

# No Condemnation to Serve the Sin Nature

📖 Romans 8:1-4

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

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🌐 fbgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

We are studying the doctrine of sanctification in Romans 6-8 and in particular experiential sanctification. Experiential sanctification is the gradual setting apart of the believer for God's purposes, or simply put, Christian growth. We are doing the exegesis in order to build biblical categories so that when the categories are all defined we can see if these categories we've built correlate with other passages. When it's all said and done we'll give a systematic presentation of this vital doctrine. It's my claim that this is not only one of the most important doctrines but one of the most misunderstood. What has erupted in the last 30 years as the controversy known as Lordship Salvation vs Free Grace is largely based on confusions about experiential sanctification. Lordship Salvation is not a new idea but in its modern form it resurged due to the observation of pastors that many professing Christians in their congregations did not appear to be living the Christian life. Of course, they wanted to look at their people in the pew and be able to see their lives changed. But instead they saw many people who still lived carnal lives. These pastors solved the apparent problem by making it harder for people to get saved; telling them that salvation is costly and if they aren't ready to forsake all for Christ and be totally committed to Him then they aren't ready to become a Christian. It's my conclusion that this was a false solution. It may have been true that their people weren't living the Christian life but to turn the free gift of salvation into something that costs you everything confuses salvation with discipleship and muddles grace and works. In my estimation the solution they should have given was to turn people back to grace. The only way a Christian can grow is to live the same way he was originally saved, that is by the grace work of the Holy Spirit through faith. This is nothing novel. Paul said this way back in Galatians 3:2-3, "This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" The obvious answer is that they originally received the Spirit by hearing with faith. They heard the gospel and they believed. Then he asks in verse 3, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" The answer should be obvious; the only way to move toward perfection in sanctification is by the Spirit. Our original salvation and our ongoing sanctification are both by the grace work of the Spirit through hearing with faith. So the modern Lordship Salvation model is a travesty because it says you've got to have a faith that works and if you don't then you never had faith to begin with. In other words, they've re-defined faith as including works. That's how they sneak in and spy out your liberty in Christ. That's how they bring you into bondage. Paul says in

Gal 3:1 that if you buy into this you are a fool and he says you have been bewitched and that you need to go back to how you originally received the Spirit, by hearing with faith and realize that the only way to grow is also by the Spirit who is stimulated by hearing with faith. There is no difference.

In Romans 7:14-25 Paul tried to be sanctified by the flesh. That is why it says "I," "I," "I," twenty four times in these verses. Paul is trying to communicate that when I am the operative agent trying to sanctify myself by keeping God's law then I fall flat on my face because my sin nature takes opportunity through the law to rebel. Now you should never underestimate the power of the sin nature. You are a fool if you do. It will overwhelm you and take you captive every time. It is that powerful, it has a life of its own within you, and anytime its authority is challenged by the law of God it springs to life and causes you to transgress the law resulting in death. You cannot overcome it. Notice how Paul states it in 7:21, this is when Paul had his eureka moment, that is the Greek word that Paul uses here when he says, "I find." Paul says I found something. What did Paul find? He found "the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good." This is Paul as regenerate and Paul found that evil was present in him, that is, in his flesh. So just because Paul was regenerated and died to his sin nature in the sense that he was no longer obligated to obey it, he found that it stayed with him nonetheless, even though he wanted to do good. Of course, the reason Paul wanted to do good was because at regeneration the Holy Spirit gave him a new nature or disposition that wanted to please God. In 7:22 he expounds saying, "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man." There was a location in Paul where he rejoiced exceedingly in agreement with the law of God and that location was "the inner man." We found that "the inner man" is the Christian mind and when we become regenerate we, at that moment, have a Christian mind. The Christian mind at that moment agrees with God as far as it knows the word of God; but since we don't know very much, not much more than the gospel, then Paul shows elsewhere that the inner man needs to be renewed and strengthened day by day by the Holy Spirit as we study the word. As Paul did he says he joyfully concurred with the law of God in his Christian mind. But, in 7:23, he saw a different law in the members of his body, instigating a conflict against his Christian mind and taking him captive to the sin nature which works through the parts of his body to accomplish its own will. Paul's conclusion, and his key realization is verse 24, "Wretched man that I am?" That is, I, left to myself, even though regenerate, and even though I have a new nature or disposition to please God, I am distressed. I can't do what I want to do. I always end up doing the thing I don't want to do, becoming a captive to the sin nature. So his question is a brilliant one, if I can't free myself from the power of the sin nature then "Who will?" "Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Paul found what every Christian must find if he is to ever to find freedom from bondage to his sin nature, and that is that someone else, someone outside of I, someone more powerful than the sin nature that is holding me captive, must set me free from the power of the sin nature because I can't do it. I am weak. In verse 25 Paul gives thanks to God the Father through the Son Jesus Christ because the Father through the Son has given this powerful ally to us in His Spirit, the Helper. He will be the deliverer revealed in Romans 8. But apart from Him all we have is the end of verse 25, "on the one hand I myself with my mind and serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of the sin nature." As

regenerate people we can in our mind desire to keep the law of God but our flesh ends up serving the desires of the sin nature. So our problem in Romans 7 is that left to ourselves the sin nature is more powerful than us. Therefore what Romans 7 does is establish the need for someone stronger than us to overpower the sin nature.

We now come to Romans 8 and this is where we find out who that someone is. In 8:1 he begins with the word **therefore**. This signals that what follows is the logical conclusion to the argument of Romans 7 and in particular the reason Paul gave thanks to the Father and the Son. Why did Paul give thanks? Because **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**. Now this is a sanctification context and so the word **condemnation** gives great trouble. **Condemnation** is so sacrosanctly thought of in connection with justification that most commentators cannot imagine its use in a sanctification context. I know, I used to be one of those people. Therefore the prevailing thought is that Paul is returning to declaration of righteousness that occurs at the moment of faith in Christ that was so ably taught in Romans 4-5. In fact, some commentators go so far as to think that the controversy over whether Paul was unregenerate or regenerate in Rom 7:14-25 is resolved by this statement. Here, they say, is proof positive that Paul was unregenerate, whereas now in Romans 8 he is regenerate. This would mean that in Romans 7 Paul is recounting his life as an unbeliever in the flesh and now in Romans 8 he is recounting his life in the Spirit as a believer. This view goes so far as to say that while an unbeliever can and does live in the flesh a believer can only and does only live in the Spirit. I would grant that only the flesh is referred to in Romans 7 and that the Spirit is referred to in Romans 8 but it is not scriptural to conclude that a believer can only and does only live in the Spirit. If that were so then all believers would never sin and would always bear the fruit of the Spirit. That is not true. What is true is that regenerate people have two options as to how to live, as 8:4 will say, either according to the flesh or according to the Spirit.

It seems better to me and some others to accept that the word **condemnation** in 8:1 is being used by Paul in a sanctification context and to simply try to understand how that could be. What Paul seems to be saying is that in sanctification we are not condemned to live by the sin nature. In other words, that is not the only avenue open to a believer. That he has the sin nature in mind is clear from the final words of 7:25 where he spoke of "the law of sin." 8:1 is a logical conclusion. We know that because he says **Therefore**. The logical conclusion is in light of his victorious note in 7:25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Why thanks be to God? Because we are not condemned to live by the sin nature. God through Jesus Christ has given us someone to deliver us from the obligation to live by the sin nature. Unbelievers are condemned to live by the sin nature. They have no other way of living available to them. But we do. So what Paul is saying in 8:1 is that now that we are **in Christ** we are not condemned to a life of penal servitude to the sin nature. **Condemnation** maintains its penal meaning. Bruce said, "there is no reason why those who are 'in Christ Jesus' should go on doing penal servitude as though they had never been pardoned and never been liberated from the prison-house of sin." Showers agreed saying, "...Paul is saying that the believer is not condemned to a life of servitude to the sinful disposition." This interpretation arises contextually out of Romans 6:6-7. There it was taught that while unregenerate we were "slaves to sin." Since a slave in ancient Rome was legally obligated to obey his master then as unregenerate we

were legally obligated to obey our sin nature. But due to our co-death, co-burial and co-resurrection with Christ we are now regenerate people, in Christ, and legally set free from any and all obligations to the sin nature. This does not mean that the sin nature is no longer with us or that it does not continually try to reassert its mastery but that we are not legally obligated to obey it. There is another option available to us to live.

8:2 explains. Note the explanatory *γὰρ* translated **For**. This is a grammatical conjunction signaling an explanation of verse 1. **For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.** Several observations are in order. First, the reason we are not condemned to a life of servitude to the sin nature is because **the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set** us free from that servitude. The Spirit of life is the one who answers Paul's question in verse 24, "Who will set me free from the body of this death?" The Spirit of life will set you free.

Second, there are two laws stated here, **the law of the Spirit of life** and **the law of sin and of death**. What does it mean by "law?" Showers says, "Law, no matter what kind it may be, is established for the purpose of governing or controlling. In light of this the law of the Spirit of life is the controlling power of the Holy Spirit, which controlling power produces newness of life (Romans 6:4; 7:6). As noted earlier (7:23), the law of sin is the controlling power of the sinful disposition, which controlling power works death." So by saying **law** Paul is referring to a controlling power. Here are two possible controlling powers. The point Paul is making in context is that the reason we are not condemned to live a life of servitude to the sin nature is because the controlling power of the Spirit has set us free from the control of the sin nature so that we can enjoy the life-giving benefits of the Spirit.

Third, the tense of the verb **has set you free** is the aorist tense and refers to a once for all action that occurred when you first believed in Christ and were placed **in** Him. In other words, the basis of deliverance from being condemned to live by the sin nature was established when we first believed.

Fourth, just because the basis of the deliverance occurred when we first believed does not mean that the enjoyment of the deliverance is automatic. Being controlled by the Spirit does not just happen. 8:4 clearly shows that the believer must "walk according to the Spirit" in order to enjoy this deliverance. Only when we walk according to the Spirit does the Holy Spirit control our lives so that we are set free from the power of the sin nature and its death dealing effects.

Fifth, 8:2 clearly shows that the Spirit is more powerful than the sin nature. Paul was looking for someone more powerful than himself to set him free from captivity to the sin nature. When he tried by self-effort to overcome the sin nature he failed because he was not as powerful as the sin nature. But the Spirit of life is infinitely powerful. Therefore, when we walk according to Him He controls us and overpowers the sin nature.

Now I would say, in conclusion to 8:2 that the concept of **the law of the Spirit of life** is the same as the concept in Eph 5:18 of being filled by the Holy Spirit. The term **law** refers to a controlling influence and the term "filling"

refers to a full presence in one's life. Therefore the concept here of **law of the Spirit of life** is equivalent to the concept in Eph 5:18 of letting the full presence of the Spirit overwhelm one's life. So while the same terms are not used the same concepts are used.

In 8:3 we find another explanatory *γὰρ*, signified by the word **For**. Paul is here showing that there is an underlying basis upon which the Spirit was given so that we could walk according to the Spirit so He would control us and overpower our sin nature. He says, **For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 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.** Let's make several observations. First, according to verse 3 there was the time of the Law and then there was the time when God sent His Son. These are two distinct times in history. These distinct times or periods we call dispensations. Dispensations aren't technically periods of time but they do occur over time. Technically a dispensation is a stewardship or an administration. That there are at least two dispensations is clear from 8:3, a dispensation of Law which ended with Christ and a dispensation of the Spirit. Second, what the Law could not do God did by sending His Son. For clarity, what was it that the Law could not do that God did? **Condemned sin in the flesh.** To understand this all-important statement we have to understand the word **condemned** and the word **sin**. By **condemn** Paul means not only to pass a sentence of judgment but also to execute the judgment. The Law could and did pass a sentence of judgment on the sin nature. Every time a person broke the Law the Law declared a sentence of judgment. However, because the Law was outside of the person it could not execute the judgment on the person's internal sin nature. I could not exercise authority over the internal sin nature so as to destroy its power. By **sin** Paul is referring to the "sin nature" or disposition. He's not talking about personal sin. He's talking about the source of personal sin as the sin nature. So Paul's meaning is that the Law could not condemn the sin nature that resides in the flesh. But thankfully God did **condemn the sin** nature that resides in flesh. Third, Paul states the reason the Law could not execute judgment on the person's internal sin nature is because it was **weak...through the flesh.** Because we are still merely human when the Law comes to us it pronounces a sentence of judgment but because it is incapable of executing the judgment the sin nature is aroused to rebel against the Law. This is nothing new. We've already seen this truth earlier in 7:8 where Paul said, "But the sin nature, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind." This is why you can't be sanctified by Law. Fourth, what the Law could not do, God did. God is the only one capable of fully condemning the sin nature in the flesh. Fifth, the way God condemned it was by **sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin.** It is difficult to understand exactly how God did it but some observations are in order under this fifth point. First, the Father sent the **Son in the likeness of sinful flesh**; not in sinful flesh. This is a statement of the incarnation. Incarnation means "in flesh." God sent His Son in the flesh," that is to say, as a human. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." The second person of the Trinity came in the flesh. Paul says specifically, in the

likeness of sinful flesh. This is to separate Him from sin. For the Son to be in human flesh and yet not be sinful flesh required the conception to be administered by the Holy Spirit. For the Son to be true humanity required that He be the seed of the woman. This way Jesus was both a true human and He lacked the sinful flesh. This was necessary for God to condemn the sin nature in the flesh, something the Law could not do but Jesus could do because He was flesh. Second, the Greek does not say **and as an offering for sin**. It simply says **and for or concerning sin**. What is in view is not exactly clear but it probably does have in view His death on the cross for our sins. God sent His Son to die for our sins. So in conclusion to the fifth point, two things were necessary for God to do to condemn the sin nature in the flesh. The first thing God had to do was the incarnation. He had to become human flesh. This He did by sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. This way He could execute judgment on sinful flesh in the one who was only in the likeness of sinful flesh. The second thing God had to do was the crucifixion. The incarnate Son of God had to die a substitutionary blood atonement for the sin nature. When He took our sin upon Himself on the cross God executed judgment on the sin nature in His flesh rather than ours. To carry the story all the way to the end we would say that when we trusted in Him we died with Him, were buried with Him and raised together with Him so that as 8:1 said, we are no longer condemned to live by the sin nature.

In summary 8:3 is saying that what the Law could not do was condemn sin in the flesh. It could pass a sentence of judgment but it could not execute the judgment. It could not do this because it could not get inside of us. Consequently the Law was weak through human flesh which was only aroused by the Law to rebel against it and break it more and more. So under the old dispensation, what the Law could not do, God has now done by the incarnation and the crucifixion so that the judgment on the sin nature was executed on God the Son who came in the likeness of sinful flesh and took ours upon Himself. When we believe in Him this same judgment is executed on our sin nature so that we are not condemned to live by it any longer.

Instead, 8:4 says that we have a new way of living available to us. The words **so that** indicate this is the reason God condemned the sin nature in the flesh. Namely, **so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us**. Again, several observations. First, having said many times that we are not under the Law for sanctification it may seem strange to say that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us. However, when we understand that the basic **requirement of the Law** was to live a holy life then we see that God still requires that of us. Paul is not putting us back under Law. Paul is saying that now that God has condemned the sin nature in the flesh there is a way for the requirement of the Law, which is holiness, to be met in us. Second, this way is not automatic. Paul says the requirement is only met in those believers **who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**. It should be clear that believers may walk either way but the only way that results in the holy requirement of the Law being fulfilled in us is when we **walk according to the Spirit**. So the new life of holiness is not automatic. Just because someone is a Christian does not mean that they have learned to walk according to the Spirit. This is what Christians must learn if they want to enjoy victory in the Christian life. Third, the Greek word for **walk** is *περιπατω* and refers to the "step by step daily living." What Paul is teaching is that each step we

take throughout the day must be according to the Spirit if we are to have the holy requirement of the Law fulfilled in our lives. Fourth, we are neither under Law nor lawless, we are under grace. To be under grace is to be under the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit. The way to see this in our life is to walk according to the Spirit. Fifth, it should be pointed out that the verb **might be fulfilled** is a passive voice. This means that we are not the ones who meet the holy requirement of the Law but another. The other is clearly the Holy **Spirit**. He produces the holiness; we merely bear it. He produces the fruit; we merely bear it. He authors life; we enjoy it. This is all enjoyed only on the basis of what God did, something the Law could not do; God sent His Son in the incarnation for the purpose of crucifixion in order to execute judgment on the sin nature. Freedom from its power is enjoyed whenever we walk according to the Spirit. Bondage is faced when we walk according to the flesh. Therefore let us learn to live by the Spirit so that His life is reproduced in ours.