

Romans (36):
No condemnation for the ones being sanctified (2)

Introduction

Today we return to the opening paragraph of Romans 8. Let us read once again the first eight verses.

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For 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, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:1-8)

Here are Matthew Henry's words on the opening verses of Romans 8:

The apostle here begins with one signal privilege of true Christians, and describes the character of those to whom it belongs: *There is therefore now no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus, v. 1.* This is his triumph after that melancholy complaint and conflict in the foregoing chapter—sin remaining, disturbing, vexing, but, blessed be God, not ruining. The complaint he takes to himself, but humbly transfers the comfort with himself to all true believers, who are all interested in it. It is the unspeakable privilege and comfort of all those that are in Christ Jesus that there is therefore now no condemnation to them. He does not say, "There is no accusation against them," for this there is; but the accusation is thrown out, and the indictment quashed. He does not say, "There is nothing in them that deserves condemnation," for this there is, and they see it, and own it, and mourn over it, and condemn themselves for it; but it shall not be their ruin. He does not say, "There is no cross, no affliction to them or no displeasure in the affliction," for this there may be; but *no condemnation*. They may be chastened of the Lord, but not condemned with the world. Now this arises from their being in Christ Jesus; by virtue of their union with him through faith they are thus secured. They are in Christ Jesus, as in their city of refuge, and so are protected from the avenger of blood. He is their advocate, and brings them off. There is therefore no condemnation, because they are interested in the satisfaction that Christ by dying made to the law. In Christ, God does not only not condemn them, but is well pleased with them, Matt. xvii. 5. 2.¹

We pointed out last Lord's Day that a casual reading of verse 1 may conclude that Paul was speaking specifically about the believer's justification rather than his sanctification. This is because we commonly assume that when we speak of the believer's deliverance from "condemnation", we immediately think in terms of justification rather than sanctification. Now for the sake of clarity for those that may not be familiar with these terms, let us review the definitions of these two critically important biblical teachings respecting salvation from sin.

When we speak of the believer's **justification**, we are addressing how God *pardons* sinners fully of their sins through faith in Jesus Christ. Here is a concise statement of the doctrine:

¹ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, pp. 726f.

“Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”²

Our justification through faith alone in Jesus Christ speaks to our legal standing before God. It has nothing to do with the change that God works *in* us, but rather it speaks only to what God has done *on behalf* of the believer through the life and death of Jesus Christ. God forgives us freely through the work of another. Jesus living for sinners and dying for sinners enables them to be forgiven of their sins and treated as if they were themselves righteous before God; God views them as righteous through Jesus Christ alone. It may be said, “therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). In other words, because of the believer’s justification, he is no longer under God’s condemnation.

But when we speak of the believer’s **sanctification**, we are not addressing how God pardons the sinner, but how God *purifies* a true believer into a saint-like person, like Jesus Christ in His holy character. Where the believer’s justification was the *one-time declaration* of God of pardon and imputed or reckoned righteousness to the believer, the believer’s sanctification is a *life-long process* in which God gradually transforms His people into holy people. Here is the concise statement of the doctrine that we have been using:

“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

And so, given these two definitions and understanding of these two doctrines, both which are set forth in Romans, we may assume that in Romans 8:1 when Paul declared there is no condemnation, that he was referencing the believer’s justification rather than his sanctification. But this is not the case. Paul may have been drawing a conclusion to all that he had written before Romans 8:1, which would have included both justification (Rom. 3:21-5:21) and sanctification (Rom. 6:1-7:23). But the immediate context suggests that he was declaring there was no condemnation for the believer due to the work of sanctification taking place in his life.³ People outside of Jesus Christ are condemned not only for the guilt of their sinful actions, and therefore they are in need of being justified, but they are condemned for being sinners by nature, and therefore in need of being sanctified. And so, the point of Romans 8:1 seems to be this: When Paul declared that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, he was declaring that not only are believers not condemned because of their justification by God’s grace (Rom. 3:21-5:21), but also because they were being sanctified by His grace (Rom. 6:1-7:25). Not only can the penalty due our sin condemn us, but the power of sin would also have spelled our doom had not God provided for us our sanctification in Jesus Christ.

In **verses 2 through 4** Paul explains why it is there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. We know that this is Paul’s explanation or the reason of his assertion in verse 1 because of the little word, “for”, used at the beginning of verse 2.

Verses 2-4 as a whole explain the reason (note the Greek γὰρ, *gar*, for in verse 2) that condemnation no longer exists for those in Christ. The argument of the text is that condemnation is no longer a reality “because” (Greek γὰρ, “*gar*”) believers are delivered from the power of sin. The argument of the text as a whole can be summarized as follows. Those in Christ are no longer under the condemnation of sin (v. 1) because in Christ they have been freed from the power of sin, so that they are now able to fulfill the law. Those who limit Romans 8:1-4 to forensic (i.e. legal) categories fail to

² This statement is taken from *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

³ It could be argued that Paul was saying there was no condemnation for the believer because of his justification but that the believer’s sanctification gave proof that he was justified. This is taught elsewhere. Cf. 1 John 3:7, 10.

perceive the connection drawn in the text between judicial and dynamic realities; those freed from the curse of the law are now liberated to keep God's commands.⁴

We read in **verse 2**, "*For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*" The "the Spirit of life" is a reference to the Holy Spirit. He is described this way because He is the giver and sustainer of life. Paul uses the term "law" twice in verse 2. Paul first usage refers to "the law" of the Spirit of life and then the second usage of "the law" is linked to sin and death. There is disagreement as to how the term "law" should be understood. (1) Some believe that the word "law" should be understood in both uses to mean "principle."⁵ What Paul was saying, therefore, "For *the principle* of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from *the principle* of sin and death." (2) There are others who believe that the first use of the word of "law" in verse 2 is metaphorical, as it is linked to the Holy Spirit and refers to the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives.⁶ The second "law" refers to the Mosaic law. This appears to be the position of **John Murray**, who wrote:

The question then becomes: what is "the law" in this connection? We can only arrive at the answer by determining what is "the law" with which it is contrasted, namely, "the law of sin and of death"... The word "law" is used in this connection as a regulating and actuating power as well as a legislating authority. In view, therefore, of this contrast "the law of the Spirit of life" should be understood as the regulating and actuating power of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of life. It is eminently appropriate that the Holy Spirit should be designated as the Spirit of life because the power of sin is unto death. "The law of the Spirit of life" is, therefore, the power of the Holy Spirit operative in us to make us free from the power of sin which is unto death.⁷

(3) But others assert that in both cases Paul was referring to the Mosaic law. The "law of the Spirit" would be the Mosaic law as administered to the true believer through the Holy Spirit, in other words, through God's covenant of grace. The "law of sin and death" would be the Mosaic law as administered to the unbeliever as a covenant of works, bringing condemnation to the unbeliever.

Although it is difficult to be certain, the idea that the Mosaic law is intended in both uses of the word **νόμος** (*nomos*- "law") in verse 2 is more probable. According to this construction, the Mosaic law is in the realm either of the Holy Spirit or of the powers of sin and death. If the law is appropriated in the realm of the Spirit and by faith, then one is liberated from using the Mosaic law in such a way that it leads to sin and death. This in no way contradicts chapter 7, for there Paul speaks of the effect that the law has on one without the Spirit. Without the Spirit the law only produces death. But for those who have the Spirit the law plays a positive role. This fits with the conception of the law in Psalm 119 and Psalm 19:7-11, where the Torah restores and revives the godly. Thus the second use of **νόμος** in the verse also relates to the Mosaic law. For those who have the Spirit, the Mosaic law liberates from the law that produces only "sin and death."⁸

This understanding would also be consistent with the role of the law as a positive good and a rule of life for the believer in the **Epistle of James**. There we read,

²²But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. ²⁵***But he who looks into the perfect law***

⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 399.

⁵ This is the position of the editors of the *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway Bibles, 2008), p. 2170.

⁶ Schreiner, p. 399.

⁷ John Murray, *Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 276.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22-25)

And,

⁸If you really fulfill *the royal law* according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; ⁹but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. ¹¹For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. (James 2:8-12)

James wrote of the Christian being “blessed” in keeping God’s law. It is the “royal law”, the standard by which Jesus Christ governs the kingdom of God and the standard that will one day assess our lives to prove or disprove our claim to be true believers.

I am not fully convinced of any one of these positions. But I do believe that all of these nuances of meaning confirm the same essential teaching of verse 2. The Holy Spirit is able to make people to become holy in life where the law of Moses alone proved to be powerless. This is confirmed in the next verses.

We next read **verses 3 and 4**. *“For 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, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* The law of God apart from the Spirit of God could not transform people so that they could live righteously, that is, to live consistently with the holy standard that the law of God reflects. Here, Paul states that the reason that God sent His Son was so that His people would be enabled to live according to His law. If you bring the law of God into contact with an unconverted sinner, it will aggravate his sinfulness and condemn him in his sin. But if you bring the law of God to bear upon the converted sinner, who has been given new life in the Holy Spirit, then it will provide him a course of life that will result in God’s blessing upon him. Here in these verses Paul was stating that the reason God sent His Son into the world was *to enable His people to be law keepers through the Holy Spirit* that is given to them.

The law has no power to transform a person, but only condemn him. But the Holy Spirit can enable the one who is united to Jesus Christ to live according to the standard of the righteous requirements of the law. And so, here again, Paul is asserting the power of God through the Holy Spirit that He has given to believers enables them to become sanctified in their lives. God has made all things available to us that are necessary for us to live as godly men and women, we who truly believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter in his second epistle asserted that God had enabled His people to live godly and righteous lives.

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: ²May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (2 Pet. 1:1-4)

This refutes those who claim that to live as a Christian should live that you need a second blessing, a second work of grace in order to enable you to live a godly life. They wrongly teach that God gives you the grace to be pardoned of your sin when you believe the gospel, but that you do not have the power to live as a Christian until God gives you grace through a second work of grace, what they wrongly refer to as “the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It can be affirmed with certainty that the apostle Paul assumed that the sinner who becomes justified through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone is also enabled to become sanctified through the Holy Spirit that God has given to that believer at conversion.

Paul next shows the contrast between the manner that a Christian lives and the manner the unconverted man lives. **Verse 5** reads,

⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

There is a world of difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. They have two different ways of viewing life. The unconverted man is governed according “to the flesh.” For Paul, this term has to do with the sinful nature with which all men are born into this world. Their lives are governed according to what suits them. What they desire is what governs them. Their interest and concern are not for the things of God. In contrast to the unconverted man, those who have been converted by the power of the Holy Spirit set their minds on “the things of the Spirit.”

What are the things of the Spirit in this context? It is the righteousness of the law of God, in other words, the holy thinking and holy practice taught and displayed in the Word of God . The godly, spiritual man has his interest and desire to know and delight in the law of God; that is, the Word of God. The unconverted man is unconcerned about God’s righteousness. He minds earthly things, worldly things, sinful things. We see this same truth stated in Psalm 1:

¹Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
²***But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.***

³He shall be like a tree
Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper.

⁴***The ungodly are not so,***
But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.
⁵Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
⁶For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish. (Psa. 1:1-6)

Those things that characterize the converted man do not characterize the ungodly, the unconverted man. They have two different ways of viewing themselves, the world, and the life they desire to live in this world.

Paul then described the kind of life that characterizes each pursuit, that of the true Christian and that of all others, and he shows the outcome that life brings. We read in **verse 6**, ***“For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”*** This appears again to be quite similar to the outcome of the “blessed” man and the “ungodly” man of Psalm 1. “The way of the ungodly shall perish” (Psa. 1:6). But the blessed man may be likened to a tree that grows beside an abundant supply of water. His life will be one of spiritual health and fruitfulness.

Paul then explained why an ungodly man, an unconverted man, cannot and will not be blessed of God. **Verses 7 and 8** record, ⁷***“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”*** The very way of thinking and living that the one whose thinking and behavior is governed by his own sinful nature is hostile to God. God is the source and cause of all goodness that may be experienced in the world. To live in defiance of

Him and in disregard or rebellion to Him and His ways cannot result in any good. Further, Paul declared the inability of a fallen man to submit to God's law. The fact is that an unconverted man, although he may have the law of God taught to him and ever before him, has no capability due to his sinfulness to conform his life to God's law. His thinking and their behavior cannot, therefore, be pleasing to God. God's laws are a reflection of His holy character. To defy and rebel against God's law is to defy and rebel against God Himself.

Of the unregenerate mind, **Matthew Henry** wrote:

It is enmity to God (v. 7), and this is worse than the former. The former speaks the carnal sinner a dead man, which is bad; but this speaks him a devil of a man. It is not only an enemy, but enmity itself. It is not only the alienation of the soul from God, but the opposition of the soul against God; it rebels against His authority, thwarts His design, opposes His interest, spits in His face, spurns at His bowels. Can there be a greater enmity? An enemy may be reconciled, but enmity cannot. How should this humble us for and warn us against, carnal-mindedness! Shall we harbour and indulge that which is enmity to God our creator, owner, ruler, and benefactor? To prove this, he urges that *it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be*. The holiness of the law of God, and the unholiness of the carnal mind, are as irreconcilable as light and darkness. The carnal man may, by the power of divine grace, be made subject to the law of God, but the *carnal mind* never can; this must be broken and expelled. See how wretchedly the corrupt will of man is enslaved to sin; as far as the carnal mind prevails, there is no inclination to the law of God; therefore wherever there is a change wrought it is by the power of God's grace, not by the freedom of man's will. Hence he infers (v. 8), *Those that are in the flesh cannot please God*. Those that are in a carnal unregenerate state, under the reigning power of sin, cannot do the things that please God, wanting grace, the pleasing principle, and an interest in Christ, the pleasing Mediator. The very *sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination*, Prov. xv. 8. Pleasing God is our highest end, of which those that are in the flesh cannot but fall short; they cannot please Him, nay, they cannot but displease Him. We may know our state and character.⁹

Romans 8:7 repudiates the teaching of many that an unconverted man as the free will to choose to come to Jesus Christ. ***“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.”*** Man's will is free if by that we mean that he is free to choose what he wants to choose. But because he is a sinner, he will not choose God. Because he is a sinner, he cannot choose to do good as God defines it and describes it. He does not have the ability in himself to convert himself. He has no interest or inclination to do so. His heart and mind are at enmity with the will and purpose of God. **John Calvin** rightly taught on Paul's words:

Nor can be. Behold the power of free-will! which the Sophists cannot carry high enough. Doubtless, Paul affirms here, in express words, what they openly detest, — that it is impossible for us to render our powers subject to the law. They boast that the heart can turn to either side, provide it be aided by the influence of the Spirit, and that a free choice of good or evil is in our power, when the Spirit only brings help; but it is ours to choose or refuse. They also imagine some good emotions, by which we become of ourselves prepared. Paul, on the contrary, declares, that the heart is full of hardness and indomitable contumacy, so that it is never moved naturally to undertake the yoke of God; nor does he speak of this or of that faculty, but speaking indefinitely, he throws into one bundle all the emotions which arise within us. Far, then, from a Christian heart be this heathen philosophy respecting the liberty of the will. Let every one acknowledge himself to be the servant of sin, as he is in reality, that he may be made free, being set at liberty by the grace of Christ: to glory in any other liberty is the highest folly.

This underscores the great teaching of the Word of God that salvation is wholly of God's grace from first to last. God must come to the sinner and convert him, or he will remain in his unconverted state. All the pleading and threatening and warning and promising will have no effect upon him unless God in His

⁹ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, pp. 730.

grace inclines the heart to listen, enables the mind to understand, subdue the will to submit to the command to repent of sin, turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is a divine work of grace, wholly of grace, solely of grace.

Let us close with a few words of application, consider these words from **Charles Simeon** (1759-1836)

1. The mere nominal Christian— Think not that your observance of a round of duties is any evidence of your acceptance with God. You must be “in Christ” by a living faith, if ever you would be accepted of Him; and by virtue derived from Him, must be bringing forth to the glory of His name. And, if this be not your state and character, deceive not yourselves, for *the text itself intimates*, that there is condemnation for you, and that you have no part or lot with God’s believing people. I pray you, lay this matter to heart, and seek, before it be too late, the blessings purchased for you by the Redeemer of the world.

2. The over-confident professor— Some there are who will pronounce the words of our text with the same unhallowed confidence, as if there were no condemnation awaiting any child of man. But, brethren, your state and character should be tried, before you claim the privilege belonging to God’s faithful people. “If ye walk after the flesh, ye shall die,” whatever ye may imagine to the contrary: “If ye be Christ’s, ye will surely crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts.”

3. The timid and doubting Christian— Some, because they still feel within themselves the workings of corruption, will doubt whether they can by any means belong to Christ. But the very text intimates, that there will yet be the flesh stirring within us; only, that, if we be Christ’s, we shall not “*walk after it.*” Say then, my dear brethren, do you *find your pleasure* in earthly things? Is it not, rather, painful to you that you cannot more entirely mortify all earthly desires, and find all your comfort in the things of God? I say not this, to encourage or sanction a slothful habit; but I say it in order to “strengthen your hands that hang down,” and to shew you, that, if, with Paul, you are constrained to cry, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me?” You should also add with him, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹⁰

May the Lord cause each of us to resort afresh to the grace of God for ourselves and also for the conversion of loved ones and others with whom we speak regarding the Savior. How much we need His favor to be manifest in our midst so that we might see His great work of forgiveness and deliverance in people in our midst. Let us each and all be faithful and importunate in our petitions that He would be merciful and gracious toward us and in us.

¹⁰ *The Entire Works of Charles Simeon*, vol. 15, pp. 238f.