

No Condemnation

Sunday 12th July 2020

Readings: Psalm 119: 105-112, Genesis 25: 19-34, Romans 8: 1-11, Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

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Over the next few Sundays we are going to focus, in particular, on our readings from Romans. In these chapters of Romans the apostle Paul lays out what some have considered the pinnacle of theological thinking in the New Testament.

The opening words in the first two verses of Chapter Eight are ones of great encouragement. Paul states, **“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.”** Now that's not only quite a mouthful but it says some critically important things.

In the previous chapter Paul reflected on the frustrations of life whereby the things he wanted to be doing and saying were the exact opposite of what he wanted to do and say. I guess we can all relate to that at times. How much worse a situation this is when such things have become addictions in our lives and have taken over. In our current world's situation, the temptation of the recourse to distractions and ways to avoid life and its challenges have never been more tempting for some people – alcohol, pornography, gossip, gambling, even violence, the list is endless. Attitudes and temperament are hardening and become more volatile. We're seeing this across the world. Then there is the guilt and frustration that go with them. As Paul so plaintively cries in Romans 7:24, **“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”** Should it be any different for Christians? The answer is “Yes. Massively different.” In times of chaos and disorder Christians should stand out. What Paul has been talking about is the unredeemed state, the unsaved man or woman, the condition of those who do not walk with Jesus. When he moves one to what we call chapter eight (of course there are no chapter breaks in Paul's original letter), Paul turns to what it is that Jesus has achieved for us and what it means in a practical sense.

Firstly, Paul affirms that those who have given their lives over to Jesus are no longer in condemnation. In other words, there is great freedom in Christ. What Jesus has done on the Cross, in taking all of the sin in our lives on His shoulders, in our place, truly sets us free.

So what is different for the believer? We sin when we do things that God does not want us doing. We sin when we don't do things that God wants us to be doing. Yes, we can be masters of self-justification, but when we look at ourselves in the mirror of reflection, we cannot run away from ourselves. We feel the guilt, the shame, the way we have let ourselves down, let alone others, even God. The Holy Spirit speaks into every person's life to convict us of our sin and shortcomings. That's why there is a search for God in every culture. We know inherently something is missing when we don't know God. Unless we have seared our consciences by years of self-justification, such that the truth has no place in us, we know this uncomfortable feeling. But, and this is a big BUT. For the Christian the outcome of the Holy Spirit speaking does not bring condemnation or guilt, rather He speaks encouragement to acknowledge the sin, ask and receive forgiveness and then move on positively learning from the experience and doing things right next time. Paul had not only heard the accounts of the disciples experience of Jesus' love and forgiveness, particularly from Peter, but Paul had experienced Jesus' love and forgiveness in his own life. In the race of life, we might

stumble from time to time but as our heart is with the Lord the Spirit helps us so we can keep running strongly. God's heart is for us, it is not to condemn us, but to strengthen us through life experience so that we can be useful workers in His Kingdom. Rather than condemnation, we are encouraged in our walk.

Secondly, Paul asserts that we are able to do what it was impossible to do previously; God's righteousness can be achieved in our own lives. Now we know that Jesus walked a perfect walk, but have you ever considered that you could walk perfectly in all of your life before God? What Paul is saying here is that as the Spirit of God is increasingly alive and active in us, we are not subject to either the Law as understood in the Old Testament, nor laws of man - be they religious or secular, nor any other rule. Instead we are responsive to God's Spirit. Does this mean that chaos and anarchy will reign in a lawless state? No, in this context quite the opposite, the Spirit, if we listen to Him, will guide us into all truth (John 16:13), into right action, proper behaviour, speech, thought, attitude and deed. In doing so, as Jesus did, all the requirements of Law will be fulfilled. Not by effort or by rigid obedience but because it will happen naturally. We will live the law of the Spirit of Life that is found in Christ Jesus.

How might that look in real terms? Let's take a couple of practical examples. The reason that God is so central in how we view Christian marriage is because we know that God loves marriage, loves families, loves faithfulness, loves love. When a couple come together, what they bring into it individually, as individuals, is vitally important. Their person, their character, their life focusses will have a profound influence on their marriage and its success. When individuals are personally responding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit they will know that God wants their marriage to succeed, for both partners to grow, for their love to deepen, that they have to work through challenges, temptations, struggles together as well as wonderful times of intimacy and celebration. When we rely on God and listen to His Spirit then we know what to do, how to act and His standard, not by Law or Scripture but because it is welded into our heart. That's not to say that we ignore the Scripture, in fact the opposite, it is a fall-back security net for us. The Holy Spirit will not direct us in ways contrary to the Scriptures. Therefore, if we are unsure what we are hearing then we have a reference to check it out against. God will never tell a woman to beat her husband or vice versa because that is not His character so the Spirit will never say that. However, He will speak of love, encouragement, forgiveness and steadfastness through challenge and trial. Another example might be that of a business-man or business-woman making decisions in a tough environment. Are people sacrificed for profit? How are staff cared for and supported? Is information handled with integrity? Haven't we seen that politically abused this week. Is there honesty and transparency in transactions? Are all appropriate taxes paid? Is there an aspect of charitable support given to those worse off? The Spirit will open doors and bless the businessperson who acts with integrity and the path of action will be clear. Again, we are not motivated by Law, but because what is right and true will be in the individual's heart because that's where God is, at the centre of their being. This is the Spirit of Life at work in us. With it comes a clear conscience and peace before God.

Paul then explains how this works in God's economy. How can our failings and shortcomings, our sin, not become a stumbling block for us? How is it that the requirements of the Law do not condemn us? Has God changed His standards? Do the Holy requirements for due punishment for sin somehow no longer apply? No. As Jesus pointed out, (Matthew 5:18), **"I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot**

or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” As Paul has already outlined earlier in the epistle to the Romans, the Law shows us what sin is, what God sees as unrighteous. The Law shows us the heart of God for Holiness and Righteousness. Disobedience and rebellion brings on itself the consequences of sin. What Paul identifies is that Jesus, being sinless, took upon Himself the sin of the world and has paid the price for all who identify with Him. Those who don't accept this gift are, it stands to reason, responsible for their own sin and the consequences of it.

For us, who have accepted what Jesus has done for us, walk in the freedom of knowing our penalty has been paid we so are not in fear or concern about the eternal outcome. Rather it is our joy to now increasingly serve God and be about His business. As we respond to the Spirit in our daily lives the Law, as Paul puts it, is realized in us. In contrast Paul points out that one can only serve one master. If we are not serving God and walking by the Spirit then we are serving what he calls *“the flesh”*. This is either our own basic desires or the demands of the evil one who preys on the desires and lusts of the flesh. The consequences are clear then. Paul states that **“to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace”**. The life of flesh cannot please God. But when the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, indwells us we please God and we are active in His work in the world. Our lives will bear increasing fruit, we will use the talents that God has given us and we will encourage others. Best of all: God will be pleased with us and we will have peace in our hearts regardless of the challenges and circumstances because we rely on God and His love for us.

Like Jacob and Esau we have the freedom to choose our path. Like the many different ground types that received the seed we can choose what type of ground we want to be. We can choose the life of the flesh and we see all too often where that leads. Or we can chose to respond to Jesus' invitation and live and walk by the Spirit. When we do this we enter into a new and constantly evolving life and we have the promise of the Spirit indwelling us. The life of the Spirit is a journey, not of condemnation but one of hope and promise, of encouragement and Holy presence through the ups and downs of life. We don't change in a moment but we can be confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. So, choose Jesus, chose life and walk in the freedom of the Spirit that Jesus so freely offers and live!

Amen