

6-7 Debtors Or Heirs? Romans 8:12-17

I called Ben, Conner and Will last night, hoping to get a good sermon idea, but they were out on the town. As one person said to me last week, *what a treat to hear three fine sermons in one service rather than one in three services*. I smiled and said; *maybe you should come to church more than once every three weeks!* One out of three is a batting average of .333 which makes you a top notch baseball player but an ordinary preacher.

Preachers struggle to connect with contemporary audiences who may not be familiar with biblical language. We find ourselves using more familiar words and images and sometimes it backfires; such as when the pastor, preparing for an Easter children's sermon, announced that his wife was going to come forward and lay an egg on the altar. (My wife prefers music)

In our text from Romans 8, Paul uses some common cultural language from Greek philosophy to speak about a basic theological dichotomy. Unfortunately, he uses the terms *flesh* and *spirit*, which for the Greeks described a dualism of the material and non-material world. This dualism divided the material world from the shadow world; the physical body from the non-physical soul. Paul tried to use these familiar terms to describe a different duality, but Greek dualism is hard to shed.

When Paul says *flesh*, he is not speaking about our physical reality over against our spiritual and non-physical identity. *Flesh* for Paul means our *human nature*. When writing to Christians, he also calls this our "old or former nature:" mortal, sinful, inclined away from God and toward sin and self-destruction.

We are all born of the flesh. We inherit this nature common to humanity. We can also by grace be born of the Spirit or born anew or born from above. In our text today, Paul tells us that we ***are not debtors to the flesh, but adopted heirs of God.***

I tore the cartilage in my right knee playing a high stakes game of intramural football when I was a senior at Baylor. I did not notice my knee that much before the injury, but afterward, it took center stage. My knee addressed me when I woke up, when I got up, whenever I took a step, whenever I sat down, and whenever I breathed. My knee took charge of my life. No more sports. I had to modify my schedule to get to class on time. I had to gimp around on crutches. I was in debt, in a way: paying for injuring part of my body. My parents were in debt too, for the surgery.

It happened to the other knee three years later playing basketball. This time, I went into debt both physically and financially. Since that time, I have injured my knees again playing basketball, softball and golf. I am no longer free to do what I want to do because I don't want to do further damage to my knees. I am a debtor and my orthopedic says I will be paying for a knee replacement in about 5 years.

Paul had a thorn in the flesh and was beaten a few times so he might have been feeling like a debtor to his flesh when he wrote this letter to the Romans. But the physicality is a metaphor. It's our mind, heart, will and passion that lead us down the primrose path of destruction. And Paul says this is all very natural.

In the chapter just before this one, Paul describes his struggle with his human nature. He laments, *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.* Couldn't have said it better myself.

Old theories of human nature are being debunked. The idea that our nature is basically good unless distorted by our environment is giving way to discoveries in neuroscience that

indicate our nature is more hardwired than we thought. For instance, recent studies of children offer evidence that lying is not a learned but an innate behavior. Children who can barely talk will lie even though they haven't been taught and even when there is no threat of punishment. It seems that lying can activate the pleasure centers of the brain. We get a little dopamine rush when we play the lying game.

We seem to have a genetic disposition toward self-interest, competition and survival. This is our nature. Even the mental sensation that seems like taking in information and then making a free decision about it is now being understood as an illusion. We are, instead, responding to neural commands already present in our brains. We are not as free as we suppose. We are in debt to our nature and bound to certain patterns of life, unless there is a powerful transforming change brought about by God.

My friend Randy showed me a place way back in the sticks of East Texas where there were two really nice waterfalls with great swimming holes. Later that summer, I decided to take my girlfriend there for a picnic. There were only two turns to remember off the highway, so I knew it wouldn't be a problem.

As I approached the area, I slowed to examine each dirt road that connected to the highway. Eventually, I saw the one that looked familiar and turned off. I followed that road until I saw the other turn that looked familiar. I drove until it dead-ended at an old farm house. I retraced my steps, and each time I was sure that I had found the road, nothing. We never found the spot.

That's happened to me a hundred different ways. I think that I have correctly identified something or someone only to discover that my mind was playing tricks on me.

The Bible says it plainly. Twice in the Proverbs, we read: ***There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*** But I just knew it was here. I just knew that was the right answer. I could have sworn I saw it. We can have the sensation of knowing without really knowing. We can have the sensation of confidence but it's just our brain creating its own reality. There is a way that seems right... but instead of giving us life, it makes us slaves.

In Paul's thinking, this is being indebted to our nature. In **v. 15** of our text, Paul says that being a debtor is being a **slave** to the one we owe. It is living in **fear** that we might not be able to pay our debt. In Paul's day, if you could not pay your debts, you would literally become a slave to the lender. The lender could then set whatever terms he wanted regarding repayment. This often led to perpetual slavery.

Paul is using a financial metaphor to describe our nature. When you borrow, you are beholdng. You have to pay it back. When we are debtors to our nature, it means we are subservient to that nature. We have a contract and we have to pay up. We have no power to say no. And worst of all, it seems so natural and right.

So when our nature says *put your own needs and desires before others*, debtors go along. When your nature says *lie to protect yourself*, debtors must go along. When our nature says *keep everything you make* in these troubles times, debtors must go along. When our nature says *cheat on the test* because you don't want to be at the bottom, debtors must go along. When our nature says *it doesn't matter how you treat "those people,"* debtors must go along. When our nature says *don't let anyone know you are vulnerable* because they will take advantage of you, debtors must go along. Debtors have to pay up.

Once upon a time, long before there were democracies and legislatures, there was a young princess who grew up in a royal household. She received a wonderful education from the best minds in the land. She ate well, dressed well and lived in a time of peace in the land.

Yet there was little peace in her heart. As she became a young lady, she also became increasingly troubled that she was missing out on a life she imagined could be much better than her own. Her parents and others did not understand her growing restlessness with life in her father's kingdom. They thought she was very blessed to be the daughter of royalty.

But something inside made her feel as though she was being enslaved by her life. She began to suspect that her family was deceiving her so that she would stay put. They were not really being honest with her about the world outside her kingdom because they were afraid she would leave.

Finally, she could stand the turmoil no longer. She took family treasures, some food and a fine horse and set out to discover her new life. And she did discover feelings, experiences and appetites that fed her hunger. Only instead of satisfying that hunger, they left her needing more and more and more.

She was smart and strong, so she gained both wealth and power. But the higher she climbed the harder it became to breathe. The further she went, the heavier her load became. She was doing what she wanted to do; what came naturally to her, but she wasn't getting what she dreamed of. In fact, she really didn't know what it was she had dreamed of when she left home.

But she needed a rest. When she decided to make a trip home to see her family, her counselors came to her in a state of panic. *Your majesty*, they said, *you cannot leave your business and your holdings. In your absence, your enemies will rise up and seize what is yours and kill those who are loyal to you. You must stay to protect your prosperity.*

But I desire to go visit my family, she said. *I'm sorry your majesty*, the wise ones said, *but such a move would mean the end of your reign and disaster for many. Surely her majesty sees that leaving is not an option.*

And so the princess lived the rest of her life in the kingdom of her own making; a world that seemed so natural and right; a world she could not leave.

Paul is telling us that we don't have to live in the prison of our nature. God has adopted us and has made us heirs. Why would we want to settle for slavery that leads nowhere.

President John Adams hoped that he could make life better for his children and grandchildren. He wrote: *I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, and tapestry.*

This is the dream of the parent because it is the heart of God; that our children break the chains of our worst nature. But alas, the sons of John Adams and the sons of Adam continue to study war; debtors to our worst nature. Only God can make the dream come true; only God can make us heirs of freedom and new life. Only God can feed us spiritual food.