

# Children of God, Led by the Spirit

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Wonderful. Right. Before I get going, a quiz. Okay, so these numbers up on the screen, I just want to set myself up. You're allowed to confer if you want to. See if you can work out what they are and what ties them together. Okay, so just now you're allowed to phone a friend or whatever you need to do. Anyone want to tell me what the first one is? A hundred over 75. Blood pressure. Okay, well done. I'll tell you a little bit more about that in a minute. How about eight hours? Sleep. Sleep. Well done. Good. 2,000. Yeah, so adult male having 2,000 calories per day. A female is supposed to be 1,800 or something like that. Okay, two minutes. Very good, James. And two times a day as well, may I add. Plus flossing, I suppose. Two minutes twice a day. Teeth cleaning. How about 10,000? Steps. Excellent. 22. Anyone know what this one is? Sorry? So that is your, is a body mass index figure. Don't ask me how you work that out. How about five a day? Fruit and veg. And of course they say it shouldn't be five. It should be about 20 or something like that. Anyway, these, any, any ideas what tie those together? Health. Health, yes. They are sort of optimal targets, aren't they? That you get set. And I know some of them are in different bands and depending on your age and all the rest of it. Okay, be honest. When you see something like that, your optimal targets, how do you feel? Some of you are feeling great. Others of you are going, oh man, no, no. There's a mix, isn't there, between a sort of pride, yeah, nailing it, woo, and guilt. A little bit of kind of like, oh, if only. And now, of course, not only do we have the figures, but we have the technology to support the keeping of those targets. Let's have the picture up, Martin.

That'd be great. How many of you have one of these or other manufacturers are available? Yeah? Okay, so a smartwatch with an activity tracker. You know, those little loops, if you're unfamiliar with this, they go around and as you hit your targets for steps or sleep or what are the other ones, distance. And they even buzz, don't they, when you've met those targets or when you're supposed to have a movement break every half an hour or whatever it is. So you have this sort of external force trying to help you reach your optimal performance, right? I often wonder what would happen for some people if you took them away. It's an interesting thought. Okay, thank you.

We can take that picture off the screen. Otherwise, we'll all be wondering what our step counts are for the rest of the day. But are we all in agreement that targets, when it comes to health and things like that, are good? You know, we're given these guidelines for better health. And I think the word that we put next to it sometimes is, these are things we should be doing. And sometimes it's that sense of should, that sense of obligation, which can make us feel a bit defeated at times.

And for those who are particularly intent on reaching those targets, it's almost like we can kind of get slightly addicted to them, slightly enslaved to watching that circle meet at the end.

And it's often accompanied, isn't it, by this fear that if we don't reach that target, our well-being will in some way suffer. Or, as it has been said in my household, if you don't brush your teeth, your teeth will fall out. Or, slightly more subtle but still just as fear-mongering, it's okay, you only need to brush the teeth you want to keep.

[ 4 : 1 5 ] How many of you have been parented like that? How many of us still parent like that? Ooh, I don't want to go there. That's just an example, right? Folks, that feeling of being fear-driven, guilt and anxiety induced, when you've got those targets you know you should meet. For many people, when it comes to their moral or spiritual life, that's often the effect the church has on them. Okay? So for someone who is struggling to hit the spiritual and moral optimal targets, church can feel like the last place you want to go.

You know, if you feel bad, come to church and you'll feel worse. I wonder if that's been your experience or perhaps that's perception a family member or a friend of yours has about church. It's all about meeting targets that make us sometimes feel worse when we don't hit them. And today we're going to be exploring a little bit why is it that some people feel like that?

And I have to say, very often, it's the people who make out they are living the optimal spiritual and moral life that cause those around them to feel worse rather than better. There's something about religious pride which is really off-putting. And even worse, hypocrisy. Because they just cover things up that they can't admit to themselves perhaps, or particularly to others, where they're missing the mark. And it leads to people, particularly I had to say, people who are employed to talk about Christian things, often walking around like sort of empty shells, speaking the right stuff, but inside they're empty. And in fact, Jesus called such characters whitewashed tombs. Look good on the outside, but inside they're full of death. It's empty. Why am I telling you all this? Why have we started off this quiz? Because actually, this parallels quite closely what is happening in the book of Romans that we are exploring together. This letter to the Christians in Rome, as we've already heard, is a quite a long, continuous, logical argument. And she's trying to make several points, but they're all very cohesive into one. And if you remember, if you've been with us, don't worry if you haven't,

I'll try and catch us up. Paul wants us to consider, particularly today, how there are two powers at work within us. Okay? Those of you who are with us, or you might know the book of Romans, will remember a few weeks ago, we looked at how Paul speaks of one of these powers being that of godlessness and wickedness, which is taking us away from God. It distorts our minds and our morals.

[ 7 : 21 ] And it's this, it's a universal human condition. That's what he's keen to tell us. And it's almost like a virus that we carry that eventually leads to spiritual and physical death. And Paul calls this power the power of the flesh. Or sometimes that is translated in our English Bibles as the sinful nature.

Now, it's really important we don't understand that Paul is saying that our flesh, our bodies, are kind of bad. That is the thoughts of some sort of religious philosophies. It's not that he's trying to say that. But there is a power, he's saying, that is in work in us that opposes the life that God wants for us. And he's very serious about that. And he, as we saw, describes the sort of downward spiral that comes as we live that out unchecked, and we become both complicit in it and victims of it.

And it's all a big mess. But as Paul writes on, as we go through the chapters, he introduces another power, if you like, a power that God has introduced to his people to try and help them understand how they must live in order to be a people who are fit to have the holy presence of God live among them. And that power is the law. The law. And when we say the law, it was introduced to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai, if you remember, it's the Ten Commandments and all that. In fact, there's 600-odd guidelines that make up the Hebraic law, that outline for God's people their optimal targets. Yeah? Particularly in the realm of spiritual, moral, and social matters.

And by the time we get to Romans chapter 7, Paul is saying, look, this law is good, and it is holy. But when it is introduced to those who are under the power of the flesh, who live in their minds and their hearts by the sinful nature, all that the introduction of that law does is make them realize that they're missing the mark. For example, says Paul, if you say to someone, do not covet, i.e., don't desire other people's stuff, and you start thinking about it, you'll suddenly realize just how much coveting you do. Or if you say, do not give false testimony, that means don't lie or exaggerate to put yourself in a better light. Ooh, just how often do I do that?

[ 10 : 08 ] So that good law, it's good, and it's holy, that is intended to bring life, it produces some kind of death in us. Guilt, fear, anxiety. Because, Paul says, the power of the flesh, the sinful nature, is like in opposition to that good law.

And so those, says Paul, who know God's good law, yet are weighed down by the power of the flesh, they live in this agonizing tension. He puts it like this, for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing. Now, if I do what I do not want to do, it's no longer I who do it, but it's sin living in me that does it. So there's this agonizing tension that even if we agree in our minds that God is, and his laws are good, that isn't enough power to help us meet that target. Because that other power that is working in us is pulling us downwards, it's waging war, if you like, against that good desire. And so willpower is not enough for us to reach God's optimal targets. And so by the end of chapter 7, verse 22, Paul writes, for in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law or power at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

Wretched. It's a horrible situation to be in. Perhaps you can feel some of that tension. I myself, in my mind, am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature, a slave to the law of sin. Do you see this enslavement that's at work, these powers or laws that are at work in the human heart? Do you see this? Do you feel the tension? Do you just get a sense of that? Maybe that's even from your own experience, or you can imagine what it is for those who are in that mindset. Well, let's allow God to release that tension for us.

[ 12 : 58 ] I'm going to read. What I'm going to do this morning is simply take us through those verses that Cheryl read for us and just try and help you unpack the logic of it, because it's all in there.

It's such rich, amazing stuff. I'm going to read just a couple of verses each and then just spend a little bit of time making sure we understand it and can get it into our heads and into our hearts. So Paul says, after telling us that about this entrapment that we're in, this enslavement to sin and enslavement to the law, he says, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Because through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. So what Paul calls here the law of the Spirit who gives life, so the word of the Spirit, it sets us free from feeling condemned, from guilt before God, because it frees us, first of all, from the power of sin and death that we've been trapped in.

And he goes on, for what the law, that good law given to God's people, was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.

[ 14 : 23 ] And so he condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

So again, what those guidelines for optimal performance did not have the power to do, Jesus, through his death and resurrection, are able to achieve.

And what happens is this transaction. Jesus' track record, his perfect life, his perfect submission to God, his sacrifice, his track record becomes ours.

I've done that the wrong way, right? Our track record becomes his, as it were. Our sins are identified with him. He takes them, and they are rightly condemned on the cross with Jesus.

But all that Jesus has done, and all he has fulfilled, the laws he fulfilled with his perfect life, and his sacrifice is then transferred, is identified with those who believe in him, and who have his Spirit in them.

[ 15 : 39 ] And Paul goes on to describe the difference between these two different mindsets, that of the flesh and that of those of the Spirit. I'll read verses 5 to 8.

Those who live according to the flesh have their mind set on what the flesh desires, but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God, does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

And those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. Do you see how they contrast those two different mindsets, those thoughts and purposes, those in the Spirit lead to life and peace, but those that are in the flesh still, still want to be ruled by that, it leads to death.

And it's a case, it seems, about who we're governed by, who we allow to govern us. Verses 9 to 11. You, however, are not in the realm, or in the governance, of the flesh, but you are in the realm of the Spirit.

[ 16 : 51 ] If indeed the Spirit of God lives in you, and if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

Now, usefully, my iPad, which I'm looking at my notes, has just crashed. So let's go on together. Let's see how much I have lived and prayed this Scripture.

Woo-hoo! So if we are governed, and we live in a realm of the flesh, there's a bit of a challenge here, though. I don't know if you noticed that. If indeed you do have the Spirit of Christ, how do we know that we have the Spirit of Christ?

Well, for that, we need to just wind back maybe last week. Emma was preaching on Romans 6. We need to tie our lives to Jesus. We need to submit our lives to his ways and submit to his authority. [18:06] We need to die to our old selves and turn fully and embrace the gift that he offers us, his life. And that is how we receive the Spirit of Christ because we've made ourselves open, killing the old self, opening ourselves to his life.

So that's the answer. If indeed you have the Spirit of Christ, that is what we need to look for. And then this is really where it kicks home because if we are in the Christ, in the Spirit of God, there's these wonderful verses.

I'm going to read verses 14 to... Just 14 and 15 without notes. For those who are led by the Spirit of God, are the children of God.

The Spirit you receive does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again. Rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.

And by him we cry, Abba, Father. So this is like the amazing good news. So whereas before, we might be looking to reach those optimal targets, a bit like a slave or an employee.

[19:19] Oh, if only I can reach those targets to earn God's love. Uh-uh-uh. If you have the Spirit of God, you are made children of God. And that's an entirely different way of relating to God, isn't it?

And it's this perhaps curious phrase, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. Now this is actually quite a sort of technical term that they've translated like this.

In the Roman world, of which the original recipients would have been very familiar, if you were, say, part of the aristocracy, you were rich and you had a sort of portfolio, let's put it that way, but you had no children, then one of the practices they would have, they would find somebody and they would adopt them, always a son, it was always a male, to be their son so that they would inherit and carry on your legacy.

This is a well-known practice. And what's interesting about this is that to use that phrase, it's not just men who could be adopted into this.

It would be women, it would be the young, it would be the old, it would be the widow, it would be the orphan. Anyone could become an adopted son in God's family and therefore, with Christ, become heirs with him, Christ our brother, and we get kind of drawn into that family as we are adopted.

[20:47] And so, it's interesting today that we're thinking about adoption and being children of God and God as our Heavenly Father, it's Father's Day. And I just wanted to just pause, press pause a bit there because I recognise that for many that actually the idea of God as our Father is a tricky one, even for our own experience and even, I was just talking to someone before the service, even those of us who seek to be fathers, perhaps because of the lack of model of father we've had in our lives or whatever's happened to us, it's very difficult to get hold of this idea of a perfect father.

And even the concept of adoption is riddled with complications here. Many of you will know that the Church of England this week made a formal apology for its role in forced adoption practices a few decades ago where rather than, you know, keeping mother and child together, they were complicit and sometimes actively so in separating.

So we're in that sort of downward spiral experience, folks, of what it means to be an adopted child. But nevertheless, let's try and clear that fog so that we understand what it is that we are being offered here.

A relationship with God, not that we've earned. I know no adopted child puts out their CV and says, please, no, they're chosen and they are drawn into the family so that all of the provision of that family, all of the protection that family is offered to them.

No conditions. It's unconditional love because they don't have a performance review every year to see how well they're doing. No, they are loved by God's heavenly father, our heavenly father, who we can call, we can cry out, we can come at any time, anything on our heart and cry, Daddy, Father, Abba, that's the sort of intimate name, the father.

[22:49] and it means that we are then united because we have the spirit of Christ in us and the spirit of Christ as it were interacts with our own spirit however healthy it is and it means that he begins to form and shape us into the family likeness and this is an ongoing process and rather than having a sort of external smart watch to buzz every time we go up no, it's much more intuitive guided by the word of God but also getting us in touch with our own spirit as it unites with Christ to guide us in life to help us make good choices and because we're not in an employment contract or a slave contract with God because we're children of God all those things that look like could be shoulds now can become coulds and cans because actually we have the spirit of God who actually

is more powerful than the power of sin and is more power than just the optimal targets of the law and actually it has the power to put to death some of the sinful stuff that's in our lives and all we have to do to help activate that power is call out

Abba Father help me and the desire that grows not because we first loved God but because he first loved us it's not that we're trying to earn our love with God no he has brought us into his family and we are loved we are loved we are loved and in response to that it's a whole different motivation to live Christ-like lives because we want to please our Heavenly Father and we just want to show our appreciation for what he has done so that is the that's the heart of Paul's argument if you like here to show that how to be led by the Spirit and to become children of God is the ultimate gift of God it brings freedom where there so can often be fear it brings relationship rather than religion and all those things completely turn us inside out and give us the hope both in the future but also now of the freedom of being the children of God unashamed we don't need to cover up our faults and our failings because we are secure in knowing that we are loved because of what

Jesus has done because we are in the family and there's a whole load of other implications probably many more if I have my notes but I'll just I'll touch on a few things here on Thursday 45 of us met stuck in room 4 because this room was being otherwise used in the sweltering heat to discuss and pray about what it meant to be increasingly inspired that was brilliant so thank you so much for coming and I know many of you wanted to come but couldn't and some of the thoughts we were having were well what would our church community look like if we were increasingly what I call inspired which is basically increasingly led by the Spirit of God increasingly allowing our identity as children to be first and foremost and to be the driver in our lives what would it look like and there was just a few indications of people understanding the freedom that brings the conversations that we might be having even over coffee where we're willing to be open about struggles about things that we need because we're free to do so we don't need to worry about our appearance and there was a sense also that actually as we follow the Spirit the more we'll be open to those who are different to us because it's not about conforming to a cultural pattern of you know this is what it means to be a

Christian in Clevedon in 2026 no this offer of being children of God is open to everyone and that we might see increase amongst us a great diversity of people from all sorts of different backgrounds and that we would be attractive to those for whom you know reaching the optimal targets really without the grace of God they'll never do it and that's all of us isn't it we're on 11 playing field as children of God because we're just reliant on the Spirit of God to do that and of course if that is our hope for us as a community to be increasingly led by the Spirit the invitation is there for us to make that increasingly so for ourselves so I'm going to end now just by giving us a bit of space to think about what it would truly mean if we stepped into our identity as children of God loved unconditionally loved even when we don't reach those optimal performance targets how else might we be motivated if we just know we are held and if the Spirit of God the love of God is increased in our hearts tell you what it would change the world Thank you.