



Central Peninsula Church

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Romans 8:1-3
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The Promise of Grace

SERIES: *His Precious and Magnificent Promises*

A few years back a movie came out called *The Mission*. It's a story about Catholic missionaries working in South America among native Indian tribes during the mid-1700's. Robert DeNiro plays a slave trading, womanizing Spaniard named Mendoza. When Mendoza murders his own brother, he falls into a deep, guilt induced depression. He's full of remorse and self-condemnation. When a kind priest named Gabriel comes to visit him, Mendoza is inconsolable. Gabriel suggests that he chose his own penance. Mendoza says, "No penance is hard enough for me." Penance, of course, is a voluntary act of self-punishment to pay for a wrongdoing. In the next scene we see Gabriel leading Mendoza through the raging waters and up the steep cliffs of South America. All the while, Mendoza is tied to a massive sack filled with heavy armor and weaponry that he forces himself to drag through this treacherous terrain. When someone mercifully cuts him loose from his load, Mendoza reconnects himself. He won't let go of his burden. No penance is hard enough for him.

That image of the self-condemned Mendoza dragging around a burden of guilt to atone for his own sin has stuck in my head. It hits me that this is the way many of us go through life. Everywhere we go, we drag around with us a load of guilt and condemnation. Sometimes it's just a nagging feeling. At other times, it's an overwhelming burden. Unfortunately, it often motivates us to greater and greater acts of painful sacrifice. No penance is hard enough for us.

It's to that mindset the Apostle Paul speaks in Romans 8:1. In chapter 7 he recounted his own struggle with sin. He said, "**I don't do what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate...I know that nothing good dwells in me...for the willing is present in me, but the doing of good is not**" (Rom. 7:15,18). Finally he cries out, "**Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?**" It's to that tortured mindset that Paul writes at the end of ch. 7, "**Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**" And then he says at the outset of ch. 8, "**Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**" This is a promise. It's the first of many promises in Rom. 8.

I. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This promise cuts us loose from the burden of condemnation. Of course, we all have to deal with different kinds of condemnation. Your wife might condemn you for failing to take out the trash. The courts might condemn you for running a red light. A teacher might condemn you for not knowing the answers on a test. But Paul is talking about a different kind of condemnation; the kind that originates with God. To be condemned by God is to experience the ultimate form of guilt and rejection; one that even extends into eternity.

The word "condemnation" that Paul uses here covers not just our guilt but also the resulting punishment. I can recall as a boy doing something wrong and getting caught by my mother. My guilt was without question. I knew it and she knew it. But then my mom would say, "You'll have to wait until your father gets home. He'll decide on your punishment." That was not a good thing. Far worse to be condemned by God! But what Paul says here covers both our guilt before God and his punishment.

To be freed from condemnation can be thought of in various ways. It can be thought of in a relational way. At one time we were at odds with God. Scripture even speaks of his wrath; his anger. There was hostility between God and us. In today's language, we had "issues." Maybe there is a person in your life you're at odds with. Perhaps you were once close friends but now you never talk; there is a quiet hostility between you. That's how it was with us and God. But no condemnation means the issues have been dealt with; the hostility is gone. The Bible calls this "reconciliation." It means we've been brought together with God and we're now free to pursue our friendship.

It can also be thought of in a kind of legal way. It means that in the courtroom of God we've been declared "not guilty." The Bible calls this "justification." A long time ago someone said that justification means "just-as-if-I-never-did-it." As far as our guilt is concerned, that's true. And if we're not guilty, we're considered innocent; even righteous. Of course, for that to happen, we had to be forgiven. The Scripture says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us." How far is

that? That's a long way! That's an infinite distance! That's why there is no condemnation. There is nothing left to condemn us for. Our sins are gone!

This is quite a promise because, if we're honest, guilt and shame are powerful things. Years ago a man named Sir Arthur Conan Doyle decided to play a practical joke on 12 friends. He sent them a telegram which read, "Flee at once! All has been discovered." That's all it said. No specific accusations were made. But within 24 hours all 12 of those friends had left the country! Deep down, we all know we're guilty. But here in Rom. 8:1 we've received a telegram of another kind. It contains a powerful promise: no guilt, no punishment, no condemnation.

Notice that Paul says this is true of us NOW. "Therefore there is NOW no condemnation..." This an eternal fact. It's true now and it always will be true. Not only have our past and present sins been removed, but our future ones as well. The rope which connected us to our burden has been cut and thrown out and we can never be connected to it again.

Now that's great news! That's a wonderful promise! And it begs the question, how can Paul make a promise like that? How can he be sure? I find there are two misunderstandings about this promise that can get us off track. Paul deals with these in the next few verses.

"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh," (vv. 2-3).

II. We are not freed from condemnation because we keep God's law.

The first misunderstanding is that we're free from condemnation because we're really pretty good people; because we really are doing our best to keep God's laws. But Paul speaks as one who knows the impossibility of keeping God's law. All through ch. 7 Paul spoke of God's law, which is embodied in the Ten Commandments. He argued that the law is good. It came from God and it reflects God's perfect nature. But he also said that the law functions in our life in a negative way. It both reveals sin and it provokes sin. And sin always leads to death, in this case, not physical death but spiritual death. That's why he calls it "the law of sin and death." This is not something we live by, but something we needed to be set free from.

In v. 3 he talks about what the law could not do. The law couldn't do something. It was weak. It was impotent. What is it that the law couldn't do? The law couldn't make us righteous. The law couldn't get rid of our sin. The law couldn't free us from condemnation. Why is that? Is there something wrong with the law? No! The problem is in us. The law was weak because it depended on what Paul calls "the flesh." He's not talking about our physical flesh. This was Paul's stock in trade term for our sinful nature. The flesh is human nature apart from God. It's the best we can do on our own. Apart from God we're bent in the wrong direction. In 7:14 Paul writes, **"For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin."** The good news is that we've been set free from that bondage. He says that what the law could not do, GOD DID. The promise of no condemnation is not about what I can do, but it's about what God did. God stepped in and did something we could not do. We can't do it ourselves. We don't have what it takes, no matter how hard we try to fix ourselves. C.S. Lewis said, "No arrangement of bad eggs can make a good omelet."

So this promise is not based on you and I being good people who try really hard to keep God's law. In the movie I mentioned earlier, Mendoza spends the rest of his life serving the Indians he once hunted like animals. Is that what freed him from his burden? Whenever I talk to people about what it means to be a Christian I like to ask them about how it is they feel they can be right with God. I'm always amazed at how many people, sadly even people who have sat in church for a long time and heard many sermons, answer by saying God accepts them because they're good people who try their best to do what's right. I hope you can see that just won't work. God doesn't say that there is no condemnation because there is nothing in you to condemn. There is lots in all of us to condemn.

Remember how Jesus heightened the bar in the Sermon on the Mount? He said it's not just about adultery – if you look or think about another person in a lustful way you are guilty of adultery. He said it's not just about murder – if you are angry at your brother and call him a "good for nothing" you are guilty of murder. He said it's not just about an eye for an eye. If an evil person slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also. If we think we can escape condemnation because we can keep the law, we need to take another look at the law.

III. We are not freed from condemnation because sin is not serious.

This leads me to a second misunderstanding. The idea that we're free from condemnation because sin is not really all that serious. Notice at the end of v. 3 that it's very clear – God condemns sin. He doesn't regard it lightly. In fact, sin is so serious that it carries with it the death penalty.

That's why it's called the law of sin and death. Every time we break God's law, the sentence is death. That's how serious sin is.

As a matter of fact, it's so serious that God sent his Son to deal with it. God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. Notice how careful Paul is with his words here. He didn't come *in* sinful flesh; he came *in the likeness* of sinful flesh. He took on a body just like ours and was subject to all the temptations that we are, but he didn't have a sin nature like we do. He was the only one who ever really kept the law. He lived a sinless life. This makes what he did even more meaningful. Paul says he came "as an offering for sin, and he condemned sin in the flesh." In the OT the people of God sacrificed unblemished animals as sin offerings to indicate the guilt of their sins. The death of that animal symbolized the seriousness of sin as well as God's willingness to transfer the penalty of that sin upon another. What God symbolized with an innocent animal he fulfilled with the innocent blood of his Son. In one stroke, Christ's death shows how great is God's love and how terrible is our sin. It's so terrible that the life of the Son of God was required to pay its penalty. I would say that's serious, wouldn't you? If you belittle sin, you belittle the Son of God who had to pay for it. Dorothy Sayers once wrote, "It is curious that people who are filled with horrified indignation whenever a cat kills a sparrow can hear the story of the killing of God told Sunday after Sunday and not experience any shock at all." Maybe that's because we've lost sight of the seriousness of sin.

IV. There is no condemnation because God's Son was condemned for us.

We have the promise of no condemnation not because sin is no big deal, but because God offered up his Son to be condemned for us. Your sin and my sins were judged and condemned in the person of Jesus as he hung on the cross. That's why Paul said up in v.1 that this promise is only for those "who are in Christ Jesus." If you're not in Christ Jesus, then you're subject to the condemnation you deserved in the first place. Someone has to pay. It will be either you or the Son of God. To be in Christ Jesus means you've put your faith in him as your sin bearer and Savior. As a result you're in him like you're in this building right now.

A duck hunter was with a friend in the wide open land in southeast Georgia. Far away on the horizon he noticed a cloud of smoke. Soon he could hear crackling as the wind shifted. He then realized a terrible truth: a brush fire was coming right at him so fast that there was no way he could outrun it. He rifled through his pockets and finally found what he was looking for – a book of matches. He lit a small fire around the two of them. Soon they were standing in a circle of blackened earth, waiting for the fire to come.

They didn't have to wait long. They covered their mouths with handkerchiefs and braced themselves and the fire came near and passed over them. But they were completely untouched. Fire would not pass where fire had already passed. The condemnation of God is like a brush fire. I can't escape it. But if I stand in the burned over place where Jesus himself and my sin with him was judged and condemned, then the promise is true for me: There is now no condemnation for those who stand in Christ. Condemnation will not pass where condemnation has already passed.

Many of us know this. We've studied this and believed this, yet we still struggle to internalize this; to enjoy the freedom of this great promise. We live with guilt even after it's gone like an amputee lives with the phantom pain of a lost limb. I think there are any number of reasons for that. One of the reasons is that we still struggle with sin. We have a hard time reconciling no condemnation with reality of our daily struggle and failings with sin. But remember that it was Paul's own struggle with sin in Rom. 7 that led him to make this great promise in the first place. I'd even say that it's your battle with sin, your sensitivity to it, that indicates this promise is true for you. Those who are not in Christ aren't that sensitive to sin. They just don't care that much. But when the Lord invades your life, that's when the battle really begins. So if you feel the battle, take heart, that's evidence that not only are you in Christ, but he is in you!

Another reason we struggle to internalize this promise is that we still have to deal with sin's consequences. The promise is for no condemnation, not no consequences. Your sin might have led to a divorce, or financial failure, or angry children, or health problems, etc. These hard realities have a way of reminding us of our failures, don't they? But the reality of consequences don't nullify the firmness of God's promise. There are times as parents when we have to watch our children walk through tough times that come as a result of their own bad choices. As hard as that is for us, it's unwise for us to try to protect them from the consequences. But in the midst of that our commitment to them doesn't waver. The best way to see this is as the discipline of a loving father. Hebrews says, "**God deals with you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?**" (Heb. 12:7). Your consequences are the painful lessons that a loving Father allows you to experience because he's committed more to your holiness than to your happiness.

Some of us struggle to internalize this promise because we're just wired with a performance mindset.

We know we're forgiven, but we still feel we should be doing so much better in our walk with God. Deep down, though we may know he loves us and forgives us, we feel he must be disappointed with us. It's just a feeling we can't shake. But the promise of no condemnation is also the promise that you're absolutely pleasing to him in every way. He is as pleased with you as he is with his own Son. We ask how could that be?

CONCLUSION

Maybe a story will help. It's one I've told before, but it's been several years so I can tell it again. It's a story from his baptism. Remember how Jesus came forward to be baptized by John, and John didn't want to do it because he was baptizing people as a symbol of their repentance from sin. Well, Jesus had no sin. So John looked at him and said, "You should be baptizing me." But Jesus insisted. Why?

Imagine with me for a minute that you and I are with him on the shores of Galilee. Imagine we're all lined up to get baptized, but first we have to put on a name tag. We go to a table where everyone is lined up to get a name tag. When it's our turn the person asks for our name. "My name is Sam." She writes down your name. Then she asks, "Sam, what is your worst sin?" Sam's not so sure he wants to answer that, but he really wants to get baptized, so he tells her, "Well, I committed adultery once." The person writes down, "adulterer" right below his name. She gives him his name tag and he puts it on and gets in line. This goes on and on. Person after person. Mary - Thief. Joe - Liar. Sheila - Gossip. George - Coward. Each one puts their name tag on with their worst sin in bold print right under their name. Now Jesus is in that line, too. Jesus comes to the table. "What's your name?" "Jesus." "What's your greatest sin?" Silence. Then Jesus walks over to Sam and says, "Sam, let me wear your name tag." He does the same with Mary and Joe and Sheila and all the rest. Finally, Jesus is covered with a thousand name tags with your name and my name and all of our sins and we all watch as he walks into the water to be baptized. When Jesus comes up out of the water, all of the writing on those name tags has been washed away. All the sins are gone and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus began his ministry being baptized, symbolizing his identification with sinners like you and me. Later, that symbol would become a reality as he took our name tags with him to the cross. So what the Father said of Jesus is true of us who are in him: "You are my Son and I am well-pleased with you." Here is another way of saying that: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; if I may say it, for those who give him their name tag." That's a promise. That's a promise we can count on.

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