

FREEDOM FROM CONDEMNATION

Story of guilt

“I never relax,” Therese told her counselor. “There’s always something to do. I either have to clean the house, pay bills, or something. And if I do take time off, I start to feel like I’m neglecting something. I feel lazy, and in my mind that’s reprehensible. I constantly feel I’m not doing everything I could be doing. I should be doing so much more reading. I should stay in better touch with friends and my family. I think 40 percent of my time is spent feeling guilty. Even as I’m accomplishing things, I’m thinking about all that I’m *not* getting done. I live with this sense that things need to be done every minute of the hour. And every minute that I’m not doing something, I feel disappointed in myself.”¹

As you read Therese’s story, does it sound like your story, at least to some extent? For all modern attempts to eliminate guilt and pump up self-esteem, there remain large numbers of people who cannot shake the feeling that they’re not measuring up. The great biblical affirmation is that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Yet even many of those who are in Christ Jesus remain burdened with feelings of condemnation.

The performance-driven Silicon Valley is a breeding ground for guilt feelings. Everyone here, it seems, feels that they’re not cutting it. We therefore need to hear from Romans 8:1-11.

In Paul’s retelling of the Exodus story, the Holy Spirit replaces the Mosaic Law. In Romans 7:7-25, he told the story of Israel’s relationship to the law, which it received in the wilderness. In Romans 8, he tells the story of the renewed people of God, who have received not the law but the Holy Spirit, who leads them through the wilderness of this world to the new Promised Land, the new creation.

In Romans 8 Paul explains his statement in Romans 7:6: “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, not in oldness of the letter.” The Holy Spirit, who we’ve received glimpses of in Romans 1-7, comes out in the open in Romans 8.

Romans 8:1-11:

¹Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For 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, ⁴so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

⁵For 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. ⁶For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷because 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, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. ¹⁰If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Life conquers death

Paul's statement in verse 1 excluding condemnation for those in Christ Jesus is based on the previous context, which reaches as far back as his treatment of condemnation in Romans 5:12-21. Therefore, because of our union with Christ, by which we are released from both sin (Romans 6) and the law (Romans 7), and now, in the new era inaugurated by Christ, we need not fear the condemnation of God. Condemnation, which Paul also speaks of as death, is God's punishment for sin. It involves final exclusion from the people of God and the presence of God. Such is not the destiny for those who are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

In verses 2-11, Paul further explains the exclusion of condemnation. The basic explanation, in verse 2, is that life has conquered death. If death is exclusion from the people of God and presence of God, life is the opposite: membership in the people of God, even beyond the grave.² There can be no condemnation—no death—for those who have life. Sin issues in death, but the Holy Spirit replaces sin and imparts life. The Holy Spirit applies Christ's victory over sin and death to us by uniting us with Christ, so that we are liberated from sin and death, just as the Israelites were liberated from Egypt.^{3 4}

The Mosaic Law, which God gave to Israel immediately after the Exodus, was unable to conquer sin and sustain Israel's covenant relationship with God. In a sense, it wanted to sustain such life. Instead, it provoked sin and resulted in death: condemnation for Israel as a whole (Romans 7:10). The "flesh" of Israel, taken over by sin and bent toward rebellion against God, was unable to respond to the law (Romans 7:18, 25).

In verse 3, Paul explains how God dealt with sin and death. In verse 4, he explains how the Spirit brought life.

God himself, through the work of his Son, did what the law could not do. The Son, at great cost to the Father, came in the "likeness of sinful flesh," in human flesh but not in sinful flesh. As the Son of God, the Messiah who represented Israel and the world, he became a sin offering.⁵ God thereby condemned the sin of the world in the flesh of Christ: He judged it, passed sentence against it and brought its reign to an end.

God condemned sin in order to fulfill not the "requirement" of the law but the intended result of the law, which is the life the law wanted to sustain.⁶ God imparts such life, connection to him, not through the Mosaic Law but through the Spirit.⁷ Those who receive this life, in fulfillment of the law, are characterized by walking according to the Spirit, not according to the law. Paul is not saying that we fulfill the law *by* walking according to the Spirit. The Spirit sets us free from sin and death and gives us life. We can therefore be defined as those who walk—however imperfectly—according to the Spirit.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because God has condemned sin and given his people life.

Life in the present

In verses 5-11, Paul distinguishes between those who walk according to the flesh and those who walk according to the Spirit. The difference, quite simply, is that those who walk according to the Spirit possess the Spirit, while those who walk according to the flesh do not. For believers, life “in the flesh” is a thing of the past, however much they may yield to sin in the present.

This difference can be seen first of all in what people “set their minds on.” This entails not isolated decisions or shifting thought patterns but a basic orientation in life: either toward the things of the flesh or toward the things of the Spirit. Those who possess the Spirit can be defined as those whose orientation in life is toward the things of the Spirit.

The orientation of the flesh is death.⁸ Death, which results from sin, involves the condemnation of God. The orientation of the flesh can therefore be defined as being “hostile toward God.” This was evident in Paul’s description of the “flesh” of Israel in Romans 7:7-25, where he used the first-person singular “I” when speaking of Israel. Israel was unable to subject itself to the Mosaic Law. It found itself, or it should have found itself, in solidarity with the rest of fleshly humanity, alienated from God. All humans who do not possess the Spirit of the new covenant “cannot please God,” no matter how good their deeds may appear.

The orientation of the Spirit, on the other hand, is not death but life—the covenant life that Paul has been speaking of all along. The other orientation of the Spirit that Paul highlights is peace, which involves peace with God and is contrast to the hostility toward God that the flesh provokes (Romans 5:1). Peace, like life, was also a covenant feature (Numbers 25:12, Isaiah 54:10, Ezekiel 37:26). It involves more than just cessation of hostilities but human wholeness. The implication of Paul’s comparison between the flesh and the Spirit is that those who possess the Spirit, with their orientation toward life and peace, are able to subject themselves to God and please him.

Life in the future

In verse 9, Paul emphasizes that he’s speaking of two kinds of people. If the Spirit dwells in you, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit. If you do not have the Spirit, you do not belong to God. Whereas the Spirit of God dwelt in the temple in the Mosaic covenant, he dwells in believers in the new covenant. Paul said that “nothing good dwells me,” speaking of fleshly Israel (Romans 7:18). What Israel needed, what all humans need, is the indwelling Holy Spirit. Possession of the Spirit—not possession of the law, as some Jews would have supposed—and the faith that the Spirit inspires are the twin marks of membership in the new covenant people of God.⁹

If it is true that the life-giving Spirit dwells in us, we may be surprised that our bodies are still “dead,” subject to decay and death. This condition, Paul says, is attributable to sin. Our bodies are experiencing the effects of an old era and an old life dominated by sin. Sin, therefore, can still exert influence in our “mortal bodies,” though we can resist it (Romans 6:12, 8:13).

Nevertheless, we should be encouraged that the Spirit is, literally, “life.” The Spirit is imparting to us the life of God, even now, and bringing about renewal for the inner person (Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 4:16).¹⁰ The presence of the Spirit in our lives

is attributable to the righteousness of God, by which he conquered sin and death through Christ so that the Spirit could be given to his people.

Although our bodies will die, death is not their final state. The presence of the Spirit, who unites us with Christ, is the guarantee that God will raise us from the dead, just as he raised Christ, who represents us. It must be this way, for our enemies are sin and death. God, through Christ and the Spirit, conquers both.

Verses 9-11 thus cap Paul's argument that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. God has condemned sin and given his people life. The presence of life, through the Spirit in the present, promises life in the future, beyond the grave. Condemnation will not be—it cannot be—the fate for such people.

The presence of the Spirit

The presence of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is determinative. If you possess the Spirit, you have life, and you need not fear the condemnation of God: final exclusion from the people of God and the presence of God. If you do not possess the Spirit, you are experiencing a kind of living death, and unless the Spirit enters your life, you will face the condemnation of God.

How, then, do you know that you possess the Spirit? First, you believe in the righteousness of God as it is understood in the death and resurrection of his Son. In other words, you believe the gospel. Second, there is an orientation in your life toward God. Your version of life is relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If you believe the gospel and you prefer the presence of God, then you have good reason to be confident. If, on the other hand, you don't believe the gospel and you prefer the absence of God so that you can pursue your version of life, then you have good reason to be fearful.

Feelings of guilt

Many people who have good reason to be confident that they will not face condemnation, and in fact do not believe they will face condemnation, nevertheless live in the present with something that feels to them like condemnation. They live with an almost perpetual sense that they have done, are doing or will do something wrong. They worry that they're not doing enough. They're concerned that they're not meeting expectations, either their own or others'. They hope that they will be able to put their feelings of condemnation behind them if they could only do better, but they're unable to sustain a lifestyle that brings them satisfaction. They weigh themselves in the balances and find themselves wanting.

One critical comment directed their way can send them into a tailspin. Or, they make a comment to someone and later awaken in the middle of the night obsessing that it was inappropriate. They call the next day to apologize to the offended party, who has no recollection of the supposedly deplorable comment.

Martin Luther's words concerning the sense of condemnation he felt before delving into the writings of Paul are memorable:

Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually loathed him.

*I was a good monk, and kept my order so strictly that if ever a monk could get to heaven by monastic discipline, I was that monk. All my companions in the monastery would confirm this. ... And yet my conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, "You didn't do that right. You weren't contrite enough. You left that out of your confession."*¹¹

Luther spent up to six hours a day confessing his sins. One superior advised him, "If you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive—patricide, blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes."¹²

For those who live with this perpetual sense of condemnation, this line from a Bruce Springsteen song well sums up their lives: "I guess for you, my best just wasn't good enough."¹³

Why we feel guilty

Why do so many of us live this way?

Some of us have been conditioned by our upbringing to feel condemned. We have come to believe that certain things are true about us and our world that aren't based in reality. One way or another, the voices we heard in our formative years are still with us. Those who spoke to us in earlier years may be saying the same things. Even if they're not, we hear them in our memories, or in the voices of those who speak to us today.

Writer Anne Lamott tells this story from her youth, which well illustrates the way uncalled for guilt feelings can work their way into our lives:

So I was doing well academically, and I was a well-ranked tennis player and was the apple of my handsome father's eye—and then I would bring home a report card with a B-plus on it, and my parents would look at the report card as if I'd flunked. "Uh, honey?" one of them would ask, looking perplexed. "Now this isn't a criticism but, if you could get a B-plus in philosophy, how much harder would it have been to get an A-minus?"

*It never once occurred to me to stare back at them and say, "What a crock." ... If I could just do a little better, I would finally have the things I longed for—a sense of OKness and connection and meaning and peace of mind, a sense that my family was OK and that we were good people. I would finally know that we were safe, and that my daddy wasn't going to leave us, and that I would be loved someday.*¹⁴

Then there is our current environment, which seems to reinforce the conditioning of our upbringing. We live in a world that has transformed a B-plus into an F—where second-best isn't good enough, even the second-best preschool. Value, it seems, is based on what you do, and what you do never seems to be enough to get the right grades, the right education, the right job, the right promotion, the right relationships or the right recognition.

Some think they're supposed to live with a sense of condemnation. They think it will inspire improvement and discourage wrongdoing. They think that the way of God is to discipline and motivate us by lacerating us with guilt feelings. Or they think they must punish themselves with guilt in spite of the pain it causes. It seems like something God

would want them to do. Or they figure, perhaps, that if they punish themselves, God will go easy on them.

The world of guilt is familiar, and many of us are reluctant to leave a familiar world. Living in freedom from condemnation (Romans 8) comes with challenges similar to living in freedom from sin (Romans 6) and freedom from the law (Romans 7). It's a new world. The fear of leaving guilt behind was well summed up by a man who told his counselor, "Without guilt, what would I do? I would feel completely at sea."¹⁵

Insult to God

When we punish ourselves with guilt, we're telling God, "The sacrifice of your Son is not sufficient." It is an insult to both God and his Son.

And it is more self-absorbed than self-giving. Consider that when we feel guilty for hurting someone, we're usually not so much concerned for the offended party as we are for how our offense makes us feel. Also, when we give someone else the right to make us feel guilty, we're giving that person the place that only God deserves. And God has already rendered his verdict: Not guilty.

Bruce Narramore, a Christian psychologist, made this observation: "As I thought back over my counseling experiences, I had to admit that I could not remember an instance where guilt feelings had a truly beneficial influence in a patient's life. I saw instead the anxiety, inhibitions and withdrawal guilt caused."¹⁶

Deep work of the Spirit

So if we live with a low-grade sense of guilt that never seems to go away for very long, what should we do?

We could purchase a joke product that was advertised this way: "Hounded and nagged by guilt? Get rid of it the modern way, the same way you eliminate underarm wetness, bad breath or limp curls. Spray it away with Guilt Away."¹⁷ Our culture, more or less, has bought "Guilt Away." It has attempted to spray away guilt. The problem is that it hasn't gone away.

As with most aspects of the spiritual life, dealing with our sense of condemnation involves a deep work of the Spirit of God to lead us further into the truth. It's a work with which we must cooperate. We must follow where the Spirit leads—deeper into prayer and deeper into relationship with God's people. When you confess your struggle with guilt feelings in this church, you will have brothers and sisters who will immediately resonate with you. We are not, however, simply at the mercy of our feelings. We need not capitulate to them. We can challenge them with the truth. Guilt feelings, like anything in the spiritual life, can be a doorway to intimacy with God and his people, and to a greater sense of confidence that you are loved, both by God and your spiritual family. Paul will have much more to say about the Spirit, and how he works, in Romans 8:12-30.

Criticism by others does not mean condemnation from God. Discipline by God does not mean condemnation from God. In fact, his discipline, according to the writer of Hebrews, is a sign of his love for you: "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (Hebrews 12:6). The gospel says, simply, "You are enough. You have nothing left to prove." God is saying, "Leave your guilt behind and trust me. Do not be motivated by your guilt but by my love."

I was teaching at a new church of mostly new believers when an argument broke out, in the middle of the worship service, about whether a certain member of the fellowship should be allowed to take communion in that he had “too much sin in his life.” In contrast, a story is told of a 16-year-old Scottish girl who turned away in shame as the communion cup was passed to her one day in church. The pastor of the church, John Duncan, approached his wounded lamb, put his hand on her shoulder, and said, “Take it, lassie. It’s for sinners.”

God has condemned sin in the flesh of his Son. He therefore doesn’t condemn it in us.

What if we believed it?

Our choices are often governed by questions such as these: “What will people think?” “How will I feel?” “What will happen to me?”

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. What if we believed it? Such questions wouldn’t matter. What if we lived our lives on the basis that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus? We’d be free, or at least a lot freer than we are. Without the voice of condemnation ringing in our ears, we’d be more sensitive to the voice of God. We’d be more deeply connected to his love, his power and his leading.

I’ve titled this Romans series “The Letter that Changes the World” because of passages such as this one. If even a handful of us opened the depth of our hearts to Romans 8:1, would the world be a different place? I wonder.

Scott Grant / 6-25-06

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¹ Allan Mallinger and Jeannette DeWyze, *Too Perfect*, © 1992 by Allan Mallinger and Jeannette DeWyze, Ballentine Books, New York. Pp. 162-63.

² Life and death were both connected to the Mosaic Covenant. If the law was obeyed, so that Israel worshiped the Lord and not other gods, Israel would enjoy “life” in the Promised Land. Death was removal from the land where God chose to dwell (Deuteronomy 4:40, 30:15-20).

³ In verse 2, Paul speaks of two kinds of laws. The first kind, the law of the Spirit of life, has set people free from the second kind, the law of sin and of death. An interpretive question, similar to the one raised by Romans 7:21-25, is whether Paul is speaking of the Mosaic Law in one or both cases or whether he’s speaking of a “principle” in one or both cases. In the interest of consistency, it seems best to understand the law of the Spirit as the Mosaic Law fulfilled by the Spirit and the law of sin and of death as the Mosaic Law taken over by sin. The law, in Romans 8:1-11, would then be similar to a human. Both the law and a human fulfill their purposes through the Spirit. Apart from the Spirit, both the law and a human are dead.

⁴ The word “you” in verse 2 is singular, not plural, in keeping with the first-person “I” of Romans 7:7-25. By changing pronouns but retaining the singular number, Paul, a Jew who is able to identify with fleshly Israel because of his life prior to Christ, is now emphasizing that he has all along been speaking about “you,” Israel as a whole. In this way, he also throws open freedom from sin and death to everyone, both Jews and Gentiles who would believe the gospel.

⁵ The language Paul employs is the same that was used of the sin offerings called for in the law (Leviticus 5:6-7; 16:3, 5, 9).

⁶ Paul used the same word that is translated “requirement” (*dikaioma*) in a similar context in Romans 5:16. There, as in Romans 8:4, it is contrasted with “condemnation,” though it is translated “justification.” In Romans 5:16, Paul says that Adam’s transgression resulted in condemnation but that the free gift through Christ results in *dikaioma*. In both Romans 5:16 and 8:4, *dikaioma* concerns a result, not a requirement.

⁷ God expected Israel’s failure and said he would provide for it through a new covenant that would feature the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would give new life to God’s people (Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:27; 37:1-10).

⁸ The verb translated “set their minds on” in verse 5 (*phroneo*) is related to the noun translated “aim” in verse 6 (*phronema*). In verse 6, Paul is defining the things on which the two kinds of people set their minds.

⁹ Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, tying the work of Christ to the work of the Spirit, and identifying both the Spirit and Christ with God. So when he speaks of the indwelling Spirit in verse 10, he can also speak of Christ, for it is the Spirit of Christ who dwells in believers.

¹⁰ The word “Spirit” in verse 10, in keeping with Paul’s use throughout Romans 8:1-14, is likely another reference to the Holy Spirit and not the human spirit.

¹¹ Quoted by Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* © 1997 by Philip D. Yancey. P. 207.

¹² R. Bainton, *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther*, Mentor Books, New York. P. 41.

¹³ Bruce Springsteen, *My Best Was Never Good Enough*, © 2005 by Sony BMG Music Entertainment Inc.

¹⁴ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, © 1999 by Anne Lamott, Pantheon Books, New York. Pp 19-20.

¹⁵ S. Bruce Narramore, *No Condemnation*, © 1984 by the Zondervan Corp., Grand Rapids, Mich. P. 162.

¹⁶ Narramore, P. 20.

¹⁷ Narramore, P. 15.