

Sermon preached at OCC, 12 July 2026

Your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path. Help us to understand your word and lead us to your truth until the very end. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Romans 8:1-12 - The Spirit-led life

Across history, people have sought freedom in different ways. Some tried to achieve freedom politically – through demonstrations, peaceful marches, or wars; some through philosophy, and others spiritually. Freedom may not mean just a physical unboundedness as seen in the metaphor of a baby elephant. Today, many look inward through practices of self-optimisation or commercialised mindfulness. Though these movements differ greatly, they share one assumption: that lasting freedom can ultimately be achieved through ourselves. But Paul points us in another direction. The freedom is not something we create but something God gives through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Freedom we cannot achieve

In his book *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, Ronald E. Purser argues that *McMindfulness* is not only outside of the context of Buddhism, but it encourages workers to adopt corporate co-optation through passivity without judgement. Despite the positive impact of mindful exercises, the corporate world is using this to maximise productivity while not changing the system. The modern adaptation of *McMindfulness* has birthed a massive self-help industry where the focus often shifts from inner peace to personal branding, career success, and monetary gain. As assumed, the prefix Mc – was derived from the word *McDonald's* – a symbol of fast food, thereby promoting fast consumption.

It's not only a modern-day thing. Starting from the 2nd to the 4th century, Gnosticism was trying to spread an idea of freedom physically and spiritually by obtaining the secret knowledge. According to them, the material world, especially the body, is evil and one's prison to escape. The secret knowledge (hence *Gnosis*) will liberate us from this prison through the knowledge of our spiritual state originally. Yet if applying Paul's words here, *McMindfulness* and Gnosticism are not merely 'wrong ideas,' but the examples of 'life according to the flesh' (ζωή κατὰ σάρκα)—human existence operating independently of God. God's spirit, however, doesn't negate the human life or body. Rather, God transforms our human life so that we participate in Christ's life.

In the previous chapter 7, Paul writes about a wretched one who is experiencing the war between the law of God and the law of the mind (v 24-25), which the one helplessly endures. Now Paul says how this Spirit-given freedom is obtained even when we are still under the condemnation of sin.

Freedom Christ has won

Romans chapter 8 begins with this: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v1). The elephant has no means of understanding its life condition because

it is beyond its knowledge and experience. Unless a kind trainer or people lead the elephant that was once tamed by the rope to nature and set it free, and until it learns the way of wild elephants’ life in nature, the elephant would not easily dream of escaping the circus. Similar examples can be found in the making of sci-fi films. When we see a sci-fi movie, especially where aliens or strange creatures appear, we often find some aspects that resemble certain animals, insects, or amphibians. That is, those aliens or creatures were created within our knowledge and experience boundaries. Likewise, we cannot imagine the freedom God gives because we have never known life apart from sin and death, also conditioned by time and space. As such, grace is not something we discover within ourselves; it comes to us from beyond ourselves. God must reveal it before we can receive it.

Now the Spirit is in view at this stage. Paul says that the Spirit’s law has set us free (v2) from the Law which the person in Romans chapter 7 was struggling with, through the work of Christ. They were set free not by their struggles but by the Spirit of God. That is, God sent his Son (v3) so that sin itself has been condemned (v3). Now Christ has defeated death, and it becomes the summary of Christian doctrine of salvation. Here what Paul says is that freedom is not with self-improvement but with grace marked by Jesus’ death and resurrection at Easter. It then continues through Pentecost when disciples were baptised by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, Paul is plainly saying to stop running away from God, as Sin and its consequence—death—have been defeated in Christ. Further, we were accepted even when we were still under the influence of sin. Still, many Christians continue living under the condemnation of sin, not knowing Christ has set them free, as if the elephant behaves as though it is still tied. Now Paul declares that the rope has been cut off. But the elephant which

used to be tied by a rope for many years wouldn't simply go back to normal like those who have been living in nature.

3. Freedom the Spirit enables

The elephant metaphor tells us a lot. It can be compared to incidents of gaslighting, school bullying, the political means of the oppressors towards the oppressed and many more. Even the commercialised *McMindfulness* can be useful sometimes, as it indeed calms the mind and makes the body feel refreshed. But band aids cannot be a permanent cure. Unless we cure the source of sickness, we cannot be free. In addition, what the Spirit has done is not merely psychological freedom, but an ontological one. By dwelling in us, the Spirit makes us belong to Christ. In doing so, we gather together, worship together, and do God's mission together by spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, who has cut the invisible rope of condemnation of sin. As if air gives a balloon life, we are participating in the life of Christ. A new reality has entered believers, which also changed our mindset as God's Spirit is now dwelling in God's people. In the meantime, the Spirit also empowers us to listen to God's voice, which makes us obedient to God's goodness, so that we continue to live the life-saving life here and now.

We began this sermon with *McMindfulness* and Gnosticism as examples of humanity's search to overcome our frailty and our inability to save ourselves. Deep down, we know our limits. We cannot conquer sin and death by our own power, so throughout history people have searched for freedom through politics, philosophy, religion, and self-improvement. But Paul tells us that true freedom does not begin with what we achieve but with what God has already done. Christ has cut the rope that held us. The Spirit now lives within us. Therefore, we no longer strive to become free—we learn to live as people who already are. Amen