

Romans 8:1-4

On the morning of November 21, 2007 my friend, M. got up early to go to work. Overtired from working two jobs, in a hurry, he did not take time to clean his windshield. He drove down the street and didn't even see G. who was crossing the street, on his way to work. M. hit him and killed him. M. did not stop, turned a corner and hit a woman as he turned the corner injuring her. He kept going, went home and tried to cover up the damage to his car. He was seen, the police were called and he was arrested. He confessed to his crimes and later pled guilty when he was charged.

This past January was the sentencing hearing.

The crown prosecutor reviewed the facts of the case.

The defence lawyer spoke for M.

G.'s sister and children spoke about him. He was a brother who helped his sister in her struggle with cancer. He was an uncle, hard working and dearly loved. By his selfish, careless, frantic actions, M. had taken a part of that family's life that they will never recover.

M. stood to speak. He fully apologized to the family and asked for their forgiveness. He took complete responsibility for what he had done. Then, as he stood before the judge, the judge reviewed all that he had heard and read and pronounced the sentence, a three and a half year jail term.

M's parents and family came forward, surrounded him, told him they loved him. Then the sheriff came in and said, "Please step away!".

The sheriff stepped forward, handcuffed M. and led him away to begin serving his sentence.

Condemnation. It looks like a punishment you must serve even though with every part of your being, you are sorry for what you have done. You must pay for your actions even though if there was any way that you could go back and change the story, change your actions, change the situation, you would. It looks like family and friends, unable to reach out to you anymore, because you have been condemned to serve what someone else has decided is just.

I share this story with you because one day **we** will stand before God. And we are all “hit and run” sinners. We have sinned against God and against each other and kept on going. We have done this multiple times, not stopping, not turning back, not doing everything in our power to save the one we hurt or undo the damage we have done. We have destroyed others and left them wounded and bleeding behind us.

Some of our sins have been committed on purpose. Some carelessly.

Sometimes we have sinned against our better will and better judgment.

Listen: “The good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish”. (Romans 7:19)

Doesn't that sound familiar?

Can you see yourself standing before God?

Now listen, “there is therefore **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus. No condemnation!

The judge of history comes around the bench and embraces us to tell us that we are forgiven and free.

All of our sins against God, forgiven.

All of our sins against each other, forgiven.

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

God saved Paul from being a Pharisee. They were religious leaders who were sincere and meant well, but they had an understanding of God that was all about rules. They specialized in judging. Jesus once complimented a Pharisee and told him, "You have judged correctly" (see Luke 7:43)

But Pharisees always left people feeling guilty. Condemned. Afraid of God.

It is just like God to use a Pharisee to get out his message of "no condemnation".

The theme pops up in his letter if we listen for it.

1:16 "I am not ashamed of the gospel" Shame is a word that condemned people know well.

2:1 "You therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else..." Doesn't it sound like Paul is concerned that people in the church were condemning each other?

Twice in this chapter, (8) the subject comes up.

Chapter 14 is all about not condemning each other.

When Paul teaches about God, there is always a pastoral situation behind it. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus".

To live under condemnation is to live by the labels other people tag on us. It is to live by what we are not, rather than having the freedom and courage to be who and what we are.

When we take condemnation into ourselves, we will do anything to earn the approval of the one condemning us.

We learn how to deal it out. We can send messages with just the slightest narrowing of the eyes or pursing of our lips. I remind you that we are followers of Jesus. Isaiah predicted years ahead of time that he is “like one from whom men hide their faces” (Isaiah 53) People have hidden their faces from us. We have looked away from others.

We learn condemnation and we need to unlearn it. Memorizing Romans 8:1 is a great place to start. Sing that verse so that it percolates in your mind, soaks into your heart and comes to the surface as a smile. Tattoo it on your forehead.

Hanging out with little kids and golden retrievers will also help.

“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”. We do not need to fear standing before God on that day. Nor do we need to fear that people will “find something out about us”. As we leave condemnation behind we are free to become more open, because we are not afraid of being discovered or labelled anymore.

We may even ask each other how we might serve God and serve them more helpfully.

There is no condemnation. We do not need to worry that God will ever find out anything about us that will make him turn away from us. God loves you and me and always will.

“For those who are in Christ Jesus”.

“In Christ Jesus” is Paul’s favourite way of talking about being a follower of Jesus.

It is shorthand for saying that everything is different now, here after Easter. Everything is different now, after Jesus lived for us, after Jesus died for us, and after he rose from death for us. We live in the difference Jesus has made for us. We live “in Christ Jesus”. Paul also loves to say that Jesus lives in us. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus was given to us. God has come to live in us, to guide us, to direct us, to transform us from the inside out.

Paul goes on to tell us more about how and what has happened in Christ Jesus.

He says, “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”

Laws and rules are not bad things. Try to play a game with no rules.

But rules cannot change who we are inside. The response to securities fraud is always to put new regulations in place. When kids beat up other kids on the playground, a school puts a “zero tolerance” rule in place for bullying.

Those kinds of rules can help. But they don't get at the heart of the problem, which is, dishonest people, kids that hate each other. A rule cannot make a person new.

If ever a law could bring us into life, the law of God should have been able to do that. The people of Israel had been given the law to lead them into a life of worship and love. Through them God wanted to bring the kind of life that would bless all the people of the world. (Genesis 12)

But all that law did was give sins a name and a sentence. Paul says that the people of Israel didn't even know what coveting was until the law was given to them. Somehow, when our actions have names it makes our guilt worse. And, the law has a penalty attached to it. In the case of God's law, the penalty is death.

But here is the good news. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death. We have been given the Spirit of Jesus to motivate and change us from the inside out. We want to live like Jesus and serve like Jesus not because there is a rule about that, but because God loves us.

It is part of the great gift of Jesus, for what the Law could not do, God did. God sent his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,

Tom Wright points out that God did not condemn Jesus, he condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus. Paul is thinking here about the sacrifice for sins in the Old Testament, called the sin-offering.

Why?

In the Old Testament, the sin-offering is the sacrifice used when someone has done something when they didn't know it was wrong, or knowing it was wrong but not intending to do it. Remember that line from chapter 7? It comes back again here. Paul has analyzed the situation of the people of Israel under the law in such a way that it falls exactly into these categories. "The good I want to do, I don't do; the evil I don't want is what I do". That's a miserable place to be. God's answer is to give his own son as the sin-offering for us.

And now, in the last part of verse 4 Paul comes to the reason for God's gift of grace and mercy.

God forgives us, "so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

The requirement of the law is love for God, love for neighbour.

Last week we saw what Jesus does at the beginning of the gospel of Mark.

We saw that every day is Earth Day for God. And every day is Refugee Day and Homeless Day and Spiritual Prisoner Day and World Hunger Day for God. So that God sent Jesus to come and to walk one step at a time and to have us follow in his path.

The plan is that **we** might show God's care for his creation, that **we** might bring refugees home, that **we** might help set people free and feed the hungry and do it all in the Spirit and name of Jesus.

Now, here in Romans 8 we find the very same theme, but put in a different way. To fulfill the righteous requirements of the law is to love the Lord our God with all our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. And it is to care for our neighbour just as we would want to be cared for. Not because there is a rule about this, but because God loves us, and his Spirit makes us want to love.

Specific opportunities.... Driving, yard work, meals, Operation Manna, Habitat, there is a way for everyone to serve the God who does not condemn M. or any of the rest of us 'hit and run' sinners, but loves us all.

The Lord is gracious to you.

The Lord is gracious to me.

And all God's people said, Amen.

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