

**Sermon for Sunday, March 21, 2010**  
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**NO CONDEMNATION**  
**Romans 8:1-9**

We are often our own stiffest critics. Suppose you prepare a meal for family or friends from soup to pie. Everyone agrees it's a wonderful meal. But how many cooks will respond, "Oh, but the beans were so soggy?" Well, come to think of it, the beans were a touch overcooked, but the meal had seven elements. Why trouble yourself over that? So it goes with so many of us. Whatever we do, whatever we make, we see the flaw and condemn ourselves for it.

Romans 8 isn't talking about our small mistakes as we teach classes or make sales presentations or design a system, but it gets our attention when Paul says, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

**1. There is struggle but no condemnation**

What a blessed word: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). "Therefore" suggests that Paul is drawing a conclusion and that is true. Paul described the godlessness and wickedness of mankind in Romans 1-3. Because we sin against our fellow man socially and because we also offend God by making idols, Paul says no human flesh will be justified by works of the law (3:20). The good news, he then says, is that we can be justified by faith as a gift from God so we have peace with God and freedom from sin (3:21-25, 5:1, 6:2-10). This is the message of Romans 3-6.

Romans 7 says, in essence, "Not so fast; let's not get overconfident." Every Christian, even the most genuine disciple, struggles against sin. Indeed, we face a lifelong battle with sin. Genuine Christians truly called by God to Christ continue to sin all their lives. We get irritable and selfish; we indulge fears and desires, and as much as we hate it, we never completely stop.

Further, it seems that most of us, maybe all of us, have some chronic problem that we never fully control. One sulks, another gets angry. One criticizes herself, another judges and condemns others. One is envious, another proud. One is gripped by physical appetites, another by grandiose dreams. Everyone has something.

Paul knows how often we condemn ourselves. We think, "I'm the only one who struggles. I'm the only one who is defeated by sin." Not so. The Lord wants all of us to aim for perfect obedience, but he knows no one will succeed. James said, "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man" but "no man can tame the tongue."

Church tradition long called James "righteous James." But even righteous James said, "We all stumble." As a result we feel defeated. But it's one thing to feel defeated one particular day, another to be defeated and condemned.

Even the great apostle Paul struggled and battle against sin. When he was in his sixties he confessed, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15).

Paul cited the races and the combat of the Greek games to illustrate his point: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

We hear Paul's strong goal and confidence – he aims to win the prize. But we also hear the toil and struggle. When Paul says, "I beat my body" he banishes lazy optimism. Formulas for victory will not suffice. Christian formulas say, "Let go and let God" or "Put Christ on the throne of your life." There is some truth in these formulas, but real life is never that easy!

Romans recommends a posture of realistic optimism. Not wild optimism, not pessimism and despair, but realistic optimism. That is, in the battle with sin, we will achieve some victories, but never total victory. Spiritual realism dictates that we must expect daily spiritual warfare, a warfare that is not easy since the enemy lies within, in our flesh. Realism calls for "rigorous preparation, constant alertness, dogged [determination], and moment by moment trust in Christ, who can give us victory." <sup>1</sup>

We should never think: If I apply enough energy and skill, if I follow the right plan, I can solve my problems. That may be true of some technical problems, but it's not true of human problems.

Remember how sheer resolve worked for the apostle Peter. During the Last Supper, Jesus blessed his disciples because they stood by him in his trials (Luke 22:28). Nonetheless, the most severe trial was about to break upon them and he tells them it will be too much. They will falter; they will run.

Jesus told Simon Peter in particular, "I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." That is, Peter will succumb for a while, as will the others, but he will return and when he does, he must help restore his brothers (Luke 22:32).

Peter refused to believe it. He said, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). "Even if everyone else falls away", Peter said, "I will never fall away" (Matthew 26:33). "It's a nice thought", Jesus replies, "but it's wrong.": "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:34). And that is what happened.

So the battle with sin never ends. We never outgrow our need for Christ, his gospel and grace. We never outgrow the means of grace. When we do achieve a victory, it will have two sources: the strength of the Spirit, and the means God has granted: prayer, the Bible, Christian community, service, the sacraments. Indeed, the Bible warns us: Don't be surprised by trials and temptation:

- 1 Peter 4:12 - Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.
- 1 John 3:13 - Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.
- Luke 12:15 - So watch out. Be on your guard against temptation.

The last line of Romans 7 sums the situation: "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin" (7:25).

J. I. Packer comments, "The man in Christ serves the law of God with his mind, in that he wants and wills to keep it perfectly, but with the flesh, he serves the law of sin." Thus "He never is able to keep the law as perfectly and consistently as he wishes..."

It seems strange, but as dedicated as Paul is, as much as he desires to keep God's law and do good, he finds that he is constantly tempted to break the law. That is our condition until the body is redeemed. We are never as strong or free as we wish. Final deliverance from this mortal body comes when Christ returns, not before. For this we wait, often with groans (8:23).

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<sup>1</sup> Boice 767, Packer, *Keep in Step with Spirit*, pages 258-61

### **Therefore we are free from the demands of justice (8:1)**

In this setting, Paul declares, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". And in this setting it's a surprise. We might expect Paul to say God sympathizes or understands. But no condemnation at all? And why does he say, "therefore" - Because we can never stop, therefore there is no condemnation. Here is how it works.

Paul has stated the problem of ongoing sin as sharply as possible. Now, as a counterpoint, he states the prevailing power of the gospel just as sharply. We never stop sinning, never stop striving and losing. Nonetheless, God's mercy remains. We may condemn ourselves, but He will not, for the basis of His judgment is not our performance, but the work of Christ, which is complete and irreversible. The key is to be "in Christ" – united with him by faith.

It's time for March Madness, the annual college basketball extravaganza, but last year's champion, North Carolina, is missing. Last year's stars became pros and this year's team suffered seventeen losses, so the defending champions weren't invited to play in the tournament. Yet no matter how poor this year was, no one can undo last year's championship. The same holds for politicians. No matter how unpopular a governor or congressman may be, he or she was elected and does hold the office. It rests on a past performance that can't be annulled or reversed.

So it is spiritually: Our current performance cannot negate Christ's past achievement. Our status with God today has no impact on past events that established that status, for it rests on things Jesus did 2,000 years ago. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are "in Christ Jesus" – that is, united to him by faith.

However much we sin, however slender our progress, we bear no guilt and suffer no condemnation or punishment. This holds for all sins - sins committed before repentance and faith and sins committed after we came to faith. The sins that make us cry with Paul, "Wretched man that I am" and the sins we barely see.

### **Further - we are free from the chains of sin**

Paul continues his thought: "Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (8:2-3)

Paul has not forgotten our ongoing problems with sin, yet he insists that our slavery to sin is past. We are free from the law or governing principle of sin. However we struggle with sin, it will never dominate as it once did. In the past, the combination of our sinful nature and the law doomed us to failure. For good as the law is, our rebellious nature led us to sin.

### **2. God did what the law could not (8.3-4)**

Look at Romans 8:3 again, in a different translation: "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin [as a sin offering], he condemned sin in the flesh." The point: The law in itself is good, but it can't do much because the flesh is such a poor partner.

To follow Paul we have to define "the flesh." It's almost a technical term not meaning the body, because the Bible says the body is good in itself. For Paul flesh is the sinful nature, the opposite of the Spirit. So, when Paul lists the "sins of the flesh" some are physical - adultery, gluttony and so on. But

most are mental or spiritual – "idolatry, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness" (Galatians 5:19-20). And the flesh weakens the law.

Think in terms of team sports. A number of sports feature two man teams – tennis, beach volleyball, badminton. Suppose one player on the team is good, but not great. If the second member of the team is weak, the team will lose. And if the other player is strong, they will ordinarily win.

So it is spiritually: the law is good, but it's always playing team sports. When its partner is weak - sinful flesh - the result is loss or sin. But when God grants a superior partner, the result is victory or righteousness. In this analogy, God has granted his followers an excellent partner, the Holy Spirit. Since you and I are still on the team, we will lose at times, but overall, we usually win.

In this way, by giving us a strong ally, the Holy Spirit, God did what the law could not do – it could not make us righteous or obedient. So 8:4 says we no longer live according to the sinful nature or flesh "but according to the Spirit."

Yet that is not all God did. He also sent "his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man" (8:3).

Jesus came "in the likeness of sinful flesh." That is, he took a body like ours, except that his flesh was not and never became sinful by succumbing to the temptations that he faced. Hebrews says, "He was tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). And this was necessary to fulfill God's plan: "He had to be made like his brothers in every way... that he might make atonement for sins" (Hebrews 2:14, 17).

**In this way he fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law – judicially.** Judicially, Jesus fulfilled the law and imputed his work to us. He resisted Satan's every temptation. He is the faithful man who won every battle in the struggle against sin. Remember: Satan tempted Jesus just before his ministry began and at the end of his ministry in Gethsemane, and Luke says, at any opportune time (Luke 4:13). Yet Jesus never succumbed to a sin of the body or the mind.

His righteousness was then attributed or ascribed to us. Studies show that an Ivy League education doesn't add much to a gifted, hard-working student. A strong state school is just as beneficial – unless that person isn't really talented. Then people seem to think, "I must be missing something; this fellow went to Princeton, after all." So the excellence of the school is ascribed or imputed to the unworthy student. So with us: the excellence of Christ is imputed to us, to cover our sin.

But there's more: Jesus also offered himself "for sin" or "as a sin offering". In this Easter season, we celebrate this offering that Jesus bore in his body, on the cross, the penalty due for our sin.

But there is more. God sent his Son "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us" (8:4) That is, God empowers us that we might fulfill the righteous requirement of the law – morally. While Christ fulfilled the law for us so that God would declare us righteous, the Lord also intends that we fulfill the righteous requirement of the law – morally and personally.

Please note that "righteous requirement" is singular in Greek. God's requirement is unified, not many confusing and conflicting demands, not a random list of rules that we must track. The law is "a recognizable and intelligible whole, God's fatherly will." It's the law of love for God and neighbor:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... and 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37, 39).

We fulfill this requirement of the law because we walk according to the Spirit, not the flesh (Romans 8:4b). When Paul says we walk this way, he means it's our lifestyle, our habit. And our habits follow our mind.

### 3. He inaugurated life in the Spirit, marked by desire to please and know God

Some have no interest in spiritual things. Others have a mind for the things of God: "Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on the things of the flesh; but those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on the things of the Spirit". The teaching of Romans 8:5-9 is direct: There are two categories of people.

- They live according to the flesh or the Spirit.
- They are alive to the things of God, or they are disinterested – or superficially interested.
- Their minds are set on what the flesh desires or what the Spirit desires.
- They take one of two directions. Either they are hostile to God and controlled by the flesh, or submitting to God, pleasing Him to gain life and peace.

When his adversaries accused Jesus and planned to kill him, he said: "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word" (John 8:43). On the other hand, Paul says the spiritual man or woman understands God's truth. He or she has both the desire and the capacity to please God.

Let me ask you to examine yourself: Do you set your mind on spiritual things? Is God's truth a passing interest or an abiding concern so that you give your mental energy to his truth? Do you seek what the Spirit desires? Do you aim to please God more and more? Or do you waste energy on many lesser things?

An example: One day a woman found herself attracted to a man who sat in front of her at church. They had never met, but he was the kind of man women notice. The very sight of him stirred her romantic imagination. She had two choices. She could move up a couple of rows, so she would be sure to meet him. But she wanted to focus on worship and be true to her husband so she decided to change where they sat in church so he wasn't in her line of vision. Eventually he moved away and she was thankful she never had a conversation with that alluring and handsome gentleman.

Do you like this story? Do you have stories like it? We live in difficult times, times full of skepticism. Read the polls. The trust people have in banks, in big business, in newspapers, public school, congress, even baseball is declining fast. The "trust numbers" are low – 32% for one, 12% for another. We think everyone is in it for themselves.

It's no surprise that someone recently asked me: Is true altruism possible? Can anyone do anything that truly seeks the good of others, and not the good of self? He was leaning toward some form of utilitarianism – everything we do, even the most apparently selfless act, is governed by some form of self-interest:

We serve the customer strictly to keep the customer. We love our family and friends because it makes us happier. It's a tempting thought. I'll even admit that almost everything we do is tainted – if not by self-interest, then at least by a desire to be noticed, to get credit for our sacrifice. (Or systems theory – we fill roles pressed on us; it's where we fit.)

But is everything we do selfish? No. First, we look to the work of God himself. The triune. The Father sent the Son. The Son gave himself as a sin offering. The Spirit lives within us. The Lord didn't need to do any of these things for us. They are acts of love.

We are drawn to this. Of course we don't always love our neighbors or strive to please God. There is a war going on inside us – but that's good because the gospel is combating my sinful nature. And the outcome is certain – the gospel will prevail. Jesus already won this war during this season 2,000 years ago. The enemy still fights and wins some skirmishes.

But there is no condemnation when we fail. The Spirit does set us free.

We can set our minds on the things of God and fulfill the righteous requirement of the law. Never perfectly, always forgiving, looking to the day...