

Good news for the Locked Down

Romans 8:1-8

Summary: Christ condemned sin on the cross so those who walk by the Spirit are not condemned.

Introduction

Do you ever get low? I know I do. Life can be hard, and especially at the moment it can feel like a real slog. Being locked down can be hard, can't it - after all isn't this what we do with criminals? Being locked up and locked down are really quite similar - try not to think about that too much though, or you might get depressed! But, there's lots in the Christian life that can get us down too. We saw last time in Romans that the Christian life is a battle, a war; not with the world, but with our ourselves. There should be no crusades or holy wars in the name of Christ, other than the one we wage against our own sin in our own life. That's where the real conflict is. That's the real battle.

The depressing bit, as we saw last time, is so often we lose the battle. We cry out with Paul "wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death!" We know that the war is ultimately won in Christ, one day we will be victorious - but for now it can feel downright depressing! Is that the whole of the Christian life? One long battle, with no help or relief?

Well, you'll be relieved to hear, no, that is not the whole of the Christian life. God has given us one to help us in the battlefield – Himself. God is with us by His Spirit, the Holy Spirit - The Lord and giver of life, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, the encourager, the comforter. And He is given to all believers as we will see in the coming weeks. The Spirit turns defeat and discouragement into life and peace. But before he gets there Paul needs to remind us of an incredibly important truth that will bolster us in our darkest moments.

One Way to Life (v1-4)

Our first point is there is one way to life. I'll read to us verses 1 – 4 again:

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.

Our passage, this morning, opens with some incredibly good news. There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Now this might not sound so great until you realise what it's saying. Paul, the author of Romans, spent the first three chapters of his book convincing us that, to put it simply: we were doomed. Guilty because of our wrongdoing, deserving much more than being locked up, under God's righteous wrath, His right judicial anger at our sin, and on top of that we were slaves to sin, trapped in our own sin-trap. To put it in one Yorkshire word - we were stuffed! Doomed!

But because of what he's been describing there, in the chapters that follow - we have gone from doomed convicts to dear companions. From what he's described in the chapters in between, he's showed us how we've gone from that dreadful situation to a wonderful situation. By the end of chapter 8 we'll have gone from sons of wrath to sons of God, adopted by his grace!

Paul has been showing us all the way through that the cross (the cross of Jesus, his death on the cross) plus faith equals life, because faith unites us to Christ:

cross + faith = life

We are now 'in Christ' who died and rose to new life, instead of 'in Adam' who still faces God's wrath and condemnation. We have been freed from the old and attached to the new. If you remember that picture of two big giants and being attached to their belts, and then being moved from one to the other, so that we follow the path of the one that we are attached to. And if we're attached to Christ - by faith - that means there is now no condemnation for those who are 'in Christ'. Not even just a little bit, zero, none at all! And that should help us and bolster us and encourage us, because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

God has done something wonderful, incredible. God has done something no moral code could ever do, however good that code is, because however good the code, it's dealing with sinful human beings. That's what it means there by "being weakened by the flesh". Rules alone don't work. Rules alone only makes things worse, inciting sinful behaviour rather than stopping it. But God has done something rules could never do: He has conquered sin. He has condemned it, he has been judge, jury and executioner. How? Well, we read it there in verse 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 sent his Son into the world to bear sin - not just our actions, but our thoughts and fundamental attitude to God, that rejects Him. That's what sin is. God sent his Son to be a sin offering. That's what 'for sin' refers to in verse 3. A 'for sin' in the Old Testament was a sin offering, a sacrifice for sin. Jesus bore our sin and destroyed it.

It's a bit like in one my favourite films, Lord of the Rings. Frodo in Lord of the Rings was the ring bearer. He carried the ring to Mount Doom to destroy it. Jesus, though, was the sin bearer: he bore sin to the cross to destroy it. And spoiler alert: Frodo fails. When he gets there, he gives in. Jesus, though, didn't give in - he took it all the way to the cross even though it cost Him His life. He is the true sin bearer. He bore our sin and was declared guilty, so that we might be declared innocent. And in that way, He met the law's righteous requirement for death. If you remember, in other weeks we've been learning:

law+ sin = death

Jesus took that death for us, and in so doing defeated sin. He took our sin and exchanged it for his righteousness, his good standing before God. He was in the likeness of sinful flesh in verse 3, but not because he wasn't really human. He was truly and fully human and fully God - what he wasn't was sinful. He looked like the rest of us, but he wasn't, in that he

never sinned. He was the only one who could plead innocent before God. He was the only one not tainted by sin.

Because we are 'in Christ' though, God sees us in Him. When he looks at someone in Christ, he sees only Christ's righteousness. Other parts of the Bible put it that we are clothed in Christ, that we've put Christ on, we've swapped our rags for his righteousness.

But, and it's a big but, it only counts, it only has effect for those who are united to Christ: *There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**.*

If we are not in Christ Jesus, then our condemnation stands. We are still guilty, under sin's authority and facing God's wrath – and there's no worse place to be! Now, I don't say that in a nasty vindictive way, I don't say that to make you upset. But the Bible teaches there's only one way to life - and that way is Jesus. Jesus death on the cross + faith = life. All we need do is to place our trust firmly in Jesus and not in our flesh, as the passage puts it.

The flesh is really all that belongs to that old system. The flesh is not just the bad things we do, it's the good things we do without God, the rule keeping without reference to Christ. So Paul can write to the Galatian Christians in Galatians 3:3, "*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" It would be weird, wouldn't it, if by flesh there that perfects us, or is trying to perfect us, he meant outwardly sinful things, that just wouldn't make sense – though he uses 'the flesh' in that way later when he contrasts the works of the flesh to the work of the Spirit. But here the flesh seemingly means that outward rule keeping, that old system, the law. So we're not to put our trust in the flesh, be that the good things that we do or the bad things that we do - we put our trust in Christ and we do that by the Spirit. That's what our passage is teaching.

Faith and the Spirit come together. When we put our faith in Jesus' death on the cross, we receive the Holy Spirit. So Paul writes in Galatians in the verse before our last one, Galatians 3:2, "*Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*" The answer is supposed to be "We received the Spirit by hearing with faith". The Spirit indwells us when we put our faith in Jesus.

Though on the other hand, faith is listed in 1 Corinthians 12 as a gift of the Spirit. And whilst that may refer to something else, Ephesians 2:8 is unambiguous "*For by grace you have been saved through faith... and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*". The faith we have that means the Spirit dwells in us, is itself a gift of God. God works in us by His Holy Spirit to bring us to life and to bring us to faith, that He may dwell in us by His Holy Spirit. Faith and the Spirit come together. One who has faith in Jesus is one who has the Holy Spirit - more on this next week.

But it helps us make sense of what follows. Those who have the Spirit, those who walk by the Spirit, those who set their minds on the things of the Spirit - are really just other ways of saying that someone has put their trust in Jesus. In other words, these things that it says here are descriptions of Christians, of believers. That's why he can say in verse 9 "*Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*"

If you have the Spirit, you **will** walk by the Spirit. If you have the Spirit, you **will** set your minds on the things of the Spirit. It's inevitable. It's part and parcel of being a believer- you don't get one without the other. Now I used to use Ant and Dec for this point, but it doesn't

really work anymore, because you do sometimes now you get Dec without Ant (or is it Ant without Dec? I get a bit confused). But if you're looking for one, in the olden days, you would always find the other, because they come together as a package. Someone who walks according to the Spirit is always a Christian. You can't separate the two, they come together as a package.

There's another way to walk of course, according to the flesh - and those who are in the flesh will walk according to the flesh. And those are the two options. There are only two ways to walk, two ways to live. And that's our next point.

Two Ways to Live (v5-8)

Have a look at verses 5 – 8:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Paul here puts the two paths before us very starkly. The way of the flesh, and the way of the Spirit. He is not at that point saying "take one path and not the other" (he will later, but at this point he's making a contrast for a different reason). He wants to assure Christians that they're on the right path, that they've got the right one. He's reminding them of this to assure them that their path really is the one that leads to life in the end.

Stuart Olyott uses the imagery of a factory to explain this situation - I've adapted it a bit, but it's basically his. Imagine that you are a factory in occupied France during the Second World War, a factory that produced bombs - but now you have been liberated by the Allies. They install new management; you work now for the other side. Now you make hospital equipment machines for the Allies. New instructions are sent to your employees, but some have a hard time making the adjustment, they keep wanting to make bombs when they really should be making X-ray machines. But gradually the employees start to catch on

Now here's the question - in the end is that factory going to be bombed by the Allies? No - the factory may not be perfect, but it's on the right track, it's under new management, it has definitely changed sides. So it's not in danger, there's no bombing coming.

Now imagine for a second you are a human being (hopefully that shouldn't take too much imagination!). A human being in Adam, producing death through sin and the law, but a human being now liberated by Christ. He has put His Holy Spirit inside you, you now have new management, you now work for the other side, and now you produce life and peace. New instructions are sent to your body, but some parts of the body and the habits that they have have a hard time making the adjustment. They just seem to keep wanting to do the things that lead to death rather than things that lead to life. But gradually they start to catch on - you start to think and act in line with the Spirit.

Again, here's the question - is that person in the end going to be condemned by God? No - they may not be perfect, but they're on the right track now, they're under new management, and they have definitely changed sides. And it's an assurance that if we're on

the right track, it's evidence that we are not going to face God's condemnation. It's saying that if we act this way, it's evidence for us that that verse 1 is true for us.

But that throws up a question I have been asked countless times - probably one of the top five questions I've been asked as a Christian - what about people who seem on the right track, but aren't believers? People who seem to be nice people, but don't trust in Jesus? Well, our passage gives us the answer in verse 8: *"Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."*

Now, go back to the factory illustration. What matters most is which side your factory is on. A factory producing for the enemy is on the other side whatever it may seem to be producing - be it beans or bombs. We cannot produce things that please God if we are doing them in opposition to God. It matters who you do it for. It's the difference between buying flowers for your wife and buying flowers your mistress. Both of them are buying flowers, but actually one of them is very good and one is not good at all.

So we must be trusting in God to please God. That's why the author to Hebrews writes in Hebrews 11 "Without faith it is impossible to please God". And it's why Isaiah can write to faithless Israel in the OT that their "righteous acts are like filthy rags" to God. It's shocking isn't it, but it makes sense of the implied question, "How can God judge seemingly good people?" Well, as it says in the passage, there in verse 7, their minds are hostile to God. Now, you might find that quite a shocking statement really, when you think of some people that you know, you think "Really? Are their minds really hostile to God?" You might be thinking "Is my mind really hostile to God?".

Well, hostility can show itself in many ways. It's not just the tearaways that it's talking about. Just think about situations where you've been annoyed at someone or hostile to someone. Perhaps, you've been in those situations in lock in, stuck in a house together with people. How do you show your annoyance and hostility?

Well, you can shout at them, can't you, and some people do that with God, shouting at God, and blaming him for things. You can run away from them. Some do that - running into anything and everything (it's a bit harder to run away physically at the moment, isn't it, but you can run away from God). You can run to others - into the arms of others. In a husband and wife relationship that's called adultery, but the bible calls that idolatry - running to other gods or other things instead of God. Or you can try to undermine them. Some do that with God as well - the New Atheists, who claim not to believe in God but devote their lives to try to undermine Him. Or you can give them the silent treatment, and sometimes that hurts more than the screaming and shouting, ignoring them entirely. In a marriage or family this can be one of the worst things. You carry on almost as normal, accepting the gifts, but ignoring the giver. Taking the meals, or perhaps, if you're a child with your parents, accepting the pocket money or allowance, but refusing to acknowledge where it all came from.

Hostility can show itself in many ways. All of us will have our own story of what we were. Perhaps you're still in the middle of this as you're watching this morning. The Bible says turn from your hostility to God. Put up the white flag and surrender to Him. Give up your attempts to go it alone without Him. Run to Him, don't run from Him.

But does that mean then, that for the rest of us it doesn't matter what we do as long as we're in Christ? I know a lot of you were probably thinking that, weren't you? Well, as Paul would say, "by no means!" You see, the longer your factory is on God's side the more it conforms to Him, the more we will walk by the Spirit. The Bible calls this sanctification. The process where we become more Holy, more like Jesus, bearing more fruit. You see, the same spirit that produces faith in us, produces holiness in us too. Real holiness, not just niceness but much more; the hallmarks of true believers in Galatians 5 are called the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Bible calls this the fruit of the Spirit. And, if you have the Spirit you will be sanctified over time.

If you're not being sanctified though, however slowly and imperfectly, then that would point to you not having the Spirit. The same Holy Spirit who gives us eternal life, makes us holy. The clue's in the name: Holy Spirit!

But remember this passage is written to Christians to assure them. They are supposed to read this and say, "Ok, I'm not perfect, but I am growing. I'm not growing as fast as I'd like, but I'm not in the flesh, I'm not hostile to God like I once was, I don't set my mind on the things of the flesh as I once did. The things that belong to my old nature, maybe I glance back at them now and then, but my mind is now reoriented - it saddens me when I do those things. I have changed direction with my mind (that's what the word repentance in Greek means at its root- a change of mind, a change of direction). I have taken the path of the Spirit; I now live according to Him."

So really there are two ways to live - the way of the Spirit and the way of the Flesh. And it really is the case that one leads to life and peace, and the other to death. But it's not a case of pick your path, it's a case of pick your side. There is no walking the way of the Spirit if you have not put your trust in Jesus; Father, Son and Holy Spirit come as a package, so to speak. You can't walk in the Spirit if you haven't come to the Father, through the Son, Jesus - the one way to life! Indeed, Jesus Himself said *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* He is the way; the way of the Spirit is the way of Jesus. If you haven't come to Jesus you can't walk the way of the Spirit.

But if you have come to Him then he will be with you on the road by His Spirit and He will encourage us in the fight - Jesus is with us, who fought the same battle with temptation and won. And that will encourage us in the fight, in the battle. Even if we feel low - Jesus is with us by His Spirit

So, do you ever get low? Well, that's ok, it's only natural, but remember it's the devil who wants to keep you low. Take the encouragements God has given us and lift your spirits, by the Spirit! Remember there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus - He is our one way to life. And remember the Spirit is with us and he will help us, cause us even, to walk in the way of the Spirit. So, when you're low in lock down, look to Him and be encouraged.