

## *Uncondemned*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 14, 2021.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 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, in 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 (Rom. 8:1–4).<sup>1</sup>

The list of problems facing humanity is myriad. Our very existence has been and continues to be perilous, as we seem bent on self-destruction. Yet, there is one root problem that is the cause of all other problems and common to everyone, the same for those who have gone before us and those who will follow: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Sin is not merely *a* human problem; it is *the* human problem. Every problem that you and I face today is a derivative of sin. Sin alienates us from our Creator and divides us as his creatures. It is the reason for sickness, suffering, and death. It is our ever-present nemesis, for neither you nor I have known a nanosecond of existence apart from it.

If there is any hope, it must come as salvation from sin—its curse, casualty, and condemnation. It must also come from outside fallen humanity. We cannot save ourselves, as we are totally toxic and contaminated as a species, not a sickness that spreads virally but by inheritance. The seed of Adam is the source of sin from generation to generation since the Fall. We are not sinners only because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners, children of Adam by nature.

As a result, we live and move and have our being under the condemnation of a holy God. As the word is used in Romans, “condemnation” does not merely mean disapproval but carries the legal connotation of punishment following a sentence.<sup>2</sup> In the courtroom of God’s holiness according to his perfect law, apart from God’s grace we are guilty and condemned. Our only hope of salvation from eternal condemnation is the mercy and grace of God by divine, monergistic act. Our only hope is to be saved by someone who did not receive Adam’s seed, unconfined to our condition, uncontaminated by sin, yet like us in every respect but without sin.

Of course, this is the Good News, the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the fullness of time he came, born of a virgin, born under the law, that he might condemn sin in his sacrifice, fulfill the law in his obedience, and give us his Spirit of righteousness that we may truly live in him. And it is this gospel that leads Paul to encourage the church in Rome, and through them us, that we now live in the new way of the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 7:6), a life lived not under the burden of the law and works but of mercy and grace. It is no wonder that the Christian heart rejoices when we hear the words: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 161.

## **Sin Condemned**

Although the chapter breaks of the biblical books are artificial constructs, it is interesting to note that this chapter begins with “no condemnation” and ends with “no separation” with “no defeat” sandwiched in between, a reassuring chapter-long reminder of the love of God in Christ.<sup>3</sup> But it is Paul’s emphatic introduction of “now no condemnation” that sets the tone for what follows. In fact, everything that follows is meaningless if we remain condemned. But Paul does not simply tell us we are uncondemned and then move on to other matters. He tells how God has done it, a God-glorifying, Christ-exalting, Spirit-inspired description, revealing the Triune-work of God in our salvation:

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, in 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 (8:3-4).

God the Father ordained what God the Son accomplished what God the Spirit applies to all who believe.

Specifically, Paul says that we are uncondemned, because God “condemned sin in the flesh.” Paul explained it this way to the Philippians:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-7).

It is not just that God acted but that he sent his sinless Son to take upon himself human flesh. It is not just that the Son became a man but that he died a sinless substitute for us. It is not just that he died in our place but that God’s wrath was poured out on him and satisfied in him. Therefore, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Sin condemned, righteousness given, thanks be to God, Amen!

Yet, for those whose sin was condemned, there can still be a tendency to obsess over sin’s evidence and to become discouraged by its consistent presence. Though we are saved by grace, our flesh loves to shame us by works. What reassurance is there in Paul’s declaration, “there is now no condemnation”? Let me draw your attention to three words: “now,” “no,” and “in.”

First, “now” speaks of a time. There was a time when

you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh,

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<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Reign of Grace: Romans 5* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 2:782.

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carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

That was *then*, before your conversion, but *now* “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5). Christian, you are not condemned for who you once were and what you once did but are uncondemned for who Christ is and what he has done. You are *now* in Christ Jesus.

Second, “no” is emphatic. The Greek negation describes the impossibility of condemnation for those who are in Christ. Condemnation is impossible because God sent his only Son to be a living, breathing sinless offering, a sacrifice for the sin of the elect. Upon the cross the sentence for sin was pronounced and punishment served. There is no condemnation in Christ Jesus.

Third, “in Christ Jesus” describes the eternal state of the redeemed who by God’s grace has trusted in God’s anointed Messiah and Savior of his covenant people. By faith, the Christian is literally in covenant union with the One whom God promised and provided to save us. The phrase implies a distinction: You are either in Christ Jesus and therefore uncondemned, forgiven of your sin, and given righteousness and life, or you are not in Christ Jesus and therefore condemned, unforgiven of your sin, and due its wages, death (Rom. 6:23). Those are the only two options. So, if you are not in Christ Jesus, believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, even this very moment. For, all who believe are *in* Christ Jesus.

So Christian, when you become discouraged by your sinful nature, remember these three little words: now, no, and in. By God’s grace through faith, you are *now* in Christ Jesus, *no* longer under condemnation, and now and forever *in* Christ Jesus.

### **Law Fulfilled**

Not only was sin condemned through Christ but also the law was fulfilled in him. Because of our sin, our obedience to the law and our good works could never save us from condemnation—only Christ’s perfect obedience to the law could, reckoned vicariously to us through faith by the Holy Spirit. God’s holy standard, the “righteous requirement” of the law was fulfilled in us, who live not in the flesh but in the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, God’s law for the Christian is not a source of condemnation but delight.

Furthermore, Christ’s fulfillment of the law reveals the glory of God’s grace bestowed upon us in Christ. God graciously gives us Christ’s righteousness as if it were our own. God graciously saved us not when we improved at keeping the law but as law breakers through the law keeper: God graciously shows us his pleasure in the law that Christ kept. As Augustine points out, “It is not by the law that the ungodly are made righteous but by grace. . . . The law was therefore given, in order that grace might be sought; grace was given, in order that the law might be fulfilled.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter* 19.43 quoted in Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 454.

For the Christian, this truth unlocks the once-hidden gospel in the Law and the Prophets. We may look back to the Mosaic Covenant, for example, and see its fulfillment in Christ. We may consider its sacraments and see how the Passover revealed salvation through the atoning blood of Christ, our Passover lamb, and how circumcision revealed the new birth by the Spirit of Christ. In Christ, the law and the gospel do not compete but, as the Westminster Confession puts it, they “sweetly comply.”<sup>5</sup>

This truth alone serves as a safeguard against the polar extremes of legalism and lawlessness, sadly seen sometimes in the church. Agreeing that the law of God is holy and righteous and good (7:12) does not mean that we use the law as a burgeoning burden of religious rules and regulations. Christ fulfilled the law, so we “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Agreeing that we “are not under law but under grace” (6:14) does not mean that we use grace as a guise for ungodliness. Christ fulfilled the law, so we “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

### **Spirit Given**

Christ then has given us his Spirit that we might mature in holiness, as God is holy, being conformed to the image of his Son. Though the law prescribed holiness, it could not give it, but the Holy Spirit can and does.

To run and work the law commands,  
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands ;  
But better news the gospel brings:  
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.<sup>6</sup>

And the “wings” given, so to speak, is the Holy Spirit.

That we may “fly,” or as Paul puts it, “walk,” implies and requires our participation: Walking is not something done to us but something we do. As the Holy Spirit enables and empowers us, we must “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). To encourage this, in our walk “according to the Spirit,” you may find it helpful to remember three words: functions, forms, and fights.

First, the Holy Spirit *functions* through means, typically the outward and ordinary means of grace: Word, sacrament, and prayer. The Holy Spirit reveals God’s truth to us through God’s Word. We are edified through witnessing a baptism and nourished in communion. We enjoy bringing our petitions to the Lord in prayer, and the Holy Spirit uses all of these.

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<sup>5</sup> “Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.” The Westminster Confession of Faith 19.7 in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 92.

<sup>6</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 161.

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Second, the Holy Spirit *forms* godly habits within us. For example, J.I. Packer writes, “The fruit of the Spirit is, from one standpoint, a series of habits of action and reaction: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control are all of them habitual dispositions, that is, accustomed ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving”<sup>7</sup> (Packer, 109). So, we must actively engage with the Holy Spirit in this habit-forming work within us.

Third, the Holy Spirit *fight*s enables and empowers us to fight for Christ’s image in us. If indeed “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep [us] from doing the things [we] want to do” (Gal. 5:17), then we must fight with the Spirit against the flesh, using the means of grace and the conforming habits of the Spirit to grow in Christlikeness.

And it is this growing in Christlikeness that further reassures us of not only the Holy Spirit’s presence but also the absence of condemnation. It is a reinforcing reality that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” And by God’s grace through faith we are indeed uncondemned and in Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), 109.