cranfield (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T. & T. Clark], p. 403, italics his) asks a pertinent question, "But what standing has our spirit in *this* matter? Of itself it surely has no right at all to testify to our being sons of God." And so I understand this to mean that the Holy Spirit confirms *to* our spirit the promises of the gospel. It is an immediate and direct inner sense that the gospel is true and that it is true in *my* life.

If you believe personally in the truth of the gospel, where did that faith come from? It didn't originate in you. "The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14). "There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11). To understand and believe in the gospel requires a supernatural work of God's Spirit in your heart. When you say, both at the point of conversion and many times in the years afterward, "Yes, I *do* believe in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord," that is the inner witness of the Spirit to your spirit that you are God's child.

When you're feeling guilty and condemned because of your sins and you read, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1) and something inside of you exclaims, "Thank God!" where does that inner sense of joy come from? It is the Holy Spirit testifying to your spirit that you are a child of God.

Or, maybe you're feeling all alone and wondering if anyone cares for you or is concerned about your problems and you read that you can cast all your cares on God, because He cares for you (1 Pet. 5:7). As you read that promise, your spirit is buoyed up with renewed hope in the Lord. Where did that hope come from? It is the Spirit of God testifying to your spirit that you are God's child.

On one occasion many years ago in California I was going through the most difficult time of my then 14 years of ministry. An associate was spreading half-truths (or, half-lies) about me, causing a lot of problems in the ministry there. Many were criticizing my preaching. I was very discouraged. One night as I was about to get into bed, out of nowhere, the reference, Acts 18:9-10 popped into my head. I had not been reading in Acts recently. There was no human explanation for why that reference came to mind.

I grabbed a Bible that was on the nightstand and opened to Acts 18 and read how Paul was afraid during his ministry in Corinth. The Lord appeared to him in a vision and said, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." It was the Lord's word to me, to go

on preaching the truth and not be concerned about my critics. It was the Spirit's witness to my spirit that I am a child of God.

Conclusion

Are you a child of God? Are you *sure* that you're a child of God? How can anyone be sure? First, have you abandoned all trust in your own good works and trusted in Christ alone to save you from God's judgment? That is the main source of assurance. But, how can you know if your faith is genuine? Is the Holy Spirit governing your life so that you fight against and kill your sin every day? Is the Holy Spirit confirming to you the wonderful truth that God has adopted you into His family? Part of that confirmation is that you often find yourself crying out to the Father for help and grace in your time of need. And the Spirit repeatedly confirms to you the many promises that God gives to His children. You can sing (author, Carolina Sandell-Berg),

More secure is no one ever
Than the loved ones of the Savior
Not yon star on high abiding
Nor the bird in home nest hiding.

Application Questions

1. Should professing Christians who are continuing in a life of sin be assured of their salvation? Why/why not?
2. Are some by personality or upbringing more prone to insecurity and doubt than others are? What can they do to overcome this and gain assurance of salvation?
3. How important is assurance of salvation? How does the presence of lack of assurance affect one's walk with God?
4. Is there a danger in focusing on feelings of assurance or on the subjective inner witness of the Spirit? Where should we focus? Where is the balance?

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