

No Condemnation

by Ray C. Stedman

The eighth chapter of Romans is the favorite chapter of many of you, I know – and not without reason. This is one of the most significant chapters of the Scriptures. Somebody has likened this to “the brightest jewel in the casket of gems in the Word of God.” I like to think of it as a great mountain, like Mt. Shasta, rising above all the surrounding hills and capturing the attention of all. Yet, the interesting thing about this is that it is not until you get to the middle of the chapter (Verse 17) that Paul introduces any new thoughts. In the opening words of this chapter he is simply gathering it up, bringing it to focus.

But first I want to point out that you have to ignore the division between Chapters 7 and 8. I believe that the text of the Scriptures is inspired by God – “breathed out” by him – but I believe that the chapter divisions were put in by the devil! Many times they come right at a place where they actually obscure truth. Sometimes these divisions break the continuity of a thought and take it out of the context. Then we may miss something tremendously important. That is certainly true here. The first two verses of Chapter 8 ought to be linked with the closing verse of Chapter 7. They are really all one sentence. When you read them that way, it will help explain the struggle and darkness in Romans 7.

As you remember, Paul is in a very intense struggle because, as a believer, he is trying to keep the Law. Anybody who gets involved in a discipline of the spirit and dedication of the heart to obey God, but is trying to do it through his own efforts, willpower, and determination, will have the same problem. The problem is really legalism. Here you see the tremendous harm that legalism causes throughout the existence of the church. There are thousands and millions of Christians who

are struggling like this today because of the power of the Law in their lives. Paul tells us about the struggle: “The things that I would not do, that I do; and the things that I would do, I do not do,” {cf, Rom 7:14-20 NIV}. We have all felt this way and can identify with his struggle.

But Paul does not leave it there. It is a struggle that does not have to go on. That is the point. How does he resolve this struggle? He immediately answers with this one, great, flashing word of relief in Verse 25:

Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! {Rom 7:25a NIV}

The rest of Verse 25 in Chapter 7 belongs with the opening verses of Chapter 8. It is an explanation of what he means when he says, “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature a slave to sin ... {Rom 7:25b NIV}

That summarizes all that he has been talking about in Chapter 7. But don’t stop there, for there should not be even a period between that and Verse 1 of Chapter 8.

[but,] therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. {Rom 8:1-2 NIV}

There is absolutely no question that Chapter 8 ought to open with the word *but*. It is a contrast that shows the way out of the struggle of Chapter 7: “But there is now no condemnation for those

who are in Christ Jesus.” The only reason this verse does not open with *but* is because some clown put a big 8 there, and that has thrown off all the translators.

Now, what is Paul saying in this passage when it all is taken together like that?

First, it is evident that **there is a struggle in the Christian life**. There is a struggle between what he calls “the sinful nature” and the Spirit. (I am not sure I like that term “sinful nature” too well – the word is flesh, and, as the word is used in the Scriptures, it not only means the body, but it means the sin that finds its seat in those bodies.) You see, it is by the body that we are linked with our father, Adam. Genetically, all that we have in our bodies is traceable back through the stream of human history to Adam. God made a body for Adam that is like ours – with two eyes, two ears, a nose, etc., and we have these characteristics because Adam had them. But we also have inherited from Adam this principle of sin that is in us.

Now, it is hard to define this principle of sin. In some way, it describes the access that the devil has to our humanity. It is the means by which Satan is able to implant in our minds “the fiery darts of the wicked one” {Eph 6:16 KJV}, as Paul calls them in Ephesians. This refers to those obscene and lustful thoughts, and selfish attitudes, and hostile, bitter feelings that we have toward others – thoughts that come suddenly, unbidden, into our minds when we least expect them. They come from this root of sin that is in our bodies.

In Galatians 5 Paul describes this struggle between the Spirit and the flesh:

For the sinful nature [or, *the flesh*] desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature [*the flesh*]. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.
{Gal 5:17 NIV}

That really is a verse of hope. Paul says the Spirit struggles against the flesh, so that you cannot do the things that you would. That is what Paul is describing here in Romans 7. In Verse 25 he says, “I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law.” That is, as he said earlier, “I want to do good. I believe in it. I delight in God’s law in my inner being. I am changed; I agree that the law is good.

But I find I can’t do it.” In his mind he is awakened to the value and the righteousness of God’s law, and this has come about by means of the Spirit. How else can you ever come to the place of agreeing that God is good and holy, his Word is right and the Law is good, except it be by the Spirit of God in you? It is only when a man is filled with the Holy Spirit that he is able to talk like that. Therefore, it is the Holy Spirit, within Paul’s human spirit, agreeing with God’s law. But set against that is this sin that is in his flesh that takes hold of him and makes him a slave to the law of sin, even though he does not want to be.

How does he break this hold? He breaks it, as he says, by calling upon a new view of himself that is true because he is in Jesus Christ. That is what Romans 8 declares to us.

But there is a struggle, and some of us have been very much aware of it.

- If you ever have watched an alcoholic, or perhaps have struggled with alcoholism yourself, you know that this is an intense struggle. An alcoholic can come to the place where he can see everything evil happening to him because of alcohol. He wants to quit; he determines to quit. He knows he is going to lose his wife, his children, his reputation, and everything if he doesn’t quit. I have seen these people resolve never to drink again. Yet, in a moment of temptation, the very struggle of Romans 7 comes in and suddenly they find themselves overpowered by sin. They give in, and then they hate themselves for it.
- Those who struggle with homosexuality feel the same way. Habits of reaction have settled in and they find it very difficult to say “No” even though they want to. Born again, they want to be delivered – but it is hard.
- And it is not only these things that grip us like this. A hot temper or a habit of overeating can do the same thing. How many of you resolve not to eat as much? Perhaps right now you are saying, “When I go home, I am going to take just a very light meal.” And someone will spread out a beautiful roast, and apple pie, and, before you know it, your resolve is gone – and so is the food.

This is a problem of the will, isn't it? We are weak, and we know it. This is what Paul is describing here. This is the struggle of the Christian life. It comes again and again, but it does not have to continue. That is what this passage is about. It is a struggle that we find ourselves in, and sometimes we aren't even aware of it at first. But the struggle does not have to go on.

Some Christians resent the fact that the struggle is there at all. They have gotten a false idea of Christianity. They think Christianity means that God takes this struggle away and removes the temptation so they never have to struggle again. Unfortunately, that is not true; and many people have been hurt, and have become angry with God, because he doesn't do that. I have seen young Christians become very upset at times because they thought they were free and then they found that they weren't.

The text goes on to tell us that this can cease only when we reckon on who we really are in Christ. Basically, what we need is a new self-image. That is what will deliver us, for that is what is true of us. And when we see who we really are, we can say "No" to the flesh and make it stick; then we can say "Yes" to the Spirit and discover a whole new walk of life.

The second major thing the apostle is saying is that not only is there a struggle, but, and this is very important, **the struggle is without condemnation**. Though I struggle at times, Paul says, there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The reason there is no condemnation is given in just one little phrase: "in Christ." That goes right back to our justification by faith:

- We came out of Adam,
- We are in Christ, and
- God will never condemn those who are in Christ.

He never will!

Now, we have to understand what "no condemnation" means. What is Paul talking about?

1. Certainly, the most basic element in it is that there is no rejection by God. God does not turn us aside, he does not kick us out of his family.

If we are born into the family of God by faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has come to dwell within us, and he will never, never leave us. No matter what we do, he will never leave us. And God will never cut us out of his family or treat us as anything less than sons and daughters.

One of the most beautiful stories of the Scriptures is that of the prodigal son. The prodigal son left home, got into deep difficulty, wasted his life in riotous living, and ended up in the pigpen. I was listening to Dr. Vernon McGee the other morning on the radio and, in his colorful way, he asked, "Do you know the difference between the son in that pigpen and the pig? The difference is that no pig has ever said to himself, 'I will arise and go to my father.'" He is right; only sons say that. That is why there will be no condemnation, no rejection, by God. He will always treat you as his child, and not as his enemy.

2. The second thing "no condemnation" means is that God is not angry with you when this struggle comes into your life. You want to be good, or you want to stop doing bad, but, when the moment of temptation comes, you find yourself overpowered and weak, and you give way. Then you hate yourself. You go away frustrated, feeling, as Paul described, "Oh, what's the matter with me? Why can't I do this thing? Why can't I act like I want to?" And though you may condemn yourself, God does not. He is not angry with you about that. He knows, as the Scriptures show us, that you are a child in his family, learning to walk.

The beautiful figure is that of a tender, loving father, watching his little boy begin to take his first steps. No father ever gets angry with his little son because he doesn't get right up and start running around the first time he tries to walk. If the child falls and stumbles and falters, the father helps him; he doesn't spank him. He lifts him up, encourages him, and shows him how to do it right. And if the child has a problem with his feet, maybe one foot is twisted or deformed, the father finds a way to relieve that condition and help him to learn to walk. That is what God does. He is not angry when we are struggling. He knows it takes awhile – quite awhile, at times. And even

the best of saints will, at times, fall. This was true of Paul, it was true of the apostles, and it was true of all the prophets of the Old Testament. Sin is deceitful and it will trip us at times. But God is not angry with us.

3. The third thing “no condemnation” means is that there is no punishment. God will never take us to the woodshed because of our struggles. He isn’t angry and he isn’t going to punish us. We may punish ourselves, we may be frustrated, we may cry out, “Oh wretched man that I am!” But God doesn’t say that – he doesn’t punish us.

Now, let me caution you. When we deliberately decide to sin, and like it, then he will punish us. This is the discipline of a father described in the closing part of Chapter 6. When we deliberately give ourselves back into sin once we have been set free from it, then, as a loving disciplinarian, God will sometimes correct us, and punish us, and even scourge us, until we begin to see what has happened. He does this out of love, just as an earthly father would. But that is a different condition than the one we are facing here.

Here Paul is addressing the times when we want to do good, and we are trying to do good. But we are weak, and, in a moment of temptation, we fail. And we fail again and again. But there is no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus. Even when we are being punished as disobedient sons, we still are not condemned. That remains true no matter what happens to us.

Why are we not condemned? The answer that Paul gives in Verse 2 is beautiful:

because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. {Rom 8:2 NIV}

Paul was not left with a continuing, constant struggle; God came in and did something about it. God reminded him of what he knew to be true, and he began to believe it. Paul brings out three reasons why there is no condemnation.

- First, look at Verse 18 of Chapter 7: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sin-

ful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good,” {Rom 7:18a NIV}. His heart is right. Then again, in Verse 22, he says, “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law;” {Rom 7:18 NIV}. Paul really wants to do right, his heart is right; therefore there is no condemnation.

- Second, and obviously connected with this, Paul explains that sin has deceived us and overpowered us. It is too much for us. We can’t handle this wild beast raging within us when it is awakened by the demands and prohibitions of the Law. And God doesn’t condemn us for that, he knows that it is more than we can handle.
- Third, and this is the most important, God has already made provision for our failure in Christ, and our very struggle is driving us to Christ. When you have come to the place of saying, “Oh wretched man that I am!” the only thing left, if you want any escape at all, is to ask, “Why am I thinking of myself in this way?” and to realize, “God says I am different.” Reckoning on that difference that has come to you in Christ, you can rise up to act differently as well. That is the way out. God knows that even your failures are driving you to that moment; and, as a loving Father, he is patiently waiting for it to come.

The third major thing that Paul says is that a **provision has been made for victory**. The law of the Spirit of life, which is in Christ Jesus, will set you free from the law of sin and death, which is in your members. That is why Paul cries, “Thanks be to God – through our Lord Jesus Christ!” {Rom 7:25a NIV}. This law of the Spirit of life is your faith in what God has already said he has done for you in Christ. He has cut you off, made you a different creature, brought you into Christ, and married you to him – you are not any longer the same man.

When we are failing, and angry with ourselves, our natural way of thinking about ourselves is something like this: “I’m a mess, a hopeless, helpless mess! Why can’t I do what I want to do? Why can’t I stop this thing that is hurting me so, and hurting others, too?” You are all wrapped up in your own feelings and you think you deserve to be whipped and punished and cast into hell.

At that point God says to you, “What is wrong is your view of yourself. That is not what you are; that is only a temporary delusion to which you are giving yourself over. The truth is, you have been cut free. You are married to Christ. Your human spirit has been indwelt by the Holy Spirit and it cannot sin. It has not sinned and does not sin. Now, you yourself, as a person, have been deceived by the sin in your flesh, and it has taken over and has gotten you into this difficulty. But that is not who you are. Don’t believe that about yourself anymore. There is a fresh provision of the forgiveness of God and the righteousness of Christ waiting for you. You are in Christ – this is who you are. Take his forgiveness, believe it, thank God for it, and go on, and know that your struggle has ended.” That is why Paul says in Galatians 5:17, “They [the Spirit and the flesh] are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want,” {Gal 5:17b NIV}.

Of course this does not mean that God has ended the reign of the flesh in our lives. It is still there. The law of sin and death, like the law of gravity, goes on working all the time. But the moment you believe what Jesus Christ says is true about you, and you believe what he has done for you, a new law comes in. This new law is stronger than the law of sin and death; it even uses that law to accomplish its end.

When I was a boy, I discovered that there was a law at work in my members that was affecting my eyesight. It was what I later learned to call the law of myopia, which is nearsightedness. It was in my members, right in my eyes, so that I could not see what other people could see. Finally, I went to a doctor about it, and he told me that I had a law in my members that was constantly working and it affected my eyesight so that I could not see what others saw. Then I discovered a new law, the law of contact lenses – two little pieces of plastic which I could put in my eyes every morning and they would keep working all day long. All I had to do was put them in. They did not eliminate the law of myopia – they actually used it. But the result was that I saw perfectly, with 20/20 vision. Now, if I got cocky and decided I didn’t need those contact lenses anymore (“I can handle this situation without them!”) and took them out – immediately the law of myopia would take over and I would have the same old problem again. But if I put the lenses in, the

law of contact lenses would cancel out – overcome – the law of myopia, and I could see perfectly.

That is what Paul is telling us here. God has given us a new image of ourselves. We are not what we feel we are. As a result of that, we can be set free anytime we employ that law, anytime that we, by faith, reckon that what God says is true and we begin to see ourselves that way.

The fourth major point that Paul makes in this brief paragraph is given in Verses 3 and 4. It is a **review of the basis for victory:**

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by our sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man [flesh] to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the sinful man [the flesh], in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to our sinful nature but according to the Spirit. {Rom 8:3-4 NIV}

This is a beautiful description of the good news in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new here; we have had it all before. Paul says the Law is powerless to produce righteousness. It cannot do it. It cannot make us good – no way. It can demand and demand, but it cannot enable and it never will.

This, by the way, is why nagging somebody never helps. Did you know that? Nagging is a form of law, and God will not let the Law nag us because it doesn’t help. It only makes it worse. If you try to nag your husband or wife or child, you will find that the same thing happens there. Nagging only makes them worse. Why? The reason, Paul says, is because the Law only stirs up the power of sin. It releases this force, this beast within us, this powerful engine that takes over and carries us where we don’t want to go. That is why nagging, or any form of the Law, will never work. It is not because there is anything wrong with what is being said – it is because of the weakness of the flesh that it cannot work. Paul says in First Corinthians 15, “The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law,” {cf, 1 Cor 15:56 NIV}. The Law keeps sin going, it stirs it up.

To break through this vicious circle, Paul says, God sent forth his own son. There is a beautiful tenderness about this. He sent “his own Son.” He

did not send an angel, he did not send a man – he sent his own Son as a man, in the likeness of sinful flesh. Notice that. He did not send him just in the likeness of flesh, but in the likeness of sinful flesh. Jesus had a real body, a body like yours and mine. Since sin has been done in the body, it has to be judged and broken in the body. Therefore, Jesus had a body. But it was not just a body of sinful flesh, it was the likeness of sinful flesh. It was like our sinful bodies, in that it was subject to infirmities (Jesus was weak and tired and hungry and weary), but there was no sin in him. Paul preserves that very carefully here.

In that body of flesh, without sin, he became sin. As we read here, he was offered as an offering for sin. And in the mystery of the cross, which we can never, never understand, no matter how long we live, somehow the Lord Jesus, at the hour of darkness, gathered up all the sins of the world, all the terrible, evil, foul, awful injustice, crime, and misery that we have seen throughout history, from every person, gathered it into himself, and brought it to an end by dying. The good news is that somehow, by faith in him, we get involved in that death. We have already seen that. In Chapter 6, Verse 6, Paul says,

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – {Rom 6:6 NIV}

This is the way the Lord did it. As described in Chapter 5, he (Christ-made-sin) was the first husband to whom we were married: And he died. The first husband died, and therefore we were free to be married to the second husband, who is Christ-risen-from-the-dead. Thus he has tied us to himself as a risen, ascended Lord, and that is who we are from now on.

This is not just for a few Christians who have gone beyond all the rest and have some special experience; all Christians are this way. If you are a Christian at all, this is who you are. It is always who you are. To let yourself believe anything else is to delude yourself. To believe your feelings about yourself at any moment of evil or sin is to fool yourself. This is who you are. By the gift of God, without earning it, or without ever deserving it, you are righteous in his sight; just like Jesus, you are righteous with the righteousness of God.

The very righteousness which the Law demands is fulfilled in us the minute we believe what God has done about our evil and trust him for it. That righteousness is ours continually, as a gift.

The last thing the apostle says is that **this becomes real to us when we choose to live according to the Spirit** – not according to our sinful nature. When we believe what God says about us and see ourselves in a new way, then we will change the way we act. This is always God’s way of deliverance. We think that we have to change the way we act in order to be different; God says, “No, I have made you different, and when you believe it, you will automatically change the way you act.” Do you see the difference?

Remember that story that Hal Lindsey shared with us on Easter Sunday? It was a beautiful story about a girl who was the daughter of one of the royal families of Europe. She had a big, bulbous nose that destroyed her beauty in the eyes of others – and especially in her own eyes. She grew up with this terrible image of herself as an ugly person. So her family hired a plastic surgeon to change the contour of her nose. He did his work, and there came the moment when they took the bandages off and the girl could see what happened. When the doctor removed the bandages, he saw that the operation had been a total success. All the ugly contours were gone. Her nose was different. When the incisions healed and the redness disappeared, she would be a beautiful girl. He held a mirror up for the girl to see. But, so deeply embedded was this girl’s ugly image of herself that when she saw herself in the mirror, she couldn’t see any change. She broke into tears and cried out, “Oh, I knew it wouldn’t work!” The doctor labored with that girl for six months before she would finally accept the fact that she was indeed different. But the moment she accepted the fact that she really was different, her whole behavior began to change.

We act from what we know we are. If the evil in us deceives us into thinking that we are not what God says we are, then we are going to keep on acting that way. That is why the way to break the power of the most vicious and evil habit is to see yourself as God sees you. Then you begin to act that way. You can’t help it. As this verse makes clear, you are one with Jesus and you share his life, and he himself, with the beauty of his character, is one with you. He is married to you and you to him

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and there is no distinction. If you can see this when you have temporarily believed something false about yourself and are struggling, then you will be free.

Many of us can testify to the fact that this works. God sets us free in this way. This is what Paul has been saying all along. Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the Law, with its nagging demand that you be different before you can be accepted, but you are under grace, with its affirmation that God has already made you different – now believe it!

Prayer:

Our Father, I am sure there are many here today who have been struggling against

very powerful forces in their lives, many who have been wanting to be free from destructive things – an evil temper; a critical, judgmental spirit; a hostile, defensive attitude; selfishness; lust; sexual desires that are hurtful and wrong. Lord, thank you that you have found a different way out. Thank you that the way out is not by forcing ourselves to be different, but by seeing that we already are different. We have been cleansed and purified and made whole in Jesus Christ our Lord. He is our life, and we belong to him and always will. What a difference that is! Help us to believe it and to act that way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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