

# God Has Done What the Law Could Not

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Romans 8:1-4

February 25, 2018

## Introduction:

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who are keenly interested in how things work and those who only care that things do indeed work. I am of the latter category. I just want things to work properly; it doesn't matter to me how it works as long as it does. So for example, I don't know much about cars, so when I'm having car difficulties, and someone tells me to pop the hood and take a look, you might as well have asked me to pop open a book written in Swahili and start reading. I have no idea what I'm looking at other than it's a bunch of hoses and wires and metal parts that have some function but what that is exactly is totally lost on me. I don't really care much about how the car works as long as the car works. I just want to turn the key, have the engine start, and be able to drive to my destination. As to what exactly makes that happens, I'm happy to leave to the mechanics.

But of course there are, thankfully, those people who love to tinker with things and can't help but try to figure out how they work. As kids, they find more fun in breaking the toy apart to see how it works than actually playing with it. Such individuals are far more interested in the "how" of the object than that "what" of whatever it does.

If you're that kind of person, then this morning's message might appeal to you because our passage is concerned with answering the why and how questions that come out of our passage we looked at last week. Last Sunday we looked at only one verse, Romans 8:1, which informed us of the glorious good news that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But today the apostle Paul will elaborate on that statement by explaining for us why we Christians are no longer under condemnation and how God brought that situation about.

So let's take a look at what Paul has to say by opening your Bibles to Romans 8. We'll be studying v. 1-4 of Romans 8, which can be found on pg. 944 of the hardcover Bibles in the pews, should you be using them this morning. Please follow along as I read v. 1-4. Paul writes, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."**

So let's begin by just considering the first verse, which says this which is our first point...

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

We spent our entire time last week unpacking this verse, but since not everyone was here last week and since what we'll be spending the majority of our time studying this morning is a further elaboration on this verse, we need to review it briefly.

Paul says in v. 1, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** He’s drawing a conclusion from all that he’s been teaching over the past few chapters of Romans, reminding us that because of the gospel, we are no longer under the condemnation of God’s wrath for our sin. Whereas he began back in chapter 1 saying God’s wrath was being revealed against all our unrighteousness, now because of the grace of God shown to us through Jesus Christ, there is no longer any condemnation for those who are Christians.

As we talked about last week, that is good news of the highest order! Our single greatest threat we face as human beings is not nuclear war or terrorism or cancer or a stray asteroid hitting the earth: our greatest threat is God’s wrath. Asteroids or cancer can only kill us physically; God can send us to hell for all eternity. And since Paul has made his case that none of us have met the righteous requirements of the Law, we are therefore all sinners who stand under God’s wrath as punishment for our sins.

But the magnificent news of the gospel is that for those who have trusted in Christ as their Lord and Savior, there is now **“no condemnation”** awaiting us. The threat of God’s wrath has been avoided. God no longer stands in opposition to you. His wrath has been satisfied. Instead, you now have peace with God, as Paul mentioned back in chapter 5. Because of Christ, you can rest assured that God will never be at war with you, that he will never change his mind and place you back under condemnation for your sin. There is a wonderful, soul-delighting assurance that comes to us through the promise of **“no condemnation”** in Christ Jesus.

That was our sermon last week in a nutshell, but now we need to pop open the hood as it were and ask some questions, namely “Why?” “How?” and “What for?” Why is that we’re no longer under condemnation for our sin? How is it that God’s wrath was satisfied? And finally what does this mean for us now that we’re no longer under condemnation for our sin? What does God then expect of us?

So let’s turn to answer those question beginning with the “Why” question that Paul answers in v. 2. So our second point answers the question of, “Why is it that we are no longer under condemnation for our sin?”

## **2. Why? Because we’ve been set free from the law of sin and death.**

Please look back in your Bibles at v. 2. Notice Paul begins with the word **“for.”** He’s now moving on to explain why this is true, that we are not under condemnation. The word **“for”** is a conjunction that tells us what is about to follow will provide the reason for the previous statement. So Paul says, **“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”**

Sometimes when Paul uses the word **“law”** he’s using it in terms of referring to the Mosaic law and other times he’s using it to refer to the idea of a principle or a power. In this verse, he’s using it in the latter sense, as a principle or power. Previously, we were under the power of sin and death, as Paul has made clear throughout Romans thus far. Frequently, Paul has spoken of sin as not merely an action we do in violation of God’s

will but as a power under which we were enslaved. We were under sin's dominion in that our desires were bent toward rebellion and rejection of God. As Paul so clearly expressed in chapter 7, in spite of his knowing what God expected of him, he still did those things which he knew he shouldn't do and didn't do what he knew he should have done. And so he cried out in v. 24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Paul was spiritually dead before Christ, unable to change himself by his own strength. His flesh was dead to the things of God. He could not respond in faith or obedience because he was totally enslaved to his sinful heart and mind.

Were Paul to remain in such a helpless, spiritually dead, sinful estate, there would indeed be condemnation awaiting him. But something happened to change the state of affairs he was in bondage to. Paul says here in v. 2, "**The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus...**" The Holy Spirit brought about a change in Paul's position before God. By causing him to be born again, spiritual death was replaced with spiritual life, such that Paul was no longer enslaved to the sinful desires that previously ruled over him. He had been set free to turn from his sin and believe in Christ. As a result, because he looked to Christ as his Savior, trusting in God's promises made to us through the cross, Paul was no longer under condemnation for sin because he believed Christ suffered God's wrath in his place.

In essence then, there are two kinds of people in the world that are far more significant than the two kinds I humorously mentioned at the start of the sermon. Either you are under the power of sin and death or you have been set free by the power of the Spirit. There's no middle ground, no third option available. You are either under condemnation because you are enslaved to sin or you are not under condemnation because the Spirit has set you free in Christ Jesus by causing you to be born again so you could repent and believe.

So then, there's no more important question to ask yourself than, "Which of these two kinds of people am I?" You have either been set free by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that has transformed your heart to know, love, and trust in Christ or you are still in your sins, spiritually dead and enslaved to sinful desires that rule over you. You are either under no condemnation or under full condemnation. As we go on, we'll talk about how to move from death to life if you see yourself as not having the assurance of being under no condemnation due to your sin and furthermore we'll talk about what a person who has passed from spiritual death to spiritual life looks like in order to ward off any false assurance we might deceive ourselves with. But for now, the question of "Which of these am I?" is of paramount importance. Have you been set free by Christ or are you still under the condemning power of sin and death?

To help us, the apostle Paul goes on to further explain how it is that the Spirit has set us free from the condemnation for us that once faced us. So the logic of this passage flows like this: Those in Christ are under no condemnation for sin (v. 1). Why? Because the Spirit has set them free from the power of sin and death (v.2). How? How did this happen? Well, that brings us to v. 3-4 and thus to our third point...

### 3. How? God's Son fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law for us.

Let's look back in our Bibles now at just the first sentence there in v. 3. **“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”** Paul is calling us back to what he talked about quite a bit in chapters 6-7 and even more than that, even since chapter one, which is that the Law of Moses was never able to save us. The Jews, such as Paul back when he was a Pharisee, thought that righteousness could be achieved by strict obedience to the law. The Gentiles, who didn't have the Law, did nevertheless have the righteous requirements of the law written on their hearts, so that they fully knew it was wrong to lie, murder, cheat, and steal. And while they didn't think one had to obey the law perfectly, they, much like people today, believed that provided your good deeds outweighed your bad deeds, God would accept you.

But regardless of whatever they had the written Law of Moses or the moral law written on their conscience, they couldn't measure up to the expectations of God, which is to be holy as he is holy. The expectation of the law isn't occasional obedience. It isn't that if you do at least 75% good deeds you'll pass. It's perfect obedience, 100% of the time. And it's a standard we all have failed because none of us have remotely come close to that level of obedience. As Paul said earlier in the book of Romans, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So the law, while good and righteous because it is a reflection of the holy character of God, could not save us, not because there is a deflection in it but rather because there is a serious deflection in us. Paul says the law could not save us because it was **“weakened by the flesh.”** Our enslavement to sin ruins the ability of the law to save us. If you could obey God's Word perfectly, always obeying the Ten Commandments and for every moment of your life do exactly what God asks of you, then yes, you could be saved on the basis of your obedience. But the flesh is weak. Our desires are bent toward pride and self-centeredness. We lust after things, be it people or objects, and so covet our neighbor's home or car or wife.

By way of reminder then, and it can never be said enough, God will never accept you on the basis of your good works. Ever. You can never do enough good deeds to outweigh your bad deeds because that's not how it works. No one goes to heaven because he was a really nice guy or because she was always kind and generous to others. Mother Theresa may have committed far fewer sins than Adolf Hitler, but neither of them possessed enough good deeds to earn God's favor. The law could not save either of them because they both sinned and both deserved God's wrath for their sin. And so it is for us. If you're banking on your good works as your ticket into heaven, you will fail. Obedience to the law cannot and will not save you from God's wrath because none of us have kept it perfectly, so do not rely upon it. I know it's common in our culture to believe that a person has died and gone to heaven because he was such a swell fellow, but that is a lie and a deception. The law is not able to save us because our flesh is enslaved to sin, and we cannot therefore obey the law as we ought.

So that then begs the question, “What is it then that God has done for us that the law could not?” How did God bring about the justification of sinners if we all utterly failed in our obedience to the law? To answer that, let’s look back in our Bible at the second half of verse 3. Paul writes, **“By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us...”** Let’s stop there.

Jesus does for us what the law could not. How? Well, first, God sent his Son to come **“in the likeness of sinful flesh”** meaning that the Son of God became a man who had the same kind of flesh and blood body as we have, in order to perfectly identify with us, but was not himself sinful. Thus, Paul says he was in the **“likeness”** of sinful flesh. As one commentator put it, “Paul is walking a fine line here. On the one hand, he wants to insist that Christ fully entered into the human condition, became [incarnate] and, as such, exposed himself to the power of sin. On the other hand, he must avoid suggesting that Christ so participated in this realm that he became imprisoned ‘in the flesh’ and became, then, so subject to sin that he could be personally guilty of it.” (Moo 479-480)

Having done that, we’re told Christ **“condemned sin in the flesh”** referring to the cross. Through the sacrifice of the cross, God reckoned our sins as if they were Christ’s. There was no sin in Jesus for which he needed to suffer God’s wrath, but he could suffer it on our behalf, as our substitute. Just as the Passover lamb served as a sacrifice on behalf of the Israelites in Egypt, so also was Christ our spotless lamb, the one who was without sin, who nevertheless took the punishment our sins deserved on himself, suffering the wrath of God against sin in the flesh while on the cross.

So then, Jesus took care of our sin problem. God’s wrath was against us for our sinful rebellion and on the cross God’s just wrath was satisfied by being poured out on Jesus instead of us. He took the punishment we deserved for our sin. But that’s not the end of the story. Look again at the first half of v. 4. Paul says God also did this, **“in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”** What does that mean? The law requires perfect obedience from us. We owe God a life of obedience. We haven’t lived that life. But Jesus did. Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law by obeying it perfectly.

Thus Jesus does two absolutely essential things for us: he died the death we should have died and lived the life we should have lived. We owe God a perfect life of unbroken obedience: Jesus lived that for us. God owes us wrath for our sin: Jesus suffered that for us. That’s the gospel in a nutshell and that’s how it is that Paul can say in v. 1 there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because Jesus suffered the punishment for our sin and lived the righteous life we should have lived so that God the Father is perfectly satisfied with us, not because of what we have done but because of what Christ has done. His life and his death has been counted to us as if it was ours and therefore there’s nothing left in us to judge or condemn because Jesus paid it all. God is satisfied with us in Christ because in living and in dying the sinless Son of God met the righteous requirements of God the Father on our behalf.

So if you aren't a Christian, this is what the good news of the gospel is all about. You stand condemned under God's wrath as punishment for your sin, but God did for you what you could not. God sent his Son to become a man, lived the sinless life you should have lived and then allowed him to suffer God's wrath in your place on the cross. Then Jesus arose from the dead three days later, promising the same kind of resurrected life to all those who come to him in faith for the forgiveness of their sins. So that's the gift God has for you: the gift of his Son who was your substitute. But you have to receive it in faith, turning from sin and trusting that Christ has indeed paid for your sin and offers you eternal life.

So if you want to have the assured confidence that you are forgiven and not under condemnation for your sin, let's talk. Let's sit down over coffee and I can answer your questions and hear your story and hopefully help you see that what God has to offer you in Christ is a million times better than whatever it is you are pursuing to find happiness and contentment in right now.

But moving on now, we need to answer our final question that comes out of this passage and that is, "For what?" Now that we've been saved, justified in God's sight so that we're no longer under condemnation for our sin, how then should we live? So let's go to our fourth point which asks...

#### **4. What for? So we can walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**

The very end of v. 4 gives us the purpose for which God has condemned sin through Christ. He describes those who have received this incredible gift of grace as those **"who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."** This idea of walking according to the Spirit and not the flesh is going to be a major talking point for Paul as we progress further into Romans 8, but he introduces it here and for good reason. He wants us to see that what Christ has done for it isn't just something that has benefit for the future, but has a wonderful purpose for us in the here-and-now.

Those who have been forgiven, who have been set free from their enslavement to sin, who are now longer under condemnation for their sin, are to actually begin to live that out in their lives by living in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God didn't send his Son to save us so that we could clap our hands and say "Yea, we're forgiven" and then go back living in the muck and mire of sin that once characterized us. God saved us so we can and would live differently. We've been set free from sin's power and given the power of the Holy Spirit in us to convict and guide us so that we don't continue in sin the way we once did before we came to Christ.

I think of my own life. The assurance of my conversion is not based on whether I said some prayer or walked down an aisle in response to a preacher (neither of which I did). Rather, I can attest to the reality of my conversion by the fact that I was radically transformed as a result of it. I was saved on the night of October 27, 1990 and I can assure you the Rob Borkowitz of October 28 was extremely different than the Rob Borkowitz of October 26. While I had objectively passed from spiritual death to spiritual life and was in the eyes of God fully cleansed of my sins and no longer under any

condemnation, subjectively I was changed. From that day forward, I began to do what Paul says here: I started walking according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh.

And this was something glaringly obvious to anyone who knew me both before and after. The sin that once enchanted me didn't hold sway over me as it once did. The kind of things I used to not do, like read the Bible for myself, or that I reluctantly did, such as attend church, became something I wanted to do. The reality of Christ's sacrificial work for me made a tangible difference in my life - in my words and actions, my thoughts and desires - because it changed me.

So going back to the question I had asked earlier in the sermon about whether you are a person under condemnation or no condemnation, well, the proof is in the pudding, as they say. Those who are under no condemnation are those **“who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”** Or as Jesus once put it, you will know a tree by its fruits. If you are under no condemnation because you are in Christ Jesus, it will be shown by being a man or woman who walks according to the Spirit. That doesn't mean sinlessness, but it does mean you will be actively striving to live for Christ, to avoid sin, to practice forgiveness and demonstrate love to others, to name just a few.

But if that isn't the case, if there's no tangible difference between you and an unbeliever, if the life you lived before you came to Christ is indistinguishable from the kind of life you lead right now, if you're still living enslaved to the same sinful and self-centered passions and desires as before, then my friend, you may be deceiving yourself when it comes to where you actually stand before God. God doesn't save people so they might escape the punishment of hell, all the while continuing to live like hell. God saves people so that he might also transform them into new creations who subsequently live by the Spirit, no longer enslaved to sin but rather striving to follow Christ.

## **Conclusion**

So as we wrap this up, I implore you to consider carefully your life. Those who are under no condemnation are those who walk according to the Spirit, while those who are still under condemnation for their sins are still living in their sins, unrepentant, enslaved to desires that if left unchecked, will lead to the judgement of God. But God has provided a way of escape. He sent his Son to live the righteous life you should have and who suffered God's wrath in your place on the cross. He simply calls to you to respond to that gracious gift in faith.

Please join me now in prayer as I close our time together.