

No Condemnation

Romans 8:1-11

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We live in a world today where people don't really like things that are black and white. More and more, there seems to be a movement toward shades of gray. While that's not always a bad thing (as many things are nuanced, and oversimplification causes problems), there are many areas where our society has gone off the rails. One glaring example right now is the idea that gender is a spectrum, rather than a biological reality. We're seeing how difficult it is to navigate life when we can't even agree on what makes someone a man or a woman. We have even seen this trend in the church, with the idea that what makes someone a Christian is nuanced and open to interpretation. Some today would claim that a Christian is anyone who claims that title for themselves. As such, we have people who call themselves Christians who don't even believe in Christ!

This is even a problem in pulpits around the country. Several years ago, a local church contacted Dad and told him they were beginning to search for a pastor. When they asked him what they should be looking for, he suggested they might want to look for a pastor who was an actual believer, because he was pretty sure their previous two were not. Even in this church, the last time they searched for a pastor (nearly 43 years ago), they spent 2 years trying to find candidates who affirmed even the most basic essentials of Christian doctrine. Understanding what makes someone a Christian is essential, and it is important to have this right in our minds.

The Apostle Paul speaks clearly to this issue in our passage this morning. Paul does not identify Christians in shades of gray, but speaks quite clearly, showing us that there is a black and white distinction of what makes someone a genuine follower of Christ, and what shows that someone is merely paying lip-service to Him. This passage contains some truly wonderful promises, but it is important to remember that as wonderful as these promises are, they apply only to those who are genuine followers of Christ. We're going to look at what Paul says about this today, and my hope is that if you are a genuine follower of Christ, you will find great comfort in these verses. And if you're not yet, my hope is that you'll be driven to seek Him so that you too may enjoy the blessings He alone can give.

No Condemnation

Paul begins with one of the great declarations in all of scripture—one that I frequently recite when I feel Satan trying to attack me and convince me that God has surely turned His back on me. Listen to what Paul says in vv. 1-4.

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. ² And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. ³ The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice

for our sins. ⁴ He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4, NLT)

Paul begins by saying that there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. As I said, this is a wonderful promise, but notice the important qualifier—for those who belong to Christ Jesus. This is a promise that only applies to followers of Christ. And as we'll see in the succeeding verses, Paul is quite clear on what makes someone a follower of Christ.

So what does it mean practically that there is no condemnation for Christians? It means we do not need to fear that God will turn His back on us, or that we can mess up so badly that God will rescind our forgiveness. It means the penalty of our sin has been paid once and for all, so we no longer need to fear that we may have to bear it.

Paul explains how this happened. It happened because God sent Jesus into the world in a body like we sinners have. Note Paul's careful language here. Jesus the same limitations and weaknesses that we do. He did not exercise His powers as God but bound Himself to a human body. His experience was just like ours with one notable exception. He did not have a sinful nature like we have. Jesus came into the world sinless. In all other respects, however, Jesus faced the same trials and temptations that we do but was without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

This meant Jesus was able to fulfill the requirements of the law—requirements we could never measure up to. Jesus supplied everything God requires of us. He made it so we are not only spared the penalty of our sin, but we can enjoy a restored and proper standing before God the Father. He has set everything right once more.

Jesus' sacrifice paid for *all* our sins. At the cross, He said, "It is finished!" This means that for those who are recipients of this gift, they cannot mess it up. If Jesus has paid the penalty for all my sins, then it means that no matter how badly I fall, Jesus has already covered me. I have confident assurance of my future—not because of what I have done, but because of what Jesus has done on my behalf. This is a wonderful promise, but it is important that we understand who the recipients of this promise are. And that's what Paul addresses in the next few verses.

Mind Control

In verses 5-8, Paul contrasts a person controlled by the Spirit with one still controlled by their sinful nature.

⁵ Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. ⁶ So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. ⁷ For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. ⁸ That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God. (Romans 8:5-8, NLT)

We talked last week about the fact that human beings have both a spiritual and a physical nature. Those who have been forgiven through Christ have their spiritual natures set free from the curse of sin. We are made new and have a newfound freedom to live in a way that honors the Lord. But we still also have a physical nature that is tainted by sin. This is the reason Christians continue to struggle and will do so for the remainder of our lives on this earth—until we are delivered from these “bodies of sin” either by death or by Christ’s return.

Now, in chapter 8, Paul digs into this concept a little bit deeper. He tells us that those who are controlled by the sinful nature continue to think about sinful things. This makes perfect sense. Conversely, he says that those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit.

So, Paul points to an important distinction between genuine followers of Christ and everyone else. Those who are followers of Jesus have the Holy Spirit living inside them, and He enables us to live in a different way. He gives us the power to overcome the sinful desires we still have in our physical nature. But Paul takes this a step further. He says that those who are genuine followers of Christ have a completely different mindset. Christ-followers are focused on trying to live in a way that pleases the Spirit of God, not on trying to live in ways that gratify their sinful nature.

This is quite possibly the most distinct difference we can see between someone who is a follower of Jesus and one who is not. Let me state it quite simply—a follower of Jesus is someone who is actually trying to follow Jesus! The person who comes to church, knows all the hymns, and maybe can even recite scripture, but doesn’t think about Christ throughout the week isn’t a true Christian—they have simply learned the lingo and are playing a role. A genuine believer is concerned each and every day with the way they are living. Their decision-making matrix begins with, “What does God say about this?” This is not to say that Christians do this perfectly. We saw last week that that is not the case. We will frequently fail. But Paul points to a drastically different mindset for Christians. Their concern is whether what they are doing honors the Lord.

This is different from the world. The world’s mindset starts with self. What do I want? What can I get for myself? It does not concern itself with what God desires. Or if it does, even those desires are somehow corrupted by the desire to get what we want for ourselves.

This is why Paul says that those under the control of the sinful nature can never please God. Paul understood this better than most. He lived as a Pharisee prior to becoming a follower of Jesus. He had been diligent in keeping every little aspect of the law. He viewed himself as being faultless. But that was the problem. Rather than really being concerned with what the Lord desired from him, Paul was primarily concerned with doing the things that would keep him in a position of power and authority. He had become self-righteous and hard-hearted, as opposed to soft and moldable in the hands of the Lord. This is one of the key differences between a follower and a pretender.

Those seeking to live by the Spirit have a different attitude and mindset than the world around them because they will constantly be asking the Lord to show them who they should be. That attitude is what makes someone a genuine follower. And Paul says those who live in step with the Spirit will find both life and peace. This explains a lot about why our culture is constantly churning. Peace is found only in following Christ.

Controlled by the Spirit

In the concluding verses of this passage, Paul speaks more directly about what it means to be controlled by the Spirit.

⁹ But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) ¹⁰ And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. ¹¹ The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you. (Romans 8:9-11, NLT)

Here, Paul clearly delineates the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. The difference is whether or not the Spirit is living inside of us. So how do we know whether that is the case? Paul says the answer is actually not that complicated. If the Spirit is living inside of you, then you will see a difference in the way you live. You will live a life that is controlled by the Spirit, rather than being controlled by the sinful nature.

There is sometimes confusion among church people about how a person gets the Holy Spirit to live inside of them. Some say this happens when we are baptized, others seem to think that it cannot happen until we have achieved a certain level of maturity or ability in the Christian life. But understand what Paul is saying—only those who have the Spirit belong to Christ. While I don't want to belabor this point, I think it is important to make very clear that every person who submits their life to Christ is changed because the Spirit of God comes to live in them at that point. I believe He is who drives us to desire to be obedient to the Lord in baptism, and He enables us to serve the Lord in new and unique ways. He empowers us to live differently. We need to understand that the Holy Spirit living in us is what brings about change. It isn't that we must change or achieve a certain level of commitment so we can receive Him. If you have truly submitted to Christ, the Spirit lives in you.

In the book of Galatians, Paul speaks about how we can tell whether we are being controlled by the Spirit or by the sinful nature. The answer is by looking at our lives.

¹⁹ When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (Galatians 5:19-23, NLT)

Paul says that for the person who is living their life controlled by the Spirit of God, we will begin to see less and less of the first list in our lives, and more and more of the second list. That is a clear indication of who is in control.

These changes don't happen overnight. We saw last week that Christians will continue to battle against the tendency to go back to the old ways of doing things. But I think that's the key—for Christians there is actually a battle! We aren't content to stay the way we are (because the Holy Spirit won't let us stay that way). We don't make excuses for our poor behavior or attitudes, but rather we recognize that through the Spirit of God, we can begin to make real changes to not just our actions, but our thoughts and attitudes as well.

This is one of the tensions we must hold as we understand the gospel message. We are not saved by being good enough. We cannot possibly be good enough to merit salvation, because we have all sinned and messed up more badly than we even realize. We are saved from our sin, not because of what we have done, but simply by trusting in what Christ has done. And then we have the assurance that our inheritance is guaranteed because the Holy Spirit begins working in us and will ensure that we remain in Him until the end.

But the flip side is that the Christian life is not a box to be checked, but a journey to be undertaken. When you become a Christian, you do not go back to life the way it was before. A Christian is a follower of Jesus. This means that we begin working to make changes in our lives that enable us to live in accordance with what Christ tells us to do. We concern ourselves less with what we want, or what our world tells us is most important, and more with what the Lord desires from us and what would honor Him. This will be a lifelong battle as we continue to make efforts to live more and more in line with the Spirit of God and less in line with our sinful natures.

We must understand both sides of this, because this is the fullness of the gospel message. People are not saved because they do the things God requires. But a person who is saved is changed in such a way that they begin doing the things God requires. To borrow Paul's analogy, our lives will begin to bear different fruit because God has made us into a different kind of tree altogether.

We've talked about the blessing of having no condemnation, but Paul points to one other blessing that belongs to those who are living in the Spirit. We know that since the Spirit who lives in us is the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead, we too can be assured of resurrection when we die as well! We can face death with confidence, knowing that the end of our lives is not the end of the story. There is life that continues after this one ends. The proof of this is Jesus. And Paul reminds us that the same Spirit that was in Christ also lives in us. What a wonderful promise!

Conclusion

As we conclude today, I want to draw some lessons from what we've seen in these verses.

First, since there is no condemnation for believers, maybe we should be less condemning with one another. Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant about a man who had been forgiven a great debt but was unwilling to forgive a far smaller debt owed to him. Often, we are quick to judge those around us and slow to forgive them because we fail to see how much we have been forgiven. When we realize how great our sin is, and that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, it should profoundly affect the way we interact with others. A person who understands this gift will not be hard-hearted, but gracious and forgiving, just as Christ has been to us.

Second, a person who is not becoming more like Christ should question the truthfulness of their faith. Paul makes it very clear that we are not saved because we live up to God's law. We cannot be good enough. But he also makes it clear that a person who is in Christ actually follows Him! The Holy Spirit brings a change in our mindset so that we now are focused on living for Christ, instead of living only for ourselves. If there is no change, if you do not see the fruit of the Spirit growing in your life, you ought to question why that is—remember these promises are wonderful, but they are only for those who truly trust Christ.

Third, if you are frustrated in your walk with the Lord, it could be that you're neglecting the power of the Spirit. Remember, God does not expect us to walk the Christian life on our own. He has given us the Spirit to lead, guide, and empower us. So, spend time each day asking God to help you see the areas where you need to change. Ask Him for help in changing your attitudes, your actions, the way you view and relate to others. Ask Him to help you with an area that you know isn't the way it should be. God doesn't expect you to do things in your own strength, so seek His help!

Finally, in those times of doubt and uncertainty, remember that our hope is anchored to Christ's performance, not ours. Jesus has assured us forgiveness, no condemnation, help in this life, and life beyond the grave. If we trust in Him, nothing can take these blessings from us, because He has paid for our sin once and for all. It is finished! The outcome is assured! In the times that Satan tries to rob you of this assurance, remind him (and yourself) that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

Paul wants us to have hope. He wants us to see the wonderful blessings that come from being in Christ. But he also wants us to be sure of where we stand. There are no shades of gray when it comes to the Lord. Either we are with Him or we are not. My hope is that today you see yourself described in Paul's words—that you know you are a follower of Jesus and you rejoice in these blessings. But if you hear these words today and find yourself unsure, then make sure! Turn to Him today and follow Him. As Paul rightly declares, it is the only way to experience life and peace.

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