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## **No Condemnation**

### **Romans 8:1-4**

Fr. William Klock

October 15, 2017 – Trinity 18

As I was preparing to preach on Romans 8:1-4 I was listening to Bach's *Jesu, meine Freude*. It's an entire cantata structured around these verses and I'm inclined to say that Bach preached these verses far better than I ever could. Paul launches into them with the words, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And that one verse has inspired musicians far and wide. It's comforted Christians and inspired hope and joy. A lot—maybe even most of us it know by heart. We memorised it as kids or have sung it in a hymn. And one of the things that struck me these last few weeks is that verses like this often become so familiar that we forget everything around them, we miss the context and the bigger picture. One of the advantages of preaching verse by verse through a book like Romans is that it forces us to read everything in context. Little bits and pieces of Scripture, especially when we have them memorised, are great, but it's even better when we look at them in context, when we allow them to speak with full force, and as we see how they fit into the big picture of creation, redemption, and re-creation. Romans 8 is one of those passages. It would probably be more accurate to say that Romans 8 is full of that sort of passage—over and over little snippets that we know so well, but that we often fail to string together as Paul wrote them. Passages like these have become so familiar that it's sometimes hard for us to actually hear them speak anymore.

Here in Romans 8 we find: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." "You

have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And yet, as Western Christians who live in a place of religious freedom and tolerance, I don't think we ever give much, if any, thought to the context in which Paul wrote these words. John the Baptist and Jesus had spoken constantly of Israel travelling along a broad road leading to destruction. Jesus warned the people that if they did not repent, if they did not give up their wrong ideas about what it meant to be God's people, they would be swept away in God's coming judgement. The alternative was a hard and narrow path leading to life. And Jesus made it clear to his people that to follow him down that path meant enduring their own version of the cross. As people who have never endured persecution, we tend to hear Jesus talking about taking up our crosses and we think of it metaphorically, but for the twelve disciples and so many of their brothers and sisters there was nothing metaphorical about it. The way of salvation for this new community, this restored Israel built around Jesus was a way of suffering. Paul knew it as he wrote these words having suffered innumerable abuses himself. Nero's persecution wasn't that many years off and, in a sense, that persecution along with the coming destruction of Jerusalem just a couple of years later, cast a sort of dark backward shadow over Romans 8. These weren't verses for bookmarks or refrigerator magnets. These were verses of comfort to people preparing to die for the sake of their faith in Jesus. It's important we grasp this.

So Paul, again, writes in verse 1:

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

Condemnation was a real thing in the minds of the Christians in Rome. Jesus warned about it. He said it was imminent: This generation will not pass away before it comes. The justice-loving God cannot let the injustice of sin go on forever. The Creator God who is good and loving and faithful, cannot let sin corrupt and rule his creation forever. If he is good and just and faithful, he must deal with sin and with all those who align themselves with sin to corrupt his creation. Judgement, condemnation has to happen at some point. Sin and its friends must be held accountable. And as we've seen, God's calling of Abraham and his gift of the law to Israel were all part of this process that will lead to a calling to account. Israel, as God's own, must be judged first—that was one of the central foci of Jesus' ministry as we warned Israel and called her to repentance—but Israel's judgement was then to become the precursor to God's eventual judgement of the nations—of all of humanity. And this is why it's important to grasp the bigger picture. God called Israel to be his means of redemption in the world. He gave her his law that the world would look at Israel know what it meant, what it looked like to be in covenant with him. Israel failed, but God sent his own Son to be Israel's Messiah—to be her representative—to deal with sin and to reconstitute a new people, a new Israel in himself—an Israel that would go on to carry the redemptive power of the Gospel to the nations as they await their own judgement. That's the backdrop here. This is why Paul's spent so much time talking about the law. In fact, he's still talking about the law, about *torah*, even in Chapter 8. Many people have a tendency to miss that part of it. These verses sum up some of the most important aspects of our theology of redemption and atonement, but first and foremost, Paul's is telling the story of the law.

At the end of Chapter 7 he brought the problem of the law to a head. He wrote, “This is what I find about the law: when I want to do what is right, evil lies close at hand! I delight in God’s law, you see, according to my inmost self; but I see another ‘law’ in my limbs and organs, fighting a battle against the law of my mind, and taking me as a prisoner in the law of sin which is in my limbs and organs. What a miserable person I am! Who is going to rescue me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:21-24 Wright) I love God’s law with my mind, but when it comes to doing it, my body just isn’t willing and I find I’m a slave to sin. If we didn’t know better, we’d expect Paul to trail off in despair here, but instead, he suddenly gives this shout of triumph. “Thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” And now he writes that despite being enslaved to sin, there is no condemnation.

Now, how does that work? How did Paul find escape from God’s judgement? Well, first, there is no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*. Remember that “Christ” isn’t Jesus’ last name. It’s his title. It means Messiah and that’s important for what Paul’s going to say. In verses 2, 3, 5, and 6 he gives us a string of explanation, all connected with the Greek word for “because” or “for”. With each step, Paul explains how God accomplishes this deliverance from condemnation for sin through Jesus and the Spirit. But note, right here at the top of it, the means is Jesus and Jesus alone. That might sound unreasonable to some people, but as Paul fleshes this out, what we see is that Jesus and only Jesus fits perfectly into the big story, at the just the right time, at just the right place, and in just the right way to fulfill God’s promises of redemption.

Paul goes on in verse 3:

**For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.**

Here’s what Jesus has accomplished. For those who are “in Jesus the Messiah”—and being “in” Jesus the Messiah means having given up everything else in order to centre our lives and find our very being and meaning and hope in him—for those who are in Jesus the Messiah, the law of the Spirit has set us free from the law of sin and death. But what does Paul mean by that? The first thing I think we’ve got to understand is that the law of the Spirit and the law of sin and death are actually the same thing. Paul uses the same word for law in both cases and it’s the same word he’s been using all along as he’s talking about the *torah* God gave to Israel through Moses. It helps to remember that in all of what Paul’s saying here and what he’s been saying through Chapter 7, *torah*, the law, is the central character and focus. In 7:7-25, which we looked at last time, Paul wrote that the whole human race is under sin and death and that the law endorses this verdict. More specifically, the law issues the same verdict against God’s own people, Israel, showing that they suffer from the same sin problem as everyone else. Israel has the same solidarity with Adam as the rest of the human race. The law condemns everyone.

But remember, Paul has said that despite the law bringing death, the real promise of the law was life. The problem isn’t and never was the law. Paul was emphatic that the law was good. The problem was humanity’s and, specifically Israel’s, bondage to sin. Remember Vinny the budding pyromaniac. The firefighter gave a presentation on fire safety at his school, but in the mind of a little pyro, that advice meant to warn kids to be careful turned into an instruction manual on how to burn your house down. So Jesus makes a difference somehow and this is just what the

Prophets had promised the Lord would do in sending Israel’s Messiah. Think of the Old Testament. Think of the end of Deuteronomy where the Lord promised to his people as they were about to enter the promised land: Keep my law and you will have life; fail to keep it and die—fail to keep it and I will withdraw my promises from you. Israel chose death. The Old Testament ends with Jerusalem and the temple destroyed and Israel in exile in Babylon. Adam disobeyed the Lord and was driven out of the garden and out of the presence of the Lord and now the same thing had happened to Israel. And yet the Prophets proclaimed hope. Israel had failed to keep the covenant, but the Lord was not done. The Lord would renew the covenant through his Messiah. Israel was dead, but like the dry bones Ezekiel had seen in a vision, the Lord would bring life out of death, the Messiah would forge a new Israel in which the problem of the old Israel would finally be fixed. The Messiah would raise up the dry bones and make them dance. The old Israel’s heart of stone would be, in the new Israel, replaced with a heart of flesh. The law that had been external and written on stone tablets, would now be written in the very hearts of God’s people. And remember what—or better *who*—the Prophets, like Ezekiel, had said would do this? It was the Holy Spirit. The Messiah is the one in whom the covenant is renewed, but it is the Spirit, indwelling the very people of God who brings the new covenant to life, who makes the dry bones to dance. Again, think of Ezekiel and his long vision of a restored and perfected temple. The whole point of that is the work of the Spirit in bringing to life a new covenant by doing away with the old temple of bricks and mortar and turning the very people of God, all those who are in Jesus the Messiah—into a perfect temple not made with hands. This is what Paul’s getting at here. Without the indwelling Holy Spirit, the law could not make good on

its promise of life. It could only condemn sinners to death. But in baptizing his people with and into the Spirit, Jesus changes everything. Our hearts of stone are replaced with hearts of flesh, our hearts and minds are renewed and turned towards God. The law that we were unable to keep is now inscribed on our hearts.

But how does Jesus actually accomplish this? Paul starts in on answering this in verses 3 and 4—which is as much as we have time for today. He writes,

**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.**

There's more to redemption than forgiveness of our sins. The Spirit was sent to blow through and restore life to God's people and to his creation, but before the Spirit can do that, sin had to be dealt with. Sin and death have to be defeated and broken. If that doesn't happen, the law—which for Israel was always a sort of shorthand for God's redemptive action—would never accomplish its purpose. Our flesh—and by that Paul doesn't mean our physical bodies, he means our corruption by sin—our flesh will always get in the way. No, sin itself has to be condemned first and that's just what Paul says God has done through Jesus the Messiah.

How does that work? Here's where we get into what theologians call atonement theology. And it begins, Paul writes, with God sending his own Son. As we saw in 5:8, "This is how God shows his love for us: the Messiah died for us while we were still sinners." The point is that God came to deal with sin himself. He's

come in person in Jesus. But to deal with sin, it wasn't enough for God to come. God had to come "in the likeness of sinful flesh". You see, this is why Jesus came at the time and the place he did. The whole story up to this point was headed right here, to the Incarnation and to the cross. This is why Paul has been talking about the law and what it accomplished. The law caused sin to be concentrated and heaped up in one place, in Israel. Through God's calling and through the law, Israel came to represent all of sinful humanity. And then Jesus came as Messiah and, as the Great King, the Messiah was himself then Israel's representative. So the sin of humanity was summed up in one people, Israel, and then Israel herself was summed up and represented by this one man, the Messiah. And then he was crucified—he suffered the death of a criminal—and even had his title posted above his head, declaring that he was "King of the Jews". Even in his crucifixion, he was executed in the very same way that his fellow Jews suffered, those who continued on the broad way that leads to destruction, on whom the Lord's judgment came through Rome forty years later. Figuratively and literally, he took Israel's punishment on himself. And there at the cross, God cornered sin and condemned it. He condemned it in the flesh of Jesus, as Isaiah said he would, "The punishment that brought us peace fell on him; and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Notice one thing, in particular, here. Paul does *not* say that Jesus was condemned. He says that in Jesus *sin* was condemned. It's not uncommon to hear people talk about God as a kind of cosmic meanie or tyrant just itching to zap sinners and to hear people talk of Jesus as if, in contrast to his Father, he's loving and merciful and chose to interpose himself between us and God, taking the brunt of this cosmic beating on himself. This was the popular idea of the Middle Ages and the Reformers

worked hard to show just how false it was, but it still pops up frequently nevertheless. What Paul shows here is the love of *both* the Father and Son. This was a joint act of love, the Father sending and the Son going. And as Paul makes clear here, the wrath of God was not directed at Jesus, his beloved Son, but at the sin Jesus chose to take on himself. Jesus was not condemned at the Cross. Sin was condemned. It doesn't help that the Apostle's Creed has been corrupted and *inferos*—the regions below or the grave—was changed to *infernus*—the Latin word for hell. That gave rise to the ideas that Jesus was tormented in hell for three days. We know now what the Creed originally said and Romans and Protestants have tried to correct it—the REC even fixed it in earlier prayer books—but the traditional English version is familiar and has held on with amazing tenacity. But the point is that it was sin that was condemned at the cross, borne by the loving Son, sent by the loving Father. It wasn't that Jesus stepped in his Father's way just at the time his Father was about to finally smite sinful humans, but that all along, Father, Son, and Spirit were working in loving concert to bring history to just this point where all three would act in unison for our sake and out of love for us.

The other important thing that Paul stresses in terms of how this works is the nature of the cross. The King James, Revised Standard, and English Standard versions all obscure this, but it comes through very well in the NIV, New American Standard, and some other translations. Where the ESV reads "for sin" the word Paul uses is the word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament for the sin offering. How the translators missed this is beyond me, because it ties right into what Paul wrote at the end of Chapter 7. In the Old Testament, the sin offering was the sacrifice made when someone committed a sin unwittingly—meaning he didn't know

it was wrong—or unwillingly—meaning that he knew it was wrong, but hadn't intended to do it. This sort of offering—on a cosmic scale, so to speak—is what Israel needed and this is just what Paul has lined up through Chapter 7 as he's outlined Israel's plight under the law. Think of his statement in 7:24, "The good I want to do, I do not do; the evil I do not want to do, is what I do." Paul cried out, "Miserable man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" Israel needed a perfect, once-for-all sin offering to break the cycle. And here in verse 8, Jesus offers just what Israel needs. There is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus the Messiah, because the condemnation of sin has taken place in him at the cross.

Because of all this, Paul says in verse 4, the "righteous requirement" of the law is fulfilled in us. This is a difficult phrase to translate, but the sense of it is that what the law originally intended—to give life to those who live it—has been fulfilled in those who are in Jesus. The promise of life given in Deuteronomy is finally fulfilled in the new Israel, the people of God's renewed covenant in Jesus. And it's made possible because we no longer walk by the flesh—meaning we are no longer bound to Adam and his fall. Instead, Jesus has poured the Holy Spirit into us and the Spirit restored life to dead wood. The Spirit has caused the dry bones to rise up and dance. Where we once practised the works of the flesh—think of Paul's long list in Galatians 5 that includes things like sexual immorality, fits of anger, jealousy, sowing discord, drunkenness, and so many other things—as we walk, as we live in the Spirit we bear his fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Like Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery, through the Red Sea, and into freedom, Jesus leads us through

our baptism out our bondage to sin and death. But inseparable from that is the life-giving, mind-renewing, and heart-regenerating works of the indwelling Spirit. Ever since Wesley, there have been some who have separated justification from sanctification, creating two classes of Christians: those who are merely forgiven and then those who have been baptised with the Spirit and truly brought to life. What Paul writes here in Romans leaves no room at all this two-tiered Christianity. To separate the work of Jesus from the work of the Spirit—and to say that one can benefit from the cross and not at the same time the Spirit, is to cut off the redemptive act of God in the New Testament from his redemptive promises made through the law and the Prophets, it's to undermine the very Trinitarian work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in this act, which is at its very heart, a renewal of the covenant in which hearts of stone are replaced with hearts of flesh. The Son accomplished the work of redemption on the Cross, but it is of no avail to anyone without the indwelling Spirit who unites us to him, who causes to bend our knees and cry out to him in praise as Lord, and who cause the new life of God to course through our veins.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the good news we proclaim. The cross, for all its ugliness, is a beautiful thing. Without the cross we would still have the story of Israel's rescue from Egypt and from slavery to be a people set apart for praise for the sake of the world. But without the cross that would be a private story for Israel alone. Without the cross, the law would condemn Israel and shut out the nations. Without the cross we would have nothing more than a rumour and a whisper of a God who saves, but the reality would escape us. Without the cross we would remain condemned. Without the cross, people would still think that power and money are what matter most and that sex is the greatest

human good. Without the cross people would still think that killing our fellow human beings is the way to get things done. Without the cross, the story of redemption would never be complete. In fact, it would never be known. Thanks be to God for the cross in which we see the Father, in love, sending the Son to be incarnate and to die for our sake, and because of the cross we see the same Father sending the Spirit of the Son to apply his work, to make it real, to cause it to bear fruit in us. Because of the cross, what had been rumours and whispers of a God who saves has become a report—an announcement of good news to the world. And because of the cross, that report is a life-changing reality. Dear Friends, embrace the cross and know the life of the Triune God. Know life and find assurance as the Son delivers you from sin and death and dance in the life of God as the Spirit gives life to your bones that were once dead. And then dance out into the world to show, to tell, to announce the cross of Jesus, that everyone around might also know the same salvation, the same life, and share in the same hope of all things made new.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving Father, in the Collect we asked for pure hearts that we might follow you and now we thank you that in Jesus, you have purified our hearts and as you have poured your Spirit into us, you have filled our hearts with love for you. We give you thanks for our salvation, for our life, for being made new and ask for grace that we not squander your gift of life or take it for granted. Keep our hearts always turned to you and cause us always to live in the joy and the hope of Jesus and the life of your kingdom. Amen.