

Romans 8:12-17 Antidote to Orneriness

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

This week we had storm warnings. We have had civil unrest warnings. But do you know there was also a church member warning—research shows that churchgoers in the US are apt to be “ornery.”¹ That means cantankerous, impatient, pushy, and mean. Are you feeling ornery? The research notes people are weary of the pandemic. Churchgoers are stressed by the news and cultural fights and upcoming election and negativity on social media. It’s hard to meet with friends like before.

And then there is the problem of self-focus. “When we are focusing on what is wrong in our lives, we are not focusing on reaching and ministering to others. A self-focused church is an ornery church.”

Our Romans verses describe the antidote to orneriness. COVID existence may wear down and demoralize many. But faith in Christ gives us a place to stand, a refuge, a base of operations, a social location, unlike that of people who seek hope and direction elsewhere.

The Bible calls this social location many things: the people of God. The body of Christ. The church. The household of God. God’s field. God’s temple. A holy priesthood. Whatever the label, this new location is essentially a family. God makes believers his children. He becomes our Father in heaven who by his Spirit is with us always here on earth through Christ our Savior.

Our Romans reading points to six family traits that we share and that counteract any tendency to orneriness.

1. We’re not ornery because we share a new indebtedness 8:12

Rom 8:12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

¹ <https://churchanswers.com/blog/ten-reasons-why-your-church-members-are-ornery-in-the-pandemic/>

Notice the word "brothers." We could translate it "brothers and sisters," because Paul is writing to the whole church. But the Roman readers of this epistle don't have the same parents as Paul. So why does he call them "brothers and sisters"?

Paul reflects here a teaching of Jesus. Christ taught that God demands our ultimate loyalty, not our natural parents, though we should certainly honor them. As followers of Jesus, we join a family centered on God's Word and will. Jesus taught, "For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3:35).

Your natural family is not your forever family. But the family of God is everlasting.

Note that v. 12 speaks of "the flesh." This refers to our inner self unaided by God's grace through faith in Christ. It's the natural state of humans, and it's not always pretty.

Prov 14:12 puts it this way: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." Unless God intervenes in your life, you will live by your will, your decisions, your preferences. And you will be bound to do so. You will live by your will not God's will.

If we belong to God's family, we are no longer indebted to live in bondage to our natural will, the flesh. We have new potential, as we learn in v. 13. A second new thing we celebrate in Christ is:

2. We're not ornery because we share a new mode of living. Rom 8:13 says: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

The old way of living, living without faith in Christ, is a dead end. "You will die" means you will languish outside of God's will in this life and then face eternal separation from God in the life to come.

But in Christ there's a new way to operate: "if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

What does that mean? Our bodies are ruled by our "flesh" (see v. 12). Our own will tends to run against God's will.

When we follow Christ we begin to put to death the deeds of the body. We swap out our will for God's higher and better will. We did party hard Saturday nights and then regret it on Sunday mornings. Church wasn't on our radar screen. Now we know better. We live better.

Maybe we used to lose our temper, or neglect our spouse or children, or gossip, or pad time at work, or swear, or eat to excess, or serve the flesh not God in other ways. The Holy Spirit comes into our life and demands improvement.

He is God's *holy* Spirit. He calls for our lives to be *holy* too.

The Spirit also enables it. "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." "Live" here refers to the quality of life that the Bible calls "eternal life." Your quality of life now improves as the glory of heaven shines more brightly in your life long before you reach heavens' gates. The Spirit gives you an appetite for better things and the ability to pursue them.

3. We're not ornery because we share a new direction due to new management: 8:14 "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."

Looking back over life I see very different outcomes in people's lives depending on whether they were led by God's Spirit or their own flesh and will. When you live to please yourself, even if you like the outcome, there's something dark and sad there.

Did you see the Michael Jordan TV series? To me, that greatest basketball player ever as filmed and recorded lacked all kinds of graces. He still hates, hold grudges, belittles people, and thinks he's the greatest. I'm sinful too; I'm not saying he's bad but I'm good. I am saying MJ showed no signs of being led by the Spirit of God, or acknowledging a force in his life greater than himself.

That would mean seeking God's glory and not his own. It would mean forgiving Isaiah Thomas and learning humility. There wasn't much humility in interviews I witnessed. MJ in those programs manages his own life for his own sake.

The gospel puts us under new management by placing us into a different family. In the ancient world the oldest son was the primary heir. The Greek in v. 14 does not say "children of God" (though the NIV translates it that way) but "sons of God."

Whether you are female or male, young or old, if you make God your guide, if you are united with Christ the Son of God par excellence, God gives each of us the status of a privileged oldest son. We are under new management, and what a benefit!

4. We're not ornery because we share a new paternity 8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Without God, we have reason to fear. Heb 9:27 says, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment." Without an eternal hope, we live unprepared for death and in slavery to the unknown future. Actually it is not unknown: after this life we stand before God.

Today many are enslaved to destructive addictions. Alcohol is an age-old problem. Opioids fell many. Pornography sinks its claws into others. I have read that porn has boomed during the pandemic.

Some years ago I was working in community events with a successful businessman. He was active in civic affairs. He was the very picture of a prosperous man with a large house and income. He was blessed with a wife and kids.

But one day he told me, "I hate my life." He had no interest in the gospel or God. He lived under a spirit of slavery to ambition and a frat house mentality because of which he drank too much and a stubbornness that resulted eventually in the end of his marriage.

As things were going down the tubes in his personal life which he hated, he was a slave to the very things that were destroying him.

In the gospel a new spirit, in fact the Holy Spirit, enters. Fear, dread, dreariness are no longer the dominant menu item. Rather, something in us calls out to God: "Abba! Father!" That word Abba is the Aramaic for how children called their dads in the home. In our home my sons first said "daaaa" and then "Da'ie" and then "daddy" and eventually "Daaaaad. Like little squawking geese.

How beautiful to have a father in heaven who invites us to squawk at him! He is perfect and all-powerful, and bigger than sin and death and our fears. This new paternity, God adopting us as his sons when we believe in his Son Jesus Christ, is the foundational truth that changes our lives when we truly believe.

Our own family may be a shambles. Nobody in our family may believe in Christ. But when we do, God places us into his family. There is no bigger or better step in life. I highly recommend it!

5. We're not ornery because we share a new assurance 8:16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

How do you know you belong to God? This verse teaches that when the Holy Spirit enters our lives through faith in Christ, he fills us inside. He begins to fulfill us and enlarge who we are within. He creates space for the living God and his goodness and his will where before there was only the flesh and our will.

As we are united with Christ by faith, our spirits unite with the Holy Spirit. The result is a growing assurance. We learn over time that the Scriptures given by the Holy Spirit are really true. We know the presence of the Spirit in various situations:
 maybe times of testing or temptation,
 maybe times of joy when we are thankful to God deep within,
 maybe times of danger when we know God is with us--not God the Father, who is in heaven, and not God the Son, who at God's right hand, but God the Spirit, fully one with the Father and the Son, but also fully present with you and me who believe.

He is able to assure us that he is there.

6. We're not ornery because we share a new identity 8:17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

In human terms maybe you aren't an heir. Maybe you lacked parents, or your parents had nothing to leave you, or maybe they left their legacy to your sister and not you. I can tell you from experience: it happens.

But in Christ God makes all his children into heirs. The blessings Christ won on the cross and from the empty tomb become ours by grace.

We become co-laborers with Christ. We seek to make disciples wherever he sends us. This assumes that our loyalty is real enough to take some hits for his sake: "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." The way of Christ is the way of the cross, not to atone for our sin, because Christ did that. But to serve Christ and fulfill his will for us whatever the pain or cost.

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I'll bet somebody here has a pet cat or dog that they love deeply. That animal is like family. You're a human, not a cat or dog: how can an animal mean that much to you?

The answer: you adopted it. You picked it, chose it, accepted it, and you bless it daily with attention and food. What love! And they love back.

God adopts you. He picks, chooses, accepts, leads, and protects those who trust in his Son and follow him and as necessary suffer with him. Infinitely more than we can make pets become like we are, God's Holy Spirit makes us become more like Christ.

The Romans call to follow Christ is at the same time the call to a new and everlasting family. You have a home where you matter because God cares for you. You have a home where your life counts because God counts on you. You have a heavenly home after this life because God has adopted you.

We close the book on being ornery as we open our heart to our new family, adopted by God. Amen and amen.