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## A Talk to Young Christians on the Nature of the Christian Life

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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(As Spoken)*

I am going to talk to you very simply. I trust that the people who 'know all about it' will not think it is too simple! But I feel we want to be quite clear about our foundations, our beginnings, and so in what I have to say I shall risk being as simple as I possibly can.

I am going to take as the foundation the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans. Perhaps you immediately say: "Well, we know that one!" And yet, you know, we may know a lot *about* it, and still we may not *know* as it has to be known. You will know this, to begin with, that the last section of this chapter is something immensely comprehensive. It reaches right back, takes us back into the 'before times eternal', and gives us just a glimpse into what was happening with God before this world was. And then in the same section we are taken right on beyond these ages, to the 'ages of the ages', and told what things will be like then so far as we are concerned. So this chapter has a very big context.

And in saying that, I have enunciated a law, a principle, which you will do well to remember: namely that, in order to have a Christian life that is really full, you have got to have it in its full setting. I have always felt, and the longer I live, the more strongly do I feel it, that it is a mistake just to try to keep people to little fragments - what is called the 'simple Gospel' - even at the beginning. If you are to have a great Christian life, you need to see from the beginning what a great thing it is you have come

into - what a tremendous context the Christian life has! Right at the beginning, indeed even before they have made a beginning, people need to be impressed with this, that it is no little thing to be a Christian. That gives them a very good starting-point. If they start on that, they will make better progress, and they will arrive at something much fuller, in a quicker way, than if things are just doled out to them in little fragments as they go along.

So remember that, and if sometimes it seems too big for you, just say: That is a very good thing; I would not have it as small as I am; there needs to be something very big to get me anywhere! For the bigger it is, the mightier is the dynamic and the motive for the Christian life.

### **The Gateway to the Christian Life**

This eighth chapter of Romans, then, in its last section particularly, represents a strategic point in the movement of the whole letter, as you will see. You know that the first seven chapters are what we might call the Gateway into the Christian life. I am not going to stay for an explanation of them, but that is what they represent: seven chapters on the gateway into the Christian life. The word that will be written on the portal of that gate is 'Faith' - you know that. And on the gate itself, 'The Cross'. Faith in the Cross of the Lord Jesus is the way in, and seven chapters are taken up with the Way In. And then, when you come to chapter 8, you find what is inside: what kind of situation, what kind of a life, this is, that you have come into.

Chapter 8 presents to us the real nature of the life into which we have come. And I suppose it is one of the most elementary things, which you have heard and noted many times, that in this chapter there is one word that stands out - one word. One of the first things I did in Bible study, as a young fellow, was to underline the words in different chapters, to see how many times particular words occurred. When I got to this chapter, and underlined one particular word, I found that the chapter was simply smothered with this word. You are familiar with it: it is the word 'Spirit'. If you go through this chapter, you will see that there is really very little else left to talk about. It all springs from, centres in, and circles round this matter of the Spirit. It begins there: "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (v. 2). We are now in, through the door, you see; we are in; and what we find here is what we may call -

### **The Life in the Spirit.**

We need to understand what kind of life that is, what it really means; because with it we come into the peculiar character of a dispensation that is altogether new. There have been other dispensations in the past - dispensations in the Old Testament - which we will not mention in particular.

But now those dispensations are past; one has followed the other, and the Old Testament, with all its different phases and stages, is closed. With the New Testament, a completely new age has been introduced, with a character all of its own, a character that never was before. You and I live in a period of time, marked off by the coming of the Lord Jesus in the first place, and by the coming of the Lord Jesus again, which is a particular phase in the whole course of the ages, with its own peculiar aspect and character.

Now, the peculiar characteristic of this time in which you and I live, is that it is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. I am sure you will agree with me that we do need to know what is the order of things, from God's standpoint, in the time in which we live. In the Old Testament, they had to learn that for

themselves, as to their own times - what times they were living in. You and I have got to know this: what is the time we are living in? And the answer is that this is the age, or dispensation, of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has come; He has introduced a new order of things entirely; and, until we understand that order, we shall not make any progress in our Christian life. It is very necessary for us to understand that.

### **"Joined to the Lord"**

In the first place, the effect of the Holy Spirit, simply but fundamentally, is that He joins us to Christ; He brings about a vital union with the Lord Jesus. "He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17); it is a spiritual and inward union with the Lord Jesus. The words and language are, I know, so simple, and perhaps so well-known, that they may not grip you very forcefully, but out of this everything comes. You and I, if we are truly born-again children of God, have got to know that, right inside of us, a union has been effected between Christ and ourselves, and ourselves and Christ; that we are joined to Christ. That union has been effected; we have been made one - *one*.

Now, you see, if you are one, you are not two! That seems quite obvious, of course; but there is more to it than it sounds. Very often, you know, we are two: even in the Christian life, the Lord is 'that', and I am 'this'! The Lord's way of illustrating this, you remember, is the marriage bond. Paul says: "The twain shall become one flesh. This mystery is great: but I speak in regard of Christ and of the church" (Eph. 5:31,32). 'One flesh'. Now, if that union is what it ought to be, those two people are so one, that to separate them is to cut one person in two, and only leave two bits, two halves, and not a whole. That is the illustration of our union with Christ. We are not complete until we are united with Christ; our completeness is in union with Christ.

If we haven't got Christ with us, we are only half here. If we lose the Lord, we have torn our very person in two; we have torn ourselves asunder, or we have been torn asunder - that is the effect of it. You know that spiritually, although the division may not be ultimate and utter and final, we can - by disobedience, by playing with sin, by disobeying the Lord, by this or that - bring about such an effect, so that we feel: Well, something has happened; the Lord is there and I am here, and we are not together. It is as though we have been torn in two, are not complete.

We could dwell much upon that. But, you see, that is the beginning of the Christian life; that is the very foundation and basis of the Christian life: we and Christ have been made one - *one*; not two - *one*! To divide, now, is not merely to walk away and have an independent life - it is to destroy your own identity, to tear your own spiritual personality in pieces; and that is how it is, if we get away from the Lord in any way.

So here, the very first thing that we find about this life in the Spirit, is that there has come about between us and Christ, and between Christ and ourselves, a oneness, which is not in any outward sense, but in a vital, inward reality. And, in greater or lesser degree, I am sure you know that that is quite true.

### **The Witness of the Spirit**

We must not stop with every part of this life in the Spirit, but the next that this chapter tells us is this: "The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God" (v. 16). The first thing is: "The law of the Spirit of life *in Christ Jesus*" (v. 2) - the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus - that is the union:

union with Christ. Now, the Spirit in us bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. How does He do that? Again, forgive me if I seem to be talking to you as to the Kindergarten, as to little children. How does He do it? Well, the Holy Spirit does not constantly speak in our ear, and say: You know, you are a child of God; you are a child of God. He says what He does *on the basis of our* being children of God - that we know it. We *know* how others can do certain things that we cannot; we *know* that we cannot take even our cue from others; there is something that we have in our own heart which makes us aware that this is, or this is not, according to the Father's mind. Putting it into language, giving it terms, that is how it works out; it is like that. The simple truth is this - *we know*: "the Spirit beareth witness"; we know.

I have many times in my life fallen back on that quite deliberately. Coming to very real testings and trials, and going through dark times, and many adverse circumstances and conditions; being tempted to wonder, to wonder if after all you are the Lord's - those questions that can come up because of many things, experiences, and so on: many times in my life I have just fallen back on this - 'Yes, but what about this and that from the beginning?' I can recall, again and again, occasions when the Lord Himself definitely held me, or spoke to me, and made me know that this was right, and this was wrong. It was something that I never received from outside; I never got advice, counsel, or anything; but I knew it in myself!

I could tell you of instances like that, again and again, right back from the beginning of my Christian life, where I could not do something that I did before I was the Lord's. Something said: 'You just can't - no, not now! You just cannot do it.' It was as real as, or more real than, any audible voice. And that has gone on through life, again and again, in different connections.

It sounds very simple, but I have had to say to myself: Yes, but what is that, coming right from the inside? That is the Spirit bearing witness with my spirit that I am a child of God. A child of God does not behave like that; a child of God *does* behave like this; a child of God does not do those things; a child of God *does* do these things. That is what it amounts to all the way along. The Spirit says: 'Others can; you cannot; you are a child of God.' Well, that is simple, but it is very real - the Spirit bearing witness. That is to be the basic law of our Christian life. And every one of you who is a child of God ought to know what I am talking about, and I am quite sure you do, at least to some extent. If you have not gone very far with the Lord, or if you are not even the Lord's yet, let me say: This is what it means to be a Christian. It is something real on the inside.

### **A Different Constitution**

Now we come to another thing in this chapter. As you look at it, you will find that this means that we are constituted in an altogether different way from all other people. The Holy Spirit, coming inside, has created and constituted a new kind of human being, a different kind of humanity from all the rest of humanity. That is saying a tremendous thing; and yet it is not something advanced in the Christian life - this is something fundamental to it, belonging to the very beginning.

We use the word 'species': well, the Holy Spirit has created and constituted a new and different species of humanity. The fundamental reality about a true child of God is that he is *different* from all other people who are not children of God. The difference is not that they have decided to be religious, and to go to meetings, and company with Christian people; do this thing and that thing, and give up a lot of other things - that is not it at all. Their very being, their very constitution, has been changed; they are different people.

You know how true this is. When you have really become the Lord's, and this great change has taken place, this 'something' has happened inside, and you go back into the world, you know that there are two kinds of humanity in your office, in your workshop, in your factory, in your school, or wherever you are. You are one, and the others are another! Although, on the outside, in outward appearance, and so on, there may be no visible difference, yet there is just the same difference as there was between the Lord Jesus, when He was here on this earth, and the other people in the world. While He could understand them, they could never understand Him. It was just as though they were living in two different worlds. As He said: 'You are from beneath; I am from above' (John 8:23). And that is exactly true of every child of God.

We too can say: I am from above, this is no longer my place; this is no longer my home; I am no longer at rest here in this world. I have got a new nativity; I have got a new location; I have got a new country, a new land: here in this world I'm just an alien.

That becomes a very real thing to the child of God. It is sometimes a very unpleasant thing to feel out of it, but it is something we have to accept. Never try to violate it - never try to be at home in this world. If you do, you will be doing damage to your new constitution - because it is that, you see, that is your testimony. It is not that you *try* to be different at all. Never try to be different; never put it on! Never try to create the impression that you are different. The difference is there, right enough! If you want any proof of that, you will find that, from the moment of your new birth, the Devil knows you! You are a marked person, just as Christ was a marked man when He was here.

As far as this world was concerned, and those who were under the enemy's control, Jesus could never do anything right: everything He said - that

which in anybody else would have been accounted good - was wrong; everything that He did well, they found fault with it. I was reading about this only today; it is an amazing thing. As He was going about the country, up and down the length and breadth of that country, doing good, casting out demons, healing those who are sick - leaving behind Him a veritable trail of folk made whole and delivered, set free, blessed with a new life and a new outlook - here come along those other people: 'By the prince of the demons He casts out demons!' (Matt. 9:14, etc.). They put it all down to the Devil - He could not do right! And the Devil knows the children of God as he knew the Son of God. And, somehow or other, a lot of things come to us which would never come to us if we were not children of God. It is for that simple reason - that we are different, and we are known.

And it is sensed: sometimes it is almost uncanny how men of this world sense it. They are not able to explain it; they are not able to say why they take these attitudes toward us; they just cannot tell us. In fact, if you ask, 'Why do you look at me like that? Why do you feel like that about me?', they say, 'Well, I don't know why, but somehow or other... somehow or other...!' You see, that is just it; they can't explain it, they don't understand it at all. But - but - there it is: a fundamental difference of constitution. You might be people of different races altogether, who have no understanding of one another.

Well, it is like that. The Spirit coming in makes us different, and it is just that difference that is the basis of everything for the future. Never try to modify or reduce that difference. But, at the same time, never make it artificial: never make people think you are a 'goody-goody', that you are 'putting it on' and trying to be different - none of that. You are different, right enough; you won't have to 'put

on' anything if you live in the Spirit. We are constituted differently, and we must understand that that is a fact. That is really what it means to be 'born of the Spirit'.

### **Led by the Spirit**

Now, we have been constituted by the Spirit according to a Divine and heavenly order, and the course of our Christian life should be one of getting further and further away from the old order. I believe that that is what is meant by the words here in this chapter: "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God"(v. 14). "Led by the Spirit of God". Now you may take hold of that and apply it to 'leading' in many things. It may apply to being 'led' about *things*; this is what we call 'guidance'. But, whatever it means for such guidance in particular matters, I believe the setting of these words demands a wider interpretation than that. You cannot lift these things out of their great context; and this is, as we have seen, a tremendous context - 'from eternity to eternity'.

You see, God started up something - that is the point that this chapter brings into view - He started up something, before this world was, where *we* are concerned. "Whom he foreknew, he... foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (v. 29). That is, right back there, God started up something, and swept down into the ages with that purpose, moving toward that great goal. And what was that goal? - conformity to the image of His Son.

Now, what is being 'led by the Spirit'? Well, take the illustration of Israel. God came down into Egypt, into the dark world of their bondage and tyranny in Egypt: He came down with His great purpose; He took possession of them; and then He gave them the symbol and figure of the Holy Spirit in the Pillar of Cloud and Fire. Paul says: 'They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud' (1 Cor. 10:2). What was the pillar of cloud and fire given for? Well, it is an illustration. It is a type of the Holy Spirit. It was given to lead them into the Land of Promise, where God had intended them to be. That was the purpose for which He had come down into Egypt, and got hold of them, and pulled them out, and brought them into the Wilderness. The Spirit was ever moving ahead of them, in the Pillar, to get them into the Land.

That is being "led by the Spirit". As the Lord said, speaking of His people: "Israel is my son... Let my son go..." (Ex. 4:22,23) - 'Now these are the sons of God, who are led by the Spirit of God'. But what does it mean? It means that you are moving on, ever moving on in this way of the Spirit, in this leaving of the old order further and further behind, and getting nearer and nearer to the heavenly order. Now, if the Christian life is normal, this is true of the Christian life. This is not something abnormal; this is 'the *normal* Christian life'! This is what is real about it - that the more you go on with the Lord, the less and less do you find it possible to accept this world and to settle down here, and the further you seem to get away from it. Or it seems to get away from you. The things of the Lord get nearer and nearer, and more and more engrossing, taking up more and more of your life. You find that, whereas at one time, you could divide your time, you could spread it out over things, now you are more and more being absorbed - not obsessed, but absorbed in the things of the Lord; you have not time for other things.

Even your work - well, you go to work, you do your work, you give yourself to your work, you do it honestly... but - but -the thing that has got a grip of you inside, is the Lord's interests - the Lord's interests! 'Being let go', you go to your own people! (Acts 4:23); and they are the Lord's people. Is that not true? If you are going on with the Lord, oh, what you want is more and more of that which belongs to your own constitution, the heavenly order of things. That is what it means to be "led by

the Spirit of God". Whatever 'guidance by the Spirit' means in things, in details, this is what it means here in this great context: it means that the Spirit is leading us on nearer and nearer to the fulness of Christ. We can, of course, test our lives by that.

### **Spiritual Qualification**

The next thing, in the life of the Spirit, is that the Holy Spirit gifts us, and qualifies us for a place, a part, in this great purpose of God. This again is something that I want you to take to heart, because it means so much. In this realm, the matter of natural qualifications is not the argument at all. I remember - and you must forgive if I put in a word of testimony, because I want to keep this near to life, because it is real - I remember how, early in my Christian life, I was very conscious of many lacks and deficiencies and defectivenesses, and things that I wished I had had. There were ambitions that I was never able to realise; desires that I had in this life for learning, for becoming qualified in this or in that, and so on: many doors were closed to me when I came to the Lord, and so I had to face life pretty much without this background that I wanted.

And then I came early to see that this matter of natural qualifications is not the argument with the Lord at all. I saw this from both sides. On the one side, there are many who have very great natural qualifications, or qualifications acquired through study, or through all manner of advantages, but they are not necessarily spiritual people. And it never does mean - and you can prove this - that, because you have got a tremendous background of scholarship, education, or qualification of that kind, you have a special aptitude for grasping spiritual things. I have been amazed, again and again, when meeting some quite 'highbrow' people - Christians - who have had all the advantages of academic training, to find that, when I have talked to them about the Lord, they just have not known what I was talking about. They can't grasp it at all! And then I have met others, who have none of those qualifications and advantages, and you can go with them on spiritual things as far as you like, and they have got it - they see.

That is a great thing to learn early in the Christian life: it is not what I have, or what I have not got, naturally - the Holy Spirit is qualification for what God wants! The New Testament speaks of 'gifts of the Spirit' - and, while we have some catalogues of those gifts, I am quite certain we have not got a full list of the 'gifts of the Holy Spirit'; not all the gifts that the Holy Spirit will give are mentioned - qualifications, equipments, for a place in the whole range of Divine interests and values. Do take that to your heart. It may be that you are one of the least, and that you feel there is not much hope for you; but, if you have got the Holy Spirit, He can and will qualify you for something that is your particular part in the whole. And people can say: 'You know, he, or she, - not very much naturally, perhaps; you would not think very much of them if you looked at them; but, but... he counts; she counts, you know; and this is the way in which they count.' It is like that; the Holy Spirit has come to give us something we have not got naturally, and we cannot get naturally - it is the particular equipment of the Holy Spirit.

Now, don't think in terms of wonderful, public gifts; it may never be that. In some simple, quiet way, you may be an effective faculty in the whole body corporate. That is what this means, to have the Holy Spirit: that we are something more in accountability than we are or could be naturally, even at our best. It is something different. The Lord will not always tell you what your gift is, but other people will know - that is just where you count for the Lord; just how you, particularly, mean something for the Lord.

## Corporate Vocation

I want to come to one more very important aspect of this whole matter of the Spirit. Supposing we take an illustration; perhaps we can get at it best that way. Let us go back to the Old Testament, to the last section of the book of Exodus, which, as you know, contains the whole account of the making of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness. And you will know that it was through the Holy Spirit that the whole thing was made, constructed; that the Spirit came upon certain men for that work, and then, under those Spirit-governed men, gathered all the people together. *All* the people came into action.

While it does not definitely say so, it as good as says that the whole nation was in this business. They were all doing something about it; they all had something to give. Some had linen to give; some had other materials to give; but they all had something. I suppose you could see 'sewing parties' all over the camp, and men at work busy at this thing and that - some on wood, some on gold, some on silver, some on brass - all the different materials; everywhere they were occupied with the work, and it was all under the direction and instruction and counsel of Spirit-filled men. That is to say, they were all under the government of the Spirit. The Anointing, so to speak, spread itself all over the whole mighty host for work.

Now my point is this: the Holy Spirit creates corporate vocation. (Is that too difficult in language?) Just think: here are some women making a curtain for the Tabernacle. Well, are they going to have their own little 'tabernacle' made of their one little curtain, all to themselves? Here are some men making a part - just a part - of wood, perhaps to be overlaid with gold: is that the Tabernacle? Are they going to have a special little tabernacle of that thing that they are making - a little church of their own? It is nonsense, you see. Now you see what I am getting at. All this, by the Spirit, is one thing - it is a corporate vocation: that is, they are not each living and working for their own little bit, they are living and working for the whole. They have got the vision of the whole, and their whole life is taken up with the whole - not with just their little bit as an end in itself. They are living and working for the Tabernacle in completeness. The Holy Spirit has brought them together, and bound them into a one-ness in corporate vocation. All the vocation is one, because they are under one Spirit.

Well, that is an Old Testament illustration; but in the New Testament, what does that mean? What does that mean now? If you and I are really under the government of the Holy Spirit, under the anointing of the Spirit, as we should be, we shall not have any little private things of our own, any little 'hole in a corner' business of ours, any detached and unrelated thing to which we are giving ourselves. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, and of unity in vocation. What it will amount to, dear friends, is this: we shall live for the whole. And if it is a matter of our local relationships - such as here - none of us is to be living other than for the whole: we ought to be living for the complete thing; the corporate vocation ought to have got a grip of us. Our position must be: 'I am not living and working as an individual: I am living and working as a part of a whole. And, in the appointment of God, for the time being, my local 'whole' is here, and I am living for that; I work for that; that is my vocation.'

Now, there is a tremendous amount bound up with that, if you realise it; and it is all in the Word of God. I am giving you in a few words the sum of so much. So many people are wondering about their service: wanting to be in the Lord's work, or to do something for the Lord - some sort of ministry, some sort of work - and to know what their work is; and they are asking: What is my work? What is my ministry? What is my job? It is always 'my', 'my', 'my'... The answer is: Your job is 'they', is 'them'.



Your vocation is a related thing. You will find the Holy Spirit coming in and using you when you link yourself on with all the rest, and become part of the whole. If you keep yourself in any detachment, He may not do anything at all with you; He will just leave you; you will be doing nothing, and be counting for nothing. We have to recognise this great law of Divine revelation, that the Spirit makes us one in a great vocation. The vocation is not our personal vocation at all; it is the vocation of the whole; it is the vocation of the Church.

You see, we are really in "Ephesians". "Walk worthily of the calling" (or 'vocation') "wherewith ye were called" (4:1); and the context all concerns the *relatedness* - our relationship one to another in vocation. This is not my vocation; this is not *your* vocation, as something personal, as something detached. It is the *Church's* vocation; it is not yours: it is not mine. Whenever people go off on a personal, unrelated, line (and I am speaking after fifty years' experience), they become an end in themselves; and when they go, that is the end. The thing started with them, and it finished with them; and now you have got to start all over again. I have seen this sort of thing happen again and again - people who were unrelated in their work, and when they went, that was the end of the work.

But that is not God's idea, and you will agree with me that we don't want it to be like that. We are not living unto ourselves, and dying unto ourselves - not by any means. If we are going right on, and the Lord's work is going on and on, we must recognise that the vocation is a corporate vocation; it is the vocation of the Church, and only of individuals as in a related way. This is a very important thing to recognise. And you come into blessing that way; you come right in - no detachment, no unrelatedness: the Lord can in some way let you contribute to the whole, and there is a real blessedness about it. Whereas, in a personal way, you make no contribution at all; in an unrelated way you would not mean anything - at any rate, the Lord is not putting His seal upon that - He will, if you come right into oneness with all the rest.

And so we go back to our illustration from the Old Testament. The people found their inspiration, and the Lord's blessing upon them, as they saw all the time the whole, lived for the whole, and regarded everything, every detail, as a part of the whole. And *you* live for the whole! If the local company is where the Lord has put you, live for it, work for it; not for yourself, but for it. But even so, as a local company, don't just work for your own ends. Have the whole view of God's Church, and you will find that the Lord's blessing is there. There may be difficulties, but the Lord will stand by you; and there will be something that would not be there if you just became a little company by yourselves, in a corner, living for yourselves, turned in on yourselves. No! have this great vision of God's purpose.

Well, now, these are a few things about the Life of the Spirit - this Divine character of things in this dispensation. We started from within - the Spirit doing His work within, working out in relation to others; then the Spirit of unity, the Spirit of purpose, the Spirit of vocation, embracing the whole Church of God, the whole instrument of His eternal purpose.

Now I suggest you go back to Romans 8, and read it once more, very carefully, fragment by fragment, and, as you ought to do in all your Bible reading, ask yourself: What has that said? What is it that that says? And what does that say to me? Not just, What does it say in the Bible? but, What does that say to *me*? How do *I* get involved in that? I think, if you will just read it again, you will find that that chapter will take on new meaning, new light, and new values: because, as I have said, it is the link - *the* link. You have come in now; you were out, but you have come in. Where are you going?

Well, the end of that chapter is: conformity to the image of His Son. That is where you are going. How? By the Spirit within, and living in the Spirit.