

Why the true believer can be sure that he is not condemned

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
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“¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For 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, ⁴in 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.” (Romans 8.2 – 4, ESV)

Introduction

Three weeks ago we started this new section in Romans chapter 8. We considered together verse 1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” We saw that this verse teaches that it is impossible for the true believer to be condemned, no matter how bad his past life has been, or how bad his sins might be in the future. We are NOW in a position of non-condemnation. The verdict that God will make on our lives, of “Not guilty”, has already been pronounced, and will never be changed. This is because of what the apostle has spoken about in previous chapters, how we who believe have been justified by faith, on account of the payment that Jesus made for our sins upon the Cross. We have been given a righteousness that is not our own, and this righteousness will never be taken away from us.

Today I want us to go on to consider verses 2 to 4, which explain further why the true believer cannot be condemned. In these verses there are two main reasons that the apostle gives for our non-condemnation. Firstly, in verse 2, he speaks about how, through the rebirth, we have

been set free from slavery to sin. Secondly, in verses 3 and 4, he speaks about how Christ came into this world, took on human flesh, and bore in his flesh the condemnation that we deserve. My plan is to consider both of these two points this morning

1. We cannot be condemned because are united with Christ and so delivered from the power of sin and death

The apostle says in verse 2, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”

As we think about this verse, the first thing we need to ask is, in what sense is the apostle using the word “law” here? Normally when the apostle uses the word “law” he does so to refer to the moral law, as summarised in the Ten Commandments. But he cannot be using the word in this sense here, because he says that what he calls the “law of the Spirit” has set the believer free from what he calls the “law of sin and death”, and this is the reason that we are not condemned. However, we know that the moral law of God cannot save anyone or set anyone free. This is exactly what he has just proved in chapter 7. So in what sense is he using the word “law” here?

The answer is found by turning back to chapter 3 and verse 27. In the NIV this verse reads “Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.” The word that is translated in this verse “principle” is, in the original, the same word that we have here translated as “law”, the Greek word “nomos”. In the ESV the verse is translated, “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.” So we see that the word that is usually translated “law” can also mean “principle” or “power”.

On this basis, we could paraphrase verse 2 as “For the power of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the power of sin and death.” Or, “For the reign of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the reign of sin and death.”

This leads us to another question. What experience is the apostle talking about here? When has it taken place?

At this point I need to deal with a false interpretation of this verse, and indeed of the whole section of Romans chapter 7 verse 14 right into Romans 8 verse 15, which has had widespread currency in our time.

There are those who will tell you that in Romans chapter 7 verses 14 – 25 the apostle is speaking about his experience prior to some “second blessing” experience, when he was experiencing defeat in his Christian life, and that then in Romans 8 he speaks about victory over sin that he experienced after this “second blessing”. On the basis of this they build a whole view of the Christian life, which says that you first get converted, but for a while after you are converted you are liable to be defeated by sin. You then need to have a “second blessing”, after which you will have victory over sin.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. The first problem is that any Christian who is honest about his life will have to admit that, however spiritually mature he might be, when he compares his life with the perfection of God’s law, he is bitterly disappointed with his performance. No Christian who is honest with himself can say that he does not often feel like the apostle Paul, who describes himself in Romans 7 verse 24 like this: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

The second problem with seeing this verse as a description of what has happened after some “second blessing” experience is that it fails to notice the all-important word “for” at the beginning of the verse. What this is talking about is not a “second blessing” experience which has happened to Paul and a few other select Christians, but something which has happened to all believers, and is the reason why the true believer cannot be condemned.

The third problem with seeing this verse as a description of what has happened as a result of some “second blessing” is that the apostle says that this experience “in Christ Jesus”. It has come about through our union with Christ. So it is something which is true for all believers.

So what is the apostle talking about here? I suggest to you that the obvious answer is that he is putting in another way something which he has talked about already several times in this letter: that those who believe have been fundamentally changed. They have been united with Christ. The old man, who wanted to sin, has died with Christ, and a new man, who wants to please God, has come into being. So the “law of sin and death” that is spoken of here is the principle of sin, or the power of sin, that is at work in those who are not saved. Those who are not saved are in the grip of sin. They are not able to do anything other than sin. This tendency to sin is leading them to eternal death in hell. They are totally unable to save themselves. The “law of the Spirit” is talking about how the person who is a true believer has, by the power of

the Holy Spirit working in him, been set free from slavery to sin, through his union with Christ. He is a new creature. The old has gone. The new has come.

Here is a glorious truth: the person who belongs to Christ has been united with Christ. His old man has died. He has been fundamentally changed. In his heart, he no longer wants to sin. He has a new nature that loves God. This is through the power of the Holy Spirit working in him to unite him with Christ and to change his fundamental nature.

But someone might ask, "How can this be reconciled with the sense of frustration and defeat that the apostle has spoken of in chapter 7 verses 14 to 25?" The answer is that, although the person who is born again has a new nature, he is still living in his body of flesh that has learned habits of sin which are very slow to change. So there is a conflict between the new nature that he has owing to his union with Christ, and the tendency to sin which lives in on his flesh. This is exactly what is described in chapter 7 verses 14 to 25, where the apostle says repeatedly that he wants to do what is good, and when he does wrong he does what he does not want to do. He says that in his innermost being he delights in the law of God, and considers it to be good. It is in his flesh that no good thing lives, but his heart loves God and wants to please him.

So here in verse 2 the apostle is speaking about the great work of rebirth that God has done in the person who belongs to Christ. This miracle of the rebirth is the reason which Paul gives to explain why the true believer cannot be condemned

If you have been born again you are united with Christ. Your life is now hidden with Christ in glory. You are seated with him in the heavenly places. The life of the Spirit in you is eternal. In your heart of hearts, you have been delivered once and for all, from the power of sin. Your old man has died. You have a new spiritual life that can never die. Of course you cannot lose your salvation! Of course you cannot be condemned! You are united with Christ, who is in glory! His life is your life! All that he has is yours! It can never be taken from you.

But this verse should also serve as a warning to anyone here who, as yet, has not been born again. If you are not born again, then you are still subject to the "law of sin and death". You are a slave of sin. You are a child of the devil. You are following the ways of this world. You are heading inexorably towards eternal condemnation in hell. And you are utterly unable to save yourself. It is vitally important that you come to Christ, and ask him to save you and to make you born again.

So we see that verse 2 gives us the first reason why the true Christian cannot be condemned, that through his union with Christ his nature has been changed. He has been born again. He has received spiritual life that can never die.

This leads us to the second reason why the true believer cannot be condemned

2. The true believer cannot be condemned because Christ was condemned for him

The second reason that the apostle gives why the true believer cannot be condemned is because of what Jesus did by coming into this world, taking on human flesh, and being condemned in our place. This is what is spoken of in verses 3 and 4: “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.”

We referred briefly to these verses three weeks ago, but it is worth looking at them in a bit more detail today. They sum up the Gospel. We see a number of things from them:

1) The inability of the law to save

The apostle says that God has done what the law “weakened by the flesh, could not do”. Here the apostle has reverted to using the word “law” to speak of the moral law of God, as summarised in the Ten Commandments. The law cannot save us. This is not because there is anything wrong with the law. It is perfect. In theory, if we lived perfect lives, we could make ourselves worthy of going to heaven by keeping the law. But the problem is that we have a tendency to sin, that the apostle calls the flesh, that lives in each one of us. Therefore, because of the tendency to sin that we all have, the law cannot save us.

2) God sent his Son

The second thing to see is that God sent his Son into the world. Notice, the verse does not say that God sent the Word into the world, and that when the Word was sent into the world it became the Son. This is an error that some teach, that the Son only became the Son when he took

on human flesh. No. The Son is the eternal Son of God, who was sent by the Father into this world.

3) The Son came “in the likeness of sinful flesh”

The third thing to notice is that it says that the Son came “in the likeness of sinful flesh”. For the Son of God to be the sacrifice for our sins, he had to take on human flesh. But why does the apostle say that he came “in the likeness of sinful flesh”? Is he saying that he looked like a human being, but that he was not really? That is what some taught in New Testament times, that Jesus seemed to be a human being, but this was in appearance only. They taught this because they found the idea of God taking on human flesh to be too demeaning for God. No, the apostle is not teaching that Jesus only looked like a human being. The consistent teaching of Scripture is that Jesus was every bit as human as we are. He was born of a woman. You could touch him, he ate and drank, and slept and walked and talked. He got tired, and thirsty and hungry. He was tempted in every way as we are, yet was without sin.

So what does the apostle mean when he says that he came in the “likeness of sinful flesh”? What he means is that, outwardly he looked no different from any one of us. If you had looked at him from a distance, he would have looked like an ordinary human being. You would have thought that he was a sinner like the rest of us. He did not have a halo around his head, to make him obviously different from the rest of us.

Moreover, when he died on the Cross, he became sin for us. He was not sinful. But God treated him as though he was sin. It was as if his flesh was sinful, even though it was not.

4) He died for sin

The fourth thing to see is that Jesus died for sin. He was sent “in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin”. The phrase “for sin” is summarising what Jesus did on the Cross. He was punished for sin. Not for his sin, but for ours.

5) So God condemned sin in the flesh

Fifthly, we see the result of this, that God has condemned sin “in the flesh”. Because Jesus took on human flesh, God has been able to condemn the sin that is in the flesh of man. And because Jesus has

been condemned, we are not condemned. God cannot condemn us, because otherwise he would condemn the same sins twice.

6) The purpose of this is that the requirement of law of God might be fulfilled in us

Verse 4 says, "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us". There is debate about how this verse is to be interpreted. Is it saying that the requirement of the law is fulfilled in us, because Christ has fulfilled it for us, and his righteousness is credited to us?

Or is it saying that because we are not condemned, and because we have been born again, we are able, at least to some extent, to fulfil the law of God by living a life of love?

It is undoubtedly true that Christ's righteousness has been credited to Christians. God does look upon true believers as righteous, on account of Jesus's perfect obedience which has been credited to them. But I think that this is not what the apostle is referring to primarily here. Why do I say this?

First of all, because of the wider context. He said in chapter 7 verse 4, that we have died to the law so that we might bear fruit for God. That fruit for God involves living a life that is consistent with the law of God.

Also because of what immediately follows from this statement. He says "who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." He follows this up in the following verses by contrasting those who have the Holy Spirit, who are born again, with those who do not have the Holy Spirit, who are dead in their sins. Those who do not have the Holy Spirit are unable to please God, and do not submit to God's law. The implication is that those who have the Holy Spirit **are** able to obey God, and **do** submit to God's law.

Then, if we look forward to chapter 13, verses 8 to 10, the apostle says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law." God wants us to fulfil the law. The work that God has done in us of making us born again has enabled us to start living a life of love, which, at least to some extent, fulfils God's law.

So I think we should see this verse as talking about the purpose of our salvation. A parallel would be Ephesians chapter 2 verses 8 to 10: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” We are saved by grace alone, through faith, and not by works at all. But we are also saved in order to do good works, and, according to the terminology of Romans 8 verse 4, to fulfil the righteous requirement of the law.

So, we have seen that in verses 3 and 4 the apostle gives the further great reason why believers are not condemned: because Christ was condemned for them. Christ took on human flesh, and God condemned sin in the flesh of Christ, so that he does not need to condemn sin in us.

Conclusion

We have learned today that there are two reasons why the Christian is not condemned. Firstly, because the true Christian has been united with Christ. He has been set free from the power of sin and death by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the rebirth. He has a spiritual life that can never die.

Secondly, the true Christian cannot be condemned because Christ took on human flesh. God condemned sin in the flesh, in Christ, so there is no way that the believer can be condemned. His sin has already been condemned in Christ.

As we apply this passage to ourselves I need to ask you two related questions?

1. Have you been born again
2. Have you trusted Jesus as your Saviour?

If the answer to both of these questions is “yes” then you can be absolutely certain that you are not condemned, and never will be. God has pronounced the verdict of “Not guilty” over your life, and this verdict will never be revoked. Be strong in the knowledge of God’s love. Rejoice in his goodness to you. Cheer up! You will soon be heaven, enjoying unspeakable pleasures at God’s right hand.

What if, however, the answer to those questions is “no”? In that case you are still in your sins. You are a slave of sin. You are in the kingdom of Satan. You are alienated from God, and under his wrath. You are heading for eternal destruction in hell. What should you do? Believe

God's testimony about you that you are a sinner. Believe that Christ has died in the place of sinners. Come to Christ, and ask him to save you. God's promise is that, if you come to him, you will be saved, and you will be able to say, "There is no condemnation for me, because I am in Christ Jesus."

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