

Romans: The Promise of Righteousness (part 1 of 6)

The Beauty of "No Condemnation"

Romans 8:1-4

Mark Vroegop

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ 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, ⁴ 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. Romans 8:1-4 (ESV)

Just east of the Royal Mile, a road in downtown Edinburgh, Scotland, which connects the Historic Edinburgh Castle and the Palace of Holyrood, is a massive volcanic rock formation that juts into the sky over Edinburgh. It is called Arthur's seat, and it may have been named due to legendary King Arthur. Or the locals just said "Archer's seat" too quickly without careful pronunciation. No one knows for sure.

Arthur's seat can be seen from nearly everywhere in Edinburgh due to the fact that its elevation is nearly 1,000 feet which is significant considering that it is within walking distance of the North Sea. Its close proximity to the center of the city and the trails that lead to the summit make it a popular hiking destination for visitors.

Early one morning Sarah, Joseph and I hiked to the top of Arthur's seat, and it was one of my favorite memories of our visit in Scotland. The view from the summit was incredible. You could see the North Sea, the bay which is called Firth of Fourth, the Castle, the Royal Palace, the Scottish parliament building, and the green rolling hills for which Scotland is famous. The city was attractive and interesting at the street level, but when seen from the summit, everything was even more beautiful.

The view from the summit allowed us to see the total beauty of Edinburgh, and it was something we talked about during our descent and at breakfast that morning. Being at the summit changed what I see in my head and what I feel when I think about Edinburgh. The summit view was that beautiful.

The Summit of Romans

Today we arrive at what I consider to be the summit of the book of Romans: Chapter 8. We started our journey last year, and we have kept this reference point in view as we walked through the dark sections of chapters 1-3, as we learned about righteousness that comes by faith in chapters 4-5, as we discovered the positional freedom of chapter 6, and as we examined the internal struggle of chapter 7. Being at the summit allows us to look back and see where we have been.

But it also gives us a view of what is to come. After chapter eight comes three of the most challenging chapters in all of the Bible, Romans 9-11, as we will wrestle with the mystery of God's sovereignty. And our descent is concluded with chapters 12-16 as we will learn how to apply the doctrinal truths of Romans to practical living and areas of disagreement.

In chapter eight we are going to see the full beauty of a believer's position in Christ, our spiritual adoption, our identity, sanctification, how to think about suffering, and what our final destiny looks like. This is a glorious text, and it is a memorable place to be. So be sure that you savor the view from the summit of Romans 8 so that you are not only awed by what you see but also motivated to share the beauty with others.

The Logic and Beauty of Romans 8:1-4

Our text this morning is the first four verses of Romans 8, and it is a stunning distillation of what Christianity is all about. It is both logical (since Paul is making an argument in Romans) and beautiful (since Paul is overwhelmed with the power what he is talking about). In other words, from this position in Romans we can see how grace works and why it is so amazing.

I want to follow Paul's train of thought in these first four verses, highlight four awe-inspiring phrases, and then share some practical implications.

"No Condemnation"

The first phrase serves as the foundation for the entire chapter and even the entire book of Romans. Previously I have said that the word "righteousness" is the key word or the theme of the book of Romans (see Rom. 1:16-18, 3:21-26). That is still true. However, verses 1-4 show us the foundation underneath God's gift of righteousness. The bedrock supporting righteousness is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Notice that verse 1 contains the important word "therefore." That word tips us off that what is going to follow is an implication, the conclusion or the resolution to what has been previously said. What does Paul have in view here? At one level he has chapter seven in view and especially verses 13-25 as he identified the internal struggle with indwelling sin (v. 23) and the hope that was found in Christ (v. 25). Chapter eight is the resolution to chapter seven. But there is more.

It is also likely that chapter eight is the implication or the resolution to chapters 1-7. The entire book has been building to this point, and verses 1-4, especially verse one, provide the signature statement for the book of Romans. In other words, if you were to take one phrase away from Romans take this one: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Secondly, notice the word "now" in verse one. It is an odd thing to say so it must be important. And it is. The word "now" is indicating that a new epoch, dispensation, or moment in biblical history has been ushered in. The previous era was characterized by the Law, the increase of sin and the reign of death (see Rom. 5:20). God's righteousness was revealed through the Law, and it exposed the unrighteousness of mankind (Rom. 1:18-23). The Law made it clear that God is holy and I am not!

Condemnation is the implication of the Law. So when Paul says that there is now no condemnation, he is saying that something new and special and glorious is at work.

I keep using this word “condemnation,” and I want to be sure that we know what it means. The Greek word means to judge someone as guilty and subject them to punishment. In a human justice system there is both the verdict and the punishment. But this word captures both. To be condemned is both to be found guilty and to be sentenced. It means that before God sinful human beings are both guilty and condemned to eternal damnation. Both hang over us because of our rebellion. We are not neutral when it comes to God, and the Law only made that condition more clear.

Therefore, the beauty of Romans 8 is the unbelievable statement that “there is therefore now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus.” It means that there is no longer the charge of guilt or the penalty connected with rebellion against God. Our relationship with God has been radically, eternally, and gloriously changed. And while this is something that relates to our past, it also relates to how we live now and in the future. There is a new statement or status over us. We have a new standing before God.

I struggled to find another English word that captures this idea, and I cannot find one word to capture all of what “no condemnation” means. We could use words like forgiveness, pardon, or commutation. But they do not capture the full meaning as it relates to the future. The words amnesty, especially as it relates to illegal immigration, or immunity, as it relates to past and future actions, get closer to the meaning. But even these are not sufficient.

No condemnation means that God has legally declared certain people to be free of guilt and punishment because their crimes have been paid for. Their record has not just been expunged; it has been exchanged for another record and they have been given a new relationship with the very God who was formerly against them.

To say that there is “no condemnation” is to say that everything has now changed. It means that something so fundamental to who a person is, how he or she relates to God, what one’s eternal destiny will look like, and who you really are has been radically altered. Once it is understood, the reality of “no condemnation” is like coming to the summit where you can see the landscape of your life so differently. “No condemnation” changes everything!

“Free in Christ Jesus”

If you are following closely you will note that I left a very important phrase in verse one unexplained. The text says “there is no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus.**” Now this is very important – crucially important. “No condemnation” is not declared over the entire human race. It is exclusively applied to those who are characterized as being “in Christ.” Verse two expands on this, and that is why it begins with the word “for.”

The pronouncement of “no condemnation” can only happen because of the payment that Christ made. It is the death of Jesus that makes it possible for God to grant sinful human beings forgiveness. The freedom that comes with “no condemnation” is not just given; it is purchased.

Therefore, the concepts of “freedom” and “in Christ” are absolutely inseparable. That is why verse two says: “for the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Paul is expanding on how it is possible that a person could have “no condemnation” over them.

Here is how it works. There is a law holding every human being hostage – the law of sin and death. This is the law that condemns us, accuses us, and damns us. What’s more, we are powerless to change our captivity to this law. However, the beauty of God’s grace is that there is now a “new law” that is in force, and this law canceled or fulfilled (as you will see in verse 4) the old law. In the same way that sinful human beings are united to sin and death, they can be united to Christ. “In Christ” means that we are united to him and no longer united to the penalty and consequence of sin. There is a new realm, a new union and a new law.

Now Paul calls the new law something interesting: “the law of the Spirit of life.” In Romans 7:6 we heard something similar:

⁶ But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. Romans 7:6 (ESV)

The life under condemnation is connected to “the old way,” and life under “no condemnation” is connected to this idea of a new way in the Spirit (7:6) or “the law of the Spirit of life” in Romans 8:2. The new way is marked by the Holy Spirit. Previously in Romans, the Holy Spirit has been mentioned (see 1:4, 2:29, 5:5, and 7:6). But the Holy Spirit takes on a new prominence in chapter eight mentioned in thirteen of thirty-nine verses.

To be “in Christ” is to possess the benefits and power of the Holy Spirit. That is why this new reality is called the law of the Spirit of life. The union that believers share with Christ is so linked to the Holy Spirit that to not have the Holy Spirit is not to really be “in Christ.”

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. Romans 8:9 (ESV)

Now we will unpack this further in the next two weeks, but I want you to see here the significant connection between the Spirit and Christ. They are inseparable for the believer. You might think of them as wetness is to water. Water and wetness are different but they are so linked that if you want someone to jump into a body of water you might say, “Come on! Get wet!” Or if you saw someone drenched with wetness you might ask them, “Where did you find water?” Water and wetness are so linked that they compliment one another. To be “in Christ” means to be under the law of the Spirit of life.

Notice, however, what the Spirit does because this is what makes this section so glorious. The Spirit sets us free in Christ from the law of sin and death. So the beauty of the presence of the Spirit is not just the Spirit himself. The beauty is what the Spirit does. He sets us free! The power that sin and death had over us is now eclipsed by a new power – the power of life. The Holy Spirit is the means, the agent, the person by whose power the believer is delivered and by whose power the believer continually lives.

To understand what is happening in Romans 8 you have to see that Paul is not only talking about past events or future events. He has those in view, but he also has a present reality in his sights. So the power of the Holy Spirit has not only set us free in Christ from the guilt and penalty of our past sins and from the threat of future punishment, but also this power is something that we live in now.

Our past is free. Our future is free. Our present is free! Everything about the Christian life is marked by grace and freedom and life. To have “no condemnation” over you is to also have “freedom in Christ Jesus” over you. And understanding this serves to liberate you from regret and guilt over the past, but also to be the fuel for godliness and righteousness.

“He Condemned Sin”

The third beautiful statement is found in verse three which is the longest verse in our section. Verse three starts with the word “for” as does verse two. So this is the second explanation of “no condemnation.” In other words, this verse also explains what happened leading to the unbelievable statement in verse one.

³ 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. Romans 8:3 (ESV)

The focus of verse three is different. It features the work of God. Notice the phrases that capture this tone: “For God has done...by sending his own Son...he condemned sin.” The beauty of verse three is, in part, the stunning display of God’s intervention. God moved to rescue sinful people who could not rescue themselves. God saves sinners. God provided the sacrifice. God made a way for reconciliation.

So as we marvel at the beauty of unmerited favor and stunning forgiveness, we need to keep in mind that the ultimate beauty of redemption is not the people who were saved but the God that saved them. “No condemnation” is beautiful because of what it says about God!

Notice the four things that God does in verse three:

- He sent his own son as the means of redemption. God rescued people at great personal cost.
- The Son was sent “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” a statement that is connected with the previous statement regarding law being weakened by the flesh. The flesh, especially sinful flesh, is the problem with mankind. It is what makes mankind hostile to God (see Rom. 8:8) and is what is fundamentally broken with our humanity (see Rom. 7:14). Jesus comes in the form of that broken, hostile, and malfunctioned image of God.
- The Son was sent “for sin,” which means that Jesus did not bring a sacrifice. He was the sacrifice (2 Cor. 5:21). The Son of God became the sin offering (Heb. 9:11-14).
- God, through the sacrifice of his Son, condemned sin in the flesh. It is no coincidence that Paul uses the word “condemned” here. He uses the word so closely to verse one so that we will see the connection! God declares “no condemnation” over those who are “in Christ” because he poured out condemnation on sin through Christ.

What does it mean that he condemned sin in the flesh? This is the only place where Paul uses language like this. It means that the location of rebellion, the flesh, became the location of the restoration. It means that Jesus' death could be applied to other flesh-bearing creations. And it meant that sin was defeated. Listen to how John Murray eloquently summarizes this truth:

Jesus not only blotted out sin's guilt and brought us nigh to God. He also vanquished sin as a power and set us free from its enslaving dominion. And this could not have been done except "in the flesh." The battle was joined and the triumph secured in that same flesh which in us is the seat and agent of sin.¹

Sin is not just forgiven or cleansed or wiped away. Sin was paid for, atoned, and purchased. You were declared "not condemned" because sin was declared "condemned" in Christ. If you are a follower of Jesus you need to remember that your redemption was purchased. And you also need to remember that through Christ sin was defeated, vanquished, and conquered. There was divine condemnation for sin, but it was poured out on Jesus so that you might receive the blessing of "no condemnation."

"Walk According to the Spirit"

The fourth and final statement that we find in this section is in verse four. If verse one was the proclamation and verses 2-3 were the explanations, we now have the effect. This is highlighted by the phrase "in order that." What follows is the end result of the previous statements.

There are two key phrases that we need to understand in verse four. But before we turn our attention to them let me identify for you an important change that happens in this verse. Previously Paul was talking about things that related to a believer's standing or position. We were talking about condemnation, charges, and the activity of God through Christ. There is a sense that we are looking back or maybe underneath when it comes to these ideas.

The focus shifts in verse four to the practical implications of these spiritual realities. You might compare it to the difference of climbing to the top of Arthur's seat and thinking about the overall beauty of what you are seeing or considering how far you have walked in verses 1-3. But imagine if you saw Edinburgh Castle or the Royal Mile while atop Arthur's seat and you said, "I want to go THERE!" Your elevated vision has given you not just a new view but a new passion to go on. That is, I think, what is happening here.

Next week we will look at verses 5-11, the life of Spirit in the followers of Jesus, and what it means. Paul introduces that idea by linking two phrases that are unique and yet parallel to one another. The two phrases are:

- "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us"
- "who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

To say that the righteous requirement of the law has been fulfilled in us is to say that Jesus by virtue of his life and death kept the Law perfectly and satisfied the demands of its righteousness. And now this

¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans - NICNT*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1965), 282.

² Dustin Crowe has authored a very helpful [blog](#) with resources for the New Year.

righteous standing has been given to those who are “in Him.” When he died, we died. If sin and death have no dominion over him, they have no dominion over us. If he was righteous, then we are righteous. The Law was fulfilled in us because Jesus fulfilled the Law.

But then the apostle does something amazing! He describes those to whom this applies. Who are those who have experienced this Law-fulfillment? Answer: those who no longer walk according to the flesh but walk, instead, according to the Spirit. And in so doing, Paul moves the discussion from only about positional realities into the practical realm.

Why is that important? You need to see this or you will only walk away with gratitude for the statement “no condemnation” over you instead of being filled with gratitude and the motivation to see this reality really lived out in your life now. In other words, the summit of Romans 8 is meant to both “wow” you and “woo” you!

Six Implications

One of my prayers from Romans 8 is that you will come to live in these truths, and not just know them. I do not want you to treat our journey through this chapter like a visit to an aquarium or a zoo where you look at all the animals you’ll never own. I want this to be like a visit to a memorial or maybe (in a negative sense) the Holocaust Museum where you see history and are left changed.

There are so many potential implications of this chapter and these first four verses, so please do not be content with what I share here. Take the sermon application guide and work out more of these in your small groups this week and next.

Worship – What should be your aim every Sunday as we gather together in corporate worship? Why do you come? Why should you sing? Why should you listen? Because we are reconnecting our broken lives in a broken world with broken actions to a truth that we need to remember and live in. Namely, that there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” But our affection and attention to this reality leaks so quickly. We need worship because we have leaky hearts!

Prayer – Tomorrow morning we start Prayer Week here at College Park. How does Romans 8 relate to prayer? Prayer is the means that I both express gratitude to God for what He has done for me, and is my connection to his supply of the grace that I need to live. It is only “not condemned” people who can truly approach the throne of grace for help. And if you have been declared “not condemned” then God promises to supply the help you need to walk in the Spirit. So pray! Pray in the Holy Spirit and keep yourselves in the love of God! (Jude 20-21).

Evangelism – If you want 2015 to be a year where you take bold and intentional steps in evangelism, do you know what you need to do? Relish in the beauty of Romans 8 and what it means that God has declared you condemnation free. Guess what I did the second I walked in the hotel room after climbing Aruthr’s seat? I told the other kids about what it was like and what they missed. It was easy to share when my heart was full. If you get Romans 8 in your heart you will have gospel witness on your tongue. Don’t fight the fear of sharing your faith with guilt. Fight it with beauty – the stunning reality of what God has done for you in Christ.

Identity – “No condemnation” is the most important statement about who you really are. It defines your identity like nothing else can. This week you will come back from Christmas break, and everyone will have their new things. You know what is going to happen. There will be this serial comparison. Do you have the right clothes? Did you get the latest piece of technology? What kind of bag should you carry books in? Did your family have the best vacation? Did you get “the ring” over the holidays? Are you cool or are you not? If these things become your primary identity, you will be miserable – and idolatrous. They were never meant to be your identity like “no condemnation” is.

No one could love you more passionately, satisfy you more deeply, or settle you more definitely than God. There is nothing more foundational to life than for God to say “no condemnation” over you. Nothing.

Guilt – Even our failures, real or perceived, can be eclipsed by the beauty of Romans 8. Maybe you look back on 2014 with great regret or have misgivings about your inadequacies as a parent or you feel bad or awkward when you are around family or you just live with a sense of shame. Maybe you wonder if the trial or the pain that you are in is because God is angry with you. Or maybe you are struggling to love a hard person in your life, and it doesn’t always go very well. Well, Romans 8 reminds us that we are not under condemnation, that our sins are paid for by Christ, and God is for us – not against us. And out of the overwhelming reservoir of God’s kindness, you pour your imperfect love and broken kindness to the hard people in your life.

Godliness – “No condemnation” is the fuel for more godliness in your life. The New Year is often a time for new resolutions, and I think that the beauty of Romans 8 serves as a great motivator for a new passion for Bible meditation, memorization, prayer, and generosity.² Accountability may help a little, but I think “no condemnation” helps even more. Seeing the beauty of “no condemnation” helps us see the trifle, silly, and temporary pleasures that the devil offers us. Why would you go to movie when you can visit the Grand Canyon?

Oh, College Park, come to the summit of Romans 8 and see the beauty what is here. See the grace of God poured out. See the sovereign work of God on your behalf. See the sacrifice of the Son. See the condemnation of sin. See the power of the Spirit. See what “no condemnation” really means.

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² Dustin Crowe has authored a very helpful [blog](#) with resources for the New Year.