

Liberation Leading to Sanctification: Romans 8:1-4

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Liberation leading to sanctification. That is what we're going to look at this morning in Romans 8:1-4. Last Sunday we focused on the pronouncement of verse 1 that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And then we considered the purchase that was necessary to make that pronouncement a reality. The purchase happened through Jesus Christ, whom the Father sent in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. Our sin was condemned in Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

And I said last week that I had a third point in mind (but that we didn't have the time for), in addition to pronouncement and purchase, namely, purpose. And that's what we're going to see this morning. God's purpose in condemning His Son so that there is no condemnation for us, the purpose is liberation leading to sanctification.

I see liberation in verse 2, in the words "has set you free." And I see sanctification in verse 4, "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." This is what happens in the lives of those who are liberated from the law of sin and death. We grow in holiness. We live according to the Spirit. God does not justify us in order that we might be lawless. He justifies us in order that the righteous requirement of the law might actually be fulfilled in us.

That is the message in a nutshell. Now let's take it piece by piece, first looking at liberation in verse 2 and then sanctification in verse 4.

Liberation

What do you think of when you hear the word "liberation" or "liberty"? Maybe you think of the Statue of Liberty in New York, or our statement in the pledge of allegiance that we are "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." At a couple points this week I was talking to our kids about liberty, and asked them what they think of when they hear the word liberty. Milaina and Noah both mentioned the Statue of Liberty. Annalyse said "the liberty tunnel." And Stacy and I looked at each other and said, "That's our Pittsburgh baby. She's a Pittsburgher!"

Well, whether you think of the liberty tunnel or W. Liberty Ave. or the Statue of Liberty or the Liberty Bell, what we need to understand is that liberty is freedom.

When I was in the African country of Liberia a couple of years ago, I learned about the tumultuous history of that country. I also learned how it got its name, which sounds a lot like liberty. That particular region of western Africa was colonized mostly by slaves who had been freed in the United States. They were going back to Africa, their homeland, to experience freedom from the bondage they had experienced in America.

Liberty is very sweet. It is a precious gift. And those who have felt the agony of slavery or oppression will rejoice at the news of liberation. The American colonies sought their independence from England. One of the values this country was founded on is liberty. Slaves throughout history have sought freedom. It is something the human soul craves.

But we must also recognize, as we ponder this concept of liberty, that political liberty is not the ultimate answer. Even to be free from personal, physical oppression is not the ultimate answer for mankind. It is not our ultimate hope. And the history of the United States and the history of Liberia bear this out. Political liberty, personal liberty, has not resulted in a utopia. Just to consider the two examples I've mentioned, Liberia is very needy place, trying to recover from its tragic civil wars in recent decades. And the United States, even though we do enjoy many good things here, we have many problems as well. Just because we have certain freedoms, for which we ought to be grateful, we cannot look to these freedoms as the solution to the human predicament. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is not salvation.

The human predicament goes far deeper. The human predicament has its roots in the fact that we are all born in bondage to sin and death. And that is the cause of the bondage and oppression we see in our world. We learned about this in Romans 5. All human beings are born into the same family, the human race, whose father is Adam, the sinner. Like father, like son (and like daughter). We have his nature, we are guilty with him for his sin because of our relationship to him, and we do the same kinds of things he did, rebelling against God's commands.

And as long as we remain in that condition, we are in bondage to sin. If we realize how complete that bondage is, and how devastating and manipulative the slave master sin is, then we will rejoice at the sweet liberty we have in Jesus.

“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” (Romans 6:17–18, ESV)

These verses also make the point of liberation leading to sanctification. We have been liberated from our slavery to sin, but not for the purpose of lawlessness. Rather, we have been set free from a cruel and destructive master in order to be bound to a new master, who is kind and caring and will satisfy our souls forever. We now have new hearts which desire obedience. We are now slaves of righteousness, slaves of God.

Another section that helps us to understand this liberation is in Romans 7:4-6.

“Likewise, my brothers, you also have *died to the law* through the body of Christ, so that you may *belong to another*, to him who has been raised from the dead, *in order that we may bear fruit for God*. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are *released from the law*, having died to that which *held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit* and not in the old way of the written code.” (Romans 7:4–6, ESV)

You see, the law played a role in our captivity. The law played a role in our condemnation. There is nothing wrong with the law, itself. But when the law confronts our sinful flesh, it brings to light the wickedness of the flesh. And it shows very clearly that we fall far short of God’s perfect standard of righteousness.

But now, being dead to the law, and united to Christ, we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. Again, this is liberation leading to sanctification. We are released from the law, which held us captive, so that we now serve in the new way of the Spirit. There is a new life, a sanctified life, a life growing in holiness, that flows from our new freedom in Christ. We are no longer burdened under an external law that provokes our flesh. Instead, we are energized by the Spirit working inside of us, giving us the desire to obey.

These verses from chapter 6 and 7 serve as a helpful background for understanding what Paul is saying now in chapter 8, verses 2 and 4. The “law of the Spirit of life” is the new way of the Spirit in which we now serve. And it’s in contrast to “the law of sin and death,” which is what held us captive. One writer put it like this, “Moses’ law has right but not might; Sin’s law has might

but not right; the law of the Spirit has both right and might.”¹ This is the liberation that the Gospel brings. And this is the liberation experienced by all those who are in Christ Jesus. We have been purchased out of the domain of sin and death, and transferred into the domain of the Spirit of life. The Spirit is powerful to guide us, and He will guide us rightly. He will guide us into all the truth (as Jesus promised His disciples in John 16).

Are you grateful for this liberty?

I want to ask you today if you are mindful of the liberty that has been purchased for you by Christ Jesus. Are you grateful for this liberty? This is an amazing thing, and we are so prone to taking it for granted. Of course, we must understand that our liberty from sin is not yet absolute. We still feel the effects of sin in this world and in our own lives. But, think of it, we are free! We are not condemned. We will not suffer in hell for our sins. We are no longer under the dominion of sin, being controlled entirely by sin. And this is reason for rejoicing!

Our Statement of Faith, in the 2nd London Baptist Confession, summarizes many of these great promises connected with our liberation.

“The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the gospel, consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the severity and curse of the law, and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions [notice: not delivered from afflictions, but from *the evil of* afflictions], the fear and sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation: as also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind.”²

This is the freedom we have, brothers and sisters. Let’s meditate on this and give praise and glory to God for it. I mentioned last week the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet, and how Jesus said of her, “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”” (Luke 7:47, ESV)

And I ask you again today, can you look back on the bondage you were in before God rescued you? Can you imagine the kind of bondage you would be in this very moment, if it were

¹ Manson, quoted in Leon Morris, Romans, pg. 301

² Chapter 21

not for God liberating you? It's healthy to consider such things, because it will give us a greater delight in the liberty we now have.

Emmanuel Jal

There's a hip-hop artist named Emmanuel Jal who was born in South Sudan during the second civil war there, which started in the 1980s. His dad went to join the army. His mom was killed. And Emmanuel ended up fighting as a child soldier. When he was 11, he met a British aid worker named Emma McCune. She had compassion on him, and got him out of the situation he was in, took him to Kenya, and gave him an education. Emma later died in a road accident. And Emmanuel looks back on what Emma did for him, and he recognizes that she saved his life. She liberated him from a hopeless situation that would have eventually left him dead.

Emmanuel is now a successful musician, and he's also very active in helping children who are in situations similar to what he was in. One of his songs is about Emma, the woman who rescued him. He says,

“What would I be, if Emma never rescued me?
 What would I be: another starving refugee.
 Praise God, praise the Almighty for sending an angel to rescue me.
 I got a reason for being on this earth
 Cause I know more than many what life is worth.
 Now that I get a chance to stand my ground,
 I'm gonna run over mountains leaps and bounds.
 I ain't an angel, hope to be one soon, and when I am, I wanna be
 like Emma McCune.
 If Emma never rescued me, I'd be a corpse on the African plain.”

That's similar to how we should look back on our life apart from Christ. If He did not rescue us, if He did not set us free from sin, if He did not make us His own, we would be dead in our sin. We would be slaves to sin. But now that we've been liberated, we have a will to live and to grow and to emulate our Savior. He set me free, therefore I now want to help set others free.

The Relationship of Justification and Sanctification

Before we turn our attention directly to verse 4, I want to say a bit about the logical flow of these verses and the relationship between justification and sanctification.

Notice that verse 1 is a reference to justification. Justification is to be declared “not guilty,” “not condemned.” The person who is justified by faith in Jesus Christ is the person who is declared to be righteous by God by virtue of being united to Christ

and covered by Christ's righteousness. And that must happen before any sanctification is going to happen.

Verses 2 and 4 refer to liberation leading to sanctification—being set free in Christ Jesus for the purpose of walking by the Spirit. Justification is being declared righteous, and that happens at the beginning of the Christian life. Sanctification is the painfully slow process of actually becoming righteous, and that's what happens throughout the rest of the Christian life. We are set free from sin, and we will grow in this freedom—the process of sanctification. And the simple observation I'm wanting make here is that the one comes before the other, and must come before the other. Because if you're still condemned, and if you're still dead in sin and a slave to sin, then you're not going to experience any liberty in Christ. The condemnation must be lifted before anyone can make any progress in being free from sin.

The logic seems to be that verse 2 is an evidence of verse 1. Verse 2 begins with the word “for” or “because.” And in this case it seems best to read that as introducing something that demonstrates the truth of what he just said. The word “for” or “because” can function in different ways. Someone might say, “I'm a huge Pittsburgh Penguins fan, because I've always lived in Pittsburgh and my whole family has always rooted for the Pens.” That “because” statement is giving the basis for why he's a Pens fan. Or someone might say, “I'm a huge Penguins fan, because I have season tickets and I have a signed Crosby jersey and I have a Penguins poster in my yard and a bumper sticker and a flag on my car and I'm growing a beard during the playoffs.” That “because” statement is giving evidence of the fact that he's a Pens fan. Do you see the difference? The word “because” could indicate a basis or a reason for why something is true. Or it could indicate an evidence that demonstrates that something is true.

John Piper explained this in a way that was helpful to me, as I was studying this week. In one of his sermons on this text, he brought out this point, although he didn't use the Penguins as a way to illustrate it. But he made the point that the “for” at the beginning of verse 2 is giving an evidence. And so his paraphrase of verses 1-2 goes like this, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, *because (look!)* the Spirit is at work in them to give them victories over sin!”³

Cranfield, in his more technical commentary on Romans, says basically the same thing. “The implication of the [word ‘for’] is that the fact that this further liberation has taken place is

³ Sermon, “Set Free by the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus.”

confirmation of the reality of the fundamental liberation described in verse 1.”⁴ The fact that we are set free is evidence that there really is no condemnation hanging over us. So that’s the relationship of verses 1 and 2, and the relationship of justification (verse 1) and the liberation leading to sanctification (verse 2 and 4) which is based upon it and evidence of it. Justification must happen first, and when that happens in a person’s life, there is then the evidence of a changed life.

Sanctification

I had an interesting conversation with a guy last week while I was watching my son’s baseball game. This other man was there watching the game as well, and we struck up a conversation. Once we had been talking for several minutes, it came up that I’m a pastor, and he was intrigued to find that out. He then shared some things with me about his life, and he had some earnest questions. And I shared with him the same thing I’m sharing with you right now, that our fundamental problem is sin and there is no hope for real change in life if that problem of sin is not addressed first.

One of the questions he asked me was a sad one. He said that a woman he works with had lost her husband some years ago. And the folks in the office were telling her that she needed to find another guy, which eventually she did. As it turns out, she is living with a man who calls himself a pastor. They are not married, but they are in this relationship. And so the question was, “Is that OK?”

I said, “No, it’s not OK!” And I quoted Hebrews 13 where it says “let the marriage bed be undefiled.” And I talked about God’s plan for marriage, that the two become one flesh, and that sex is exclusively for the marriage relationship. He was grateful for a clear answer, because some people he had talked to seemed to think that the Bible didn’t really have anything to say about this.

The moral of the story, which is the point of what I want to say about sanctification here, is that a true believer will be pursuing righteousness in his or her life. Someone who is declared righteous in Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will be striving to obey God’s commands. That, indeed, is the purpose and the result of what Christ did for us. He didn’t bear our condemnation in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be ignored. That’s not what it says. He died in our place, purchased our salvation, bought our liberation, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.

⁴ Cranfield, ICC, Pg. 374.

Interpreting Verse 4

Now, I have to give some explanation for how I'm presenting verse 4. You need to know that there is debate over how to understand this verse. Many interpreters in the Protestant tradition take this as a reference to Christ fulfilling the righteous requirement of the law for us. And I certainly agree with that point theologically. We've learned this in Romans 4 and 5, that Christ's righteousness is counted to those who believe. Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law, and by faith we are united to Christ. And thus we are declared righteous by God. He justifies us. That is a glorious truth.

But the point I think Paul is making now in verse 4 is about the sanctification that results from that. And it may sound almost heretical to some of us to say that the righteous requirement of the law is actually fulfilled in us. But the Bible does teach this, and we must embrace it. Yes, Christ has fulfilled the law for us, and that's the only foundation of our right standing before God. But it's also true that once that happens, there is a transformation in our lives such that we do actually obey, and we do actually fulfill the law (not perfectly, but significantly and increasingly as the Spirit is working in us).

It's important to notice that verse 4 very clearly says "in us." Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who said that he was in the unhappy position of having to disagree with Charles Hodge on this verse, pointed out that Paul would have used a different preposition if he was saying that the righteous requirement of the law was fulfilled "with respect to us" or "concerning us" or "on our behalf." But the preposition he did use means "in us."⁵

Another compelling reason to see the verse in terms of sanctification is the way that it continues. Paul then describes the life of the person in whom the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled. These individuals "walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." And the following verses continue to expound that, which we'll look at next week.

This is about the life of the believer. This is what the Spirit does in us. He causes us to walk in conformity to God's law. And this serves as yet another rebuttal to the question that arose back in 6:15, "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"

You see, we're no longer under the law. We're no longer condemned by the law. But that doesn't mean obedience to God goes out the window. No, something amazing happens inside us of. We *want* to obey. In fact, we want to obey so badly that when we give in to the old self and its fleshly desires, we cry out to God, saying, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this

⁵ Romans 7:1 – 8:4, pg. 303.

body of death?” We’re painfully aware of how we continue to fall short.

But we should also be joyfully aware of the transformation that has taken place and is taking place in our lives. We should be able to see that God has given us a genuine love for our brothers and sisters in Christ and a genuine desire to see unbelievers be drawn into a saving relationship with Christ.

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” (Romans 13:8–10, ESV)

That happens in the lives of those who are walking not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Once we are regenerate, we do begin to walk in accordance with God’s commands and actually begin to fulfill the very essence of the law. That’s certainly not something we can take any pride in. But it’s something to stand in awe of and a reason to praise God and thank Him for His mercy.

The last text I want to refer to, just to give you one other example of the relationship between justification and sanctification, is Ephesians 2:8-10.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [that’s justification, and now he’s going to talk about what flows from that] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, *that we should walk in them.* [that’s sanctification]” (Ephesians 2:8–10, ESV)

To summarize the points of Romans 8:1-4, I hope you’ve been able to see what God did through His Son (verse 3) is what erases our condemnation (verse 1) and purchases our liberation (verse 2), and its for the purpose of our sanctification (verse 4).

And I hope that in light of these truths, we will be emboldened to fight sin, and to find joy in repentance, and to risk for the cause of Christ. We have this one life to live, brothers and sisters, and it is going by quickly. Don’t waste your life. Seize the day. The pronouncement of No Condemnation has been declared over you, if you are in Christ. And the outworking of that is for us to walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. So let’s live that out this week, in the pursuit of our own greatest joy, and to bring honor and glory to our Savior.