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SET FREE

Romans 8:1-4

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Romans Lesson 42

Set Free
Romans 8:1-4

We come to a chapter that has often been called either the greatest or one of the greatest chapters in the Bible (James Boice, *Romans* [Baker], 2:781; Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Romans: The Law: Its Functions and Limits* [Zondervan], p. 258). The Swiss commentator Godet pointed out that it begins with “no condemnation” and ends with “no separation.” Another commentator (C. A. Fox) added that in between there is “no defeat” (cited by Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 299).

Personally, I’ve come to Romans 8 again and again when I’ve been discouraged or depressed. I don’t see how you can read Romans 8 and remain down. If you struggle with guilt, read Romans 8. If you struggle with sin, read Romans 8. If you’re going through trials, read Romans 8. If you don’t know how to pray, read Romans 8. If you’re struggling with assurance of your salvation, read Romans 8. Interestingly, while the flavor of Romans 8 is exhortation, there is not a single command in the chapter. The German Pietist Philipp Spener said that if the Bible were a ring and Romans its precious stone, chapter 8 would be “the sparkling point of the jewel” (F. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 295).

There is a noticeable shift from Romans 7 to Romans 8. In chapter 7, “I” is frequent, the law is prominent, and sin is dominant. In chapter 8, the Holy Spirit is frequent (18x, more than any other NT chapter), God’s grace and persevering love are prominent, and victory over sin is dominant. There are several ways to outline the chapter; here is one:

1. Justification and sanctification: God’s salvation through Christ and His indwelling Spirit give us life to overcome judgment and sin (8:1-13).
2. Adoption: God’s Spirit assures us of our adoption as His children and heirs (8:14-17).
3. Glorification: Although we (and all creation) now suffer, God will bring us to final glory (8:18-30).

- A. Our present sufferings do not compare to our future glory (8:18-25).
 - B. In our weakness, the Spirit intercedes for us (8:26-27).
 - C. God will work all things together for our good, because His sovereign purpose for His elect will bring us to glory (8:28-30).
4. Assurance: No attack or hardship can separate God's elect from His great love (8:31-39).

With that as an overview of the chapter, let's zero in on 8:1-4, where Paul deals with two very practical issues: guilt and sin. As we saw in chapter 7, believers fight an inner war. With the new man in Christ, they joyfully concur with the holy commandments of God's law. But, with the old man (the flesh, or indwelling sin), they are prone to be held captive by the law of sin. As I explained, I understand Romans 7:14-25 to refer primarily to immature believers who have not learned of their new identity in Christ. They do not yet reckon themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. They have not yet learned to rely on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to put to death the deeds of the flesh. They're living like unbelievers. So sin and guilt are a major problem for them.

Even though mature believers experience consistent victory over sin, they still struggle daily against the flesh and occasionally lose the battle. So they must understand how to deal with guilt and how to overcome temptation. When we do sin as Christians, the enemy comes in to stir up doubts about our salvation: "How do you know that your sins are all forgiven? True Christians don't do what you just did! You're hopeless! You might as well admit your hypocrisy in claiming to be a Christian and quit trying to be holy." It is to those practical issues that Paul directs these opening verses:

God has graciously set free from sin's penalty and power all
who are in Christ Jesus.

Although these are wonderful verses, they're not easy to interpret. So godly commentators and pastors disagree over many details in the text. Some see verses 1 & 3 as pertaining to justification, with verses 2 & 4 applying to sanctification. But as I've wrestled with the flow of thought, I think that Paul is dealing with justification through most of this paragraph, but brings in sanctification at the end to answer his critics who accused him of promoting li-

centiousness. Note that verses 2 & 3 both begin with “for.” In verse 2, Paul explains what he said in verse 1, which clearly deals with justification. Thus I understand verse 2 primarily to explain justification. Verse 3 explains further verse 2. The first half of verse 4 gives the result of justification (in 8:1-3). Then the last half of verse 4 describes those who have been justified: They do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Verses 5-11 explain the differences between those in the flesh and those in the Spirit, which is applied to believers in verses 12-13.

1. Justification: God has graciously set free from sin’s penalty all who are in Christ Jesus (8:1-4a).

There are three stages in Paul’s thought:

- A. Those who are in Christ Jesus can be assured that they will not be condemned at the judgment (8:1).

Romans 8:1: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” If you have not memorized that simple verse, do it! You will need it over and over again, every time you sin. By the way, the King James Version wrongly includes the phrase from verse 4, “who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” That rightly belongs at the end of verse 4, but it was probably inserted after verse 1 by a copyist who was worried that the bold statement of verse 1 as it stands would lead readers into licentiousness. But it lacks sufficient manuscript support. Verse 1 ends with the wonderful phrase that Paul uses so often, “in Christ Jesus.”

There are four words or phrases that we must understand to grasp the truth of verse 1: “Therefore”; “no condemnation”; “now”; and, “in Christ Jesus.”

“Therefore”: It is not immediately obvious what Paul refers to with “therefore.” Some think that it refers to his exclamation in 7:25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” But the intervening summary at the end of that verse makes the connection unclear. Probably, Paul is going back to the entire argument of justification by faith that has dominated the letter from 3:21 onward. But there are two more definite connections. The word “condemnation” (in Greek) only occurs elsewhere in the New Testament in Romans 5:16 & 18, where Paul argued that just as condemnation

came to the entire human race through Adam's sin, so God's free gift of justification came to us through Jesus Christ. Just as we were under condemnation in Adam, so now we are in Christ, justified by His grace.

Also, in Romans 7:6, Paul said, "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter." He seems to be picking up that truth and elaborating on it here. So "therefore" goes back to sum up the great truth of the gospel of justification by faith alone through God's grace alone in Christ alone that Paul has laid out earlier in this letter.

"No condemnation": "No" is emphatic and means, "not any," or "not one." "Condemnation" is a legal or forensic term that "includes both the sentence and the execution of the sentence" (Morris, p. 300). In Adam, we all stand before God as guilty and condemned to eternal punishment (5:16, 18). We're on death row, awaiting the execution of the guilty verdict that has been passed. If we died in that condition, we would pass into eternal separation from God, the second death. But since Christ bore the punishment that we deserved, in Him we are set free so that we stand before God justified and acquitted, with all charges dismissed.

This raises the practical question, "As a believer should I feel guilty when I sin?" If there is no condemnation, should we refuse to feel guilty when we disobey God? I would argue that properly understood, believers *should* feel guilty when they sin. The guilt stems from the fact that I have violated God's holy Word. I have disobeyed my loving heavenly Father. Rather than loving my Savior, who went to the cross on my behalf, I have loved the sin that put Him there. Feelings of guilt that lead to genuine sorrow and repentance when I disobey God are appropriate.

On the other hand, I should not feel the guilt of condemnation that stems from the accuser's false charge: "True Christians don't do what you did. You're not even a Christian!" If I mourn over my sin and am repentant before God over it, then I must accept His forgiveness and answer the accuser with the blood of the Lamb and the word of my testimony that I trust in Jesus (Rev. 12:10-11; Zech. 3:1-5). To put it another way, the guilt that I feel

when I sin is relational, as a child to my Father. It is not forensic, as a criminal before the judge.

The third word is "now": This refers to the great change that came about in salvation history when God sent His own Son to bear our sins on the cross. Now that Christ has come, we no longer need to bring the blood of sacrificial animals over and over again to atone for our sins. Once for all, Jesus offered Himself as the perfect and final sacrifice (Heb. 10:1-18). But personally, it also applies to the time since you put your trust in Christ as your sin-bearer. Since He bore the full wrath of God, which you deserved, and your trust is in Him, not in any good works of your own, *now* you stand before God with no condemnation. Even when you sin, you stand before God as His child, not as a guilty criminal. *Now* should bring you great relief every day, especially when you sin.

Finally, this great blessing of no condemnation is not for everyone. Rather, it is for those who are "in Christ Jesus." As we saw (in 5:12-21; 6:1-11), there are only two categories of people: Those who are in Adam; and, those who are in Christ. Those who are in Adam are under God's just condemnation and face His awful wrath for all their sins. Those who are in Christ have been clothed with His righteousness. His death paid the penalty for all of their sins, so that God can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26). So, as one writer put it, "The unbeliever has his judgment day *before* him, but the believer in Christ has his judgment day *behind* him" (Marcus Rainsford, cited by W. H. Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 205).

And so it's no trivial question to ask, "Are *you* in Christ Jesus?" Have you fled to Christ as your only refuge from God's judgment? When God destroyed the world through the flood, the only thing that mattered was, were you on the ark? You may have thought that you were a decent person, but if you weren't on the ark, you perished. You may not have believed that God was going to judge the whole earth, but your not believing it didn't change the fact. God brought that terrible judgment and the only ones who were saved were those who heeded His warning and got on board the ark. Have you "gotten on board" with Jesus Christ? If you're in Him, you're safe from the judgment to come. If you're trusting in your own ability to swim, you're under condemnation!

- B. Liberation from the law of sin and of death comes through the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (8:2).

Romans 8:2: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." "For" explains how it is that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Before Christ, you were under the law of sin and of death. This refers to the strong principle or authority of sin that dominated your life as an unbeliever. Unchecked, that life under sin's domination was leading you toward death. As I explained in the messages on 7:14-25, I believe it also explains the experience of an immature believer, who has not yet learned to live under the new law of the Spirit of life in Christ (7:23, 25). So in that sense, Romans 8:2 has a secondary application to sanctification, or the process of growing in holiness. Believers are now freed from sin's domination by the new principle or power of the Spirit of life.

But I think that verse 2 refers primarily to the new life that the Holy Spirit gives to us in regeneration. Jesus told the religious Nicodemus (John 3:6-7), "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" He also said (John 6:63), "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life."

Religion, no matter how conscientiously we follow it, cannot deliver anyone from the power of sin and death. All the good deeds in the world will not set you free from the law of sin and death. To be set free, you need new life imparted by God's Spirit. Along with this new life comes complete justification from all your sins (8:1). But also, this new life means that you are now dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11). The new law of life in the Spirit frees you from the old law in which sin held you down, just as the law of aerodynamics frees a heavy plane from the law of gravity.

So I understand verse 2 as *primarily* referring to the new life that the Spirit gives in regeneration. That new life comes to us "in Christ Jesus" and frees us from "the law of sin and of death." But of course this new life in the Spirit works after regeneration by giving us the power to overcome sin in daily life. Sin still tries to hold us down, but the life that comes from the indwelling Spirit gives us the power to soar above sin and the resulting death.

- C. God did what the law could not do: through the substitutionary death of His own Son, He paid the penalty that the law demanded (8:3-4a).

Romans 8:3-4a: "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, ..." As Paul has stated, the law brought God's wrath and resulted in increased sin (4:15; 5:20). The problem wasn't with the law, which is holy, righteous, and good (7:12). The problem was with our flesh (7:13, 25). The law did not provide the power to keep it, and so was weak through the flesh. Apart from God's intervention, the law only served to condemn us.

But, thankfully, God intervened! He sent His own Son. Salvation is completely from the Lord. God's sending His Son implies the pre-existence of the Son. Did you notice the Trinity in our text? God the Father sent Jesus Christ His Son to offer Himself for our sins, so that the Holy Spirit could provide us with new life. God is one God who exists eternally in three distinct persons, each of whom is fully God. The word *own* is emphatic and shows us God's great love for us: He sent none other than *His own Son* (5:8).

When Jesus came, He took on "the likeness of sinful flesh." There is a fine balance here. Jesus did *not* come in *sinful flesh*, in that He was without sin. If He had been born in sin, He would have had to die for His own sin. He did *not* come *in the likeness of flesh*, which would mean that He was not truly human. This was the early church heresy known as Docetism. They claimed that Jesus only *appeared* to be a man. But Jesus came *in the likeness of sinful flesh*. His body was a real human body, so that He could die for human sins. But He was also sinless, so that He could be the Lamb without blemish, dying as a substitute for sinners.

Also, He died "as an offering for sin." The literal Greek phrase is, *for sin*, which may mean, "to deal with the sin problem." But it is also a technical phrase in the LXX, where in 44 out of 54 occurrences it refers to a sacrifice for sin (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 480, note 48). The result of Christ's sacrificial death was that "He condemned sin in the flesh." The phrase might better be rendered, "in the flesh, He condemned sin"

(Morris, p. 303). This means that by His sacrificial death, offering His body on the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. His death was substitutionary—in our place. He died the death that we deserve so that we could be set free from the law of sin and death.

But there is debate over what the next phrase means (8:4a): “so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, ...” Many scholars whom I respect (e.g., Thomas Schreiner, F. F. Bruce, John Piper, Martyn Lloyd-Jones) understand this to refer to the obedience of Christians who walk by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables them to obey God’s law. Thus it refers to sanctification.

Others (John Calvin, Charles Hodge, Douglas Moo) point out that even with the Spirit’s power, no believer fulfills the righteous requirement of the law. If you keep the entire law, but stumble in one point, you are guilty of it all (James 2:10). Only Christ completely fulfilled the law by His perfect obedience and sacrificial death. Thus I think that the first part of verse 4 refers to Christ’s perfect righteousness applied to our account through faith. This is the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

But critics have always alleged that that doctrine will lead to licentiousness (Rom. 3:8). If God counts us as totally righteous apart from our good works, then we can sin all we want, so that grace might abound. Paul’s strong response to that charge is (6:1), “May it never be!” Here he counters it by adding the last phrase of verse 4 and then expanding on it in 8:5-13:

2. Sanctification: God has graciously set free from sin’s power all who are in Christ Jesus, who walk in the Spirit (8:4b).

Romans 8:4b: “who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Justification (8:1-4a) is the necessary foundation and motivating cause of sanctification (8:4b). Justification frees us from sin’s penalty; sanctification frees us from sin’s power. Because God has forgiven all our sins through Christ’s death and because He has imparted new life to us through the Holy Spirit, we now do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Walk implies steady, gradual progress along a path toward a goal. In this life, we will never walk in *perfect* obedience. Only Jesus did that and His perfect righteousness is credited to our account so

that we stand before God with no condemnation. But as we learn to walk daily in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we will make progress in obedience to God's Word. We will grow in holiness. Our lives will increasingly be distinguished by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Salvation by grace through faith alone *always* results in a life of walking in good works (Eph. 2:8-10).

Conclusion

I leave you with two questions: (1) Are you in Christ Jesus through faith in His blood, shed for the remission of your sins? If so, you can enjoy the assurance that there is now no condemnation for you, because you are in Christ Jesus.

(2) Are you walking according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh? Each day, do you yield to the Holy Spirit and rely on His power, so that His fruit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-23)—are growing in you? Christ died and the Spirit gave you new life to set you free from the law of sin and of death.

Application Questions

1. Do you agree that believers who sin should feel guilty? If not, why not? If so, explain what you mean.
2. Why is justification the necessary foundation for sanctification? Why is it important to affirm that justification is the *imputation* of Christ's righteousness, *not* the *impartation* of righteousness?
3. Some argue that the requirement of the law being fulfilled in us refers to our sincere obedience in fulfillment of Jer. 31:33. Agree/disagree? Why?
4. What does it mean practically to "walk in the Spirit"? Describe what it looks like in specific terms.

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