

A Vision for Our Lives

Romans 8:1-8

Today in our study of the book of Romans, we finally come to Romans 8. In this chapter Paul makes a series of staggering statements about those who are “in Christ Jesus.” Paul doesn’t give any direct commands. Rather, he simply makes a series of bold statements about what is true of those who put their trust in Jesus. As always, my encouragement is for you to listen for the voice of God as we work our way through this passage. But I realize that this might not be easy for some of us.

If you have been a believer for a long time. . . and your life hasn’t turned out the way you’d hoped. . . or your experience hasn’t matched up with your understanding of Scripture, you might have developed a degree of cynicism in your faith. Instead of hearing and receiving Scriptures eagerly, you might hold a passage like this at arms length. You might be tempted to protect yourself and play it safe and lower your expectations because you don’t want to be disappointed one more time. I’d simply encourage you to “risk” hearing what God is saying about you in Romans 8. This chapter can give you a new vision for your life in Christ.

If you’ve not yet trusted in Christ, Romans 8 might seem too good to be true. I guess I’d simply ask you to be open to the realities that we’ll talk about today. The life that is described in Romans 8 is something that God gives to everybody who wants it. My prayer for you is that you’d want the life that God can give you in Christ.

Wherever you are in your spiritual journey this morning, let’s consider Paul’s vision for the type of life that is available in Christ. As we work our way through Romans 8:1-8 we’ll notice five things that are true of those who are “in Christ Jesus.” You’ll find a list of these five truths at the bottom of the sermon outline in your bulletin. Verse 1 stands as a banner over the entire chapter.

1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Paul’s “therefore” probably indicates that he is drawing a conclusion from everything He has already said in Romans about Jesus. Now (in the age that began with the death and resurrection of Jesus) there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Paul is picking up a concept he developed in chapter 5 (the only other place in the NT where this term “condemnation” is found). In 5:18 Paul wrote that as a result of Adam’s transgression, “there resulted condemnation to all men.” We are all born “in Adam” and therefore sinful and under condemnation. That plight has been reversed in Christ Jesus. Since the condemnation we deserved fell upon Him on the cross, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus through faith.

This means that ***In Christ Jesus we live w/o fear of condemnation in this life or the next.*** As believers we no longer have to live with a sense of dread that, “It’s only a matter of time before I’m ‘found out’ as a fraud and a hypocrite. . .” In other words, in Christ Jesus we really can let go of our shame. It’s not that we’re so amazing and “together” that we have nothing about which to be embarrassed. We all have things in

our lives that need to be different. We discussed this last week when we saw in Romans 7 how Paul agonized because of his internal war with the flesh.

No, it's the case that **now** our identity is in Christ. We have confidence that since Jesus will never be condemned that we will never be condemned. This isn't presumption; this is faith. This perspective doesn't lead to complacency; it leads to a life of gratitude and deep heart-felt devotion to God. As in any healthy relationship, when you know you're fully accepted, there's freedom to be yourself and even freedom to make mistakes. You don't have to walk on pins and needles, afraid that you'll say or do the wrong thing and the other person will explode. No, you don't fear that the other person will heap condemnation upon you. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

In verse 2 Paul explains that the indwelling Holy Spirit allows the believer to experience life instead of condemnation. Paul uses the term "law" in an interesting way. He's probably not referring to the Mosaic Law (the old covenant). He seems to be using the term "law" to refer to a power or authority in a person's life (so Moo, p. 475) - much the way we would refer to the "law of gravity." Gravity is essentially a power that exerts its will on each of us. In contrast to gravity, the Holy Spirit isn't an impersonal force (the Holy Spirit is a person); but in Christ Jesus the Holy Spirit does exert His power and influence in our lives.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

The basic contrast is between the power of the Spirit and power of sin/death. Here Paul writes that the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit trumps that of sin and death. He writes that the law/power of the Spirit brings us life, and He does so in Christ Jesus. The power of the Spirit sets us free from the power of sin and death. In chapter 7 Paul agonized over the power of sin in the members of his body; but here he makes clear that this power doesn't have to dominate or win.

The Holy Spirit (the Spirit of life) has set us free from the power of sin and death.

This is a statement that Paul has made repeatedly in Romans. In chapter 6, for example, Paul wrote that those who have "died with Christ" are "freed from sin" (6:7). The tendency is to look at our **behavior** and then make a pronouncement about whether or not the Holy Spirit has freed us from the power of sin. If I've had a fairly obedient week, I might conclude, "Yes, I've been freed from the power of sin." But if I've stumbled and sinned and feel crummy about myself I might conclude, "I don't feel very free from the power of sin. . ."

This is where we need to be very clear about what Paul is saying. Paul unambiguously says that if you are in Christ Jesus the indwelling Holy Spirit He has set you free from the power of sin and death. This is objectively true; this is the deepest truth. We are to live our lives with the conviction that the power of the Holy Spirit trumps the power of sin in our lives. Unless we're clear on this, we won't take the commands of Scripture

seriously (such as the command, “Do let sin reign in your mortal bodies” in Romans 6:12). This is not make believe or pretending. This is believing that the death and resurrection of Jesus really has freed us from the power of sin.

This freedom was something that the Law could never accomplish. Even though the Law was holy and righteous and good, it was impotent to set people free from sin and death. In verses 3 and 4 Paul says that what the Law could not do, God did through Jesus Christ.

3 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, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

In chapter 7 Paul pointed out that the Law actually stimulated sin instead of setting people free from sin. This is because the flesh makes us naturally rebellious and resistant to the commands of God. But what the Law could not do, God did by “sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.”

Think about this with me. . . Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, had enjoyed unbroken fellowship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit from eternity past. In the fullness of time, God sent His own Son to earth “in the likeness of sinful flesh.” Since Jesus was fully identified with humanity, He was qualified to be “an offering for sin.” God Himself provided a spotless, acceptable sacrifice for our sin, a sacrifice that we couldn’t provide for ourselves. The result was that “He condemned sin in the flesh”: having become one of us, Jesus bore/absorbed our sin in His own flesh.

God Himself did for us what the Law never could; He sent His Son as an offering for our sin.

God didn’t sit in heaven passively as the human race spiraled out of control. Through the Law He exposed how helpless we really are. Then He provided the sinless, spotless Lamb of God as a once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Our salvation was God’s initiative and God’s grace. As Paul says in numerous places (e.g., Ephesians 2:8-9), we have been saved by grace; our salvation is purely a gift to receive.

This is one of those truths that can seem like “old hat” if we’re not careful. We can find ourselves thinking, “Of course I was saved by grace but sooner or later I need to ‘earn my keep’”. . . as if we are saved by grace but kept by works. That’s not what the Scriptures teach. The Scriptures teach that our salvation and our sanctification are grace from first to last. We saw in Romans 5:1 that we now “stand in grace.” If God opened up a store, the only currency that would spend would be grace. He doesn’t sell anything; He doesn’t make deals; He only gives gifts.

Later in chapter 8 (verse 32) Paul will use this same line of reasoning to tell us that “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” When you envision your life and your future, are you

counting on God to “freely giving you all things?” Or do you have some other arrangement in mind? In our walk with God, He does for us what we can never do for ourselves.

In verse 4 Paul explains the goal of God sending His Son:

4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

This statement echoes Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:17 when He said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but fulfill.” He came to fulfill the Law - to bring it to its fullest expression. Several Scriptures explain that the essence of the Law was to “love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27, Gal. 5:14).

In verse 4 Paul boldly writes that this requirement of the Law is brought to fullest expression “in us.” Paul clarifies who is included in “us”: those “who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” This means that:

The Spirit empowers us to give fullest expression to the true intent of the Law (love God and love our neighbors).

As the body of Christ, we are to think of ourselves as giving fullest expression of what it means to love God and love our neighbors. People should be able to point to us and say, “Now I get it. . . now I understand what it means to be in covenant with the one true living God!”

This would be an arrogant claim if we made it up. But we find this claim made over and over in the New Testament. For example, we are told that we are “the body of Christ” - the physical representation of Jesus Himself on this earth.

In his book *Disappointment with God* Philip Yancey wrestles with questions about how people can believe in God when there is so much evil and when He seems so absent in this world. Toward the end of the book he reflects on the reality that the Holy Spirit indwells those who believe in Jesus and that we are therefore called the body of Christ. He writes (pp. 142-143), “My friend Richard had asked, ‘Where is God? Show me. I want to see him.’ Surely at least part of the answer to his question is this: *If you want to see God, then look at the people who belong to him - they are his ‘bodies.’ They are the body of Christ.*”

In verses 5-8 Paul explains why some people can fulfill the intent of the Law and others cannot. The capacity flows from whether a person is “according to the flesh” or “according to the Spirit.” Paul isn’t talking here about people’s day-to-day behavior (although these truths certainly affect our behavior); Paul is talking primarily about two broad categories of people. He’s describing their identity and spiritual capacity.

5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,

“Those who are according to the flesh” are those who live exclusively in the flesh; they are not yet indwelt by the Spirit. Consequently, their only option is to “set their minds on the things of the flesh.” This doesn’t mean that they never do anything virtuous/good. But it does mean that their mind’s focus is upon the things of this world and the flesh. The ultimate fruit of this mindset is death. This is the basic diagnosis that Paul gives throughout the book of Romans. In 6:23 he wrote that “the wages of sin is death.”

“Those who are according to the Spirit” are those who are indwelt by the Spirit because of their faith in Jesus. Consequently, they set their minds on the things of the Spirit. It’s not that they’re incapable of dwelling on the things of the flesh. Paul repeatedly wrote to believers and urged them, “set your mind on things above” (Col. 3:2) and “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). The ultimate fruit of this way of thinking is “life and peace.” [At the end of chapter 7 Paul mentioned, “With my mind [I] am serving the law of God, but. . . with my flesh the law of sin” (7:25).]

In verses 7 and 8 Paul explains the inability of the “mind set on the flesh” to please God.

7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

When Paul writes that “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God,” he is restating something he wrote in chapter 5. The word hostile here in chapter 8 comes from the same root as the word enemy in chapter 5. There he wrote that “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (5:10). Because we are born sinful, in our natural state we are enemies of God. Sin isn’t merely breaking a rule here or there; sin is a personal affront to God Himself. But wonder or wonders, through the death of His Son, God’s enemies can become His friends.

Here Paul provides us with one of those biblical categories that can help us think clearly. Basically Paul tells us in Romans that every person is either an enemy of God or a friend of God (someone who has been reconciled to God; the relationship is restored and whole). Here in verses 7 and 8 Paul is simply saying that those who are still God’s enemies have minds that are “hostile toward God” and minds that lack the capacity to submit to God and to please God. Next week we’ll consider verse 9 in which Paul assured the Romans that because of their faith in Jesus they were “in the Spirit” and indwelt by the Spirit.

Paul doesn’t make these pronouncements about people being “in the flesh” and enemies of God in order to rub it in their faces. He’s laying out these categories in order to announce that:

God invites His enemies (those who are “in the flesh”) to come to Christ and experience life and peace through the Spirit. If God only wanted to condemn His enemies, He never would have sent Jesus. God sent Jesus so that His enemies would become His friends. In Jesus, God chose to pursue us in the most humble, inviting way possible. Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable that makes this point.

Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents.

And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know for sure? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.

The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise—the king took on a totally new identity—He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers.

The King, Jesus, humbled Himself by taking on the likeness of sinful flesh. In humility He pursued us so that we could be reconciled to God. Through His death and resurrection God's enemies become His friends. And if you're God's friend, you now live with no dread of condemnation; you have been set free from sin and death; you are now finally able to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the vision for our lives that God gives us in Christ Jesus.