

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, June 9, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 8:1-2

LIVING WITHOUT CONDEMNATION

The first two verses of Romans 8 are amongst the most inspiring in all of Holy Scripture: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”

What is Condemnation? What kind of mind-set do you have when you feel condemned?

- (a) You feel guilty. You know you did wrong. You got caught with your hand in the cookie jar!
- (b) You feel fear, and it is fear of punishment. “I’m not only guilty: I’m going to be punished for this.”
- (c) You feel self-rejection. It is the feeling that “I blew it; how stupid I was!”

Now the Bible says that God doesn’t want Christians to live intimidated by these feelings of guilt, fear, or self-rejection.

You remember how in Romans 7 Paul said, “All the things I want to do, I end up not doing; and all the things I don’t want to do, I end up doing; and I’m so miserable!” Now Romans 8:1-2 has to do with that previous chapter. Paul is talking about a Christian who is struggling; and he is saying that a Christian who is struggling is not under condemnation. Now what does that mean? It means three things:

1. It means that God does not reject me when I sin. Look at John 6:37 — Jesus is speaking, and He talks about the fact that when you give your life to Him, God is never going to reject you after that. “All whom the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away.” No matter what you do, God will never reject you once you are “in Christ;” so you don’t worry about “losing your salvation.” God doesn’t write you off. He still loves you and keeps you as His child even when you sin. Why is that? I think it is for three reasons:

- Because his love is unconditional. Were you ever told as a child, “Be good or God won’t like you?” Folks, that is not in the Bible. That’s a nice guilt-manipulating technique. But if you’re a believer, God has already accepted you, and He will never reject you because you are “in Christ,” and to reject you would mean rejecting Christ Himself, and God could not do that.

- Because our acceptance is not based on our performance. Look at Romans 9:16, “It does not therefore depend on man’s desire but on God’s mercy.” God’s salvation depends not on your effort but on His mercy.
- Because your acceptance is based on your position in Christ. There is no condemnation for those who are “in Christ.” You know that “in Christ” is Paul’s favorite term to describe a Christian. But have you ever felt when you sinned that God was far away from you? Folks, that feeling is not from God. There’s a bumper sticker that says, “If you feel far from God, guess who moved?” God does not reject you even when you sin, because you are “in Christ.” Now that’s one of the things it means to live without condemnation. No matter what I do, God will never wipe me out.

2. No condemnation means that God is not angry with me when I am inconsistent.

Do you ever say, “What’s the matter with me? Why can’t I act the way I want to?” We get angry and frustrated with ourselves. But God doesn’t. One of the most beautiful truths you can learn in Scripture is that God is patient with you. He understands that it takes time for you to grow; and even when you are inconsistent, He does not condemn you. Why? For two reasons:

(a) Look at Psalm 103:13-14: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him; for He knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust.” Do you know what I like about those verses? They tell me that God knows exactly what I’m made of! One of the reasons God is never angry with you when you are inconsistent is because He made you, and He knows that you have human weaknesses. He knows your struggle against sin. He knows that you’re not perfect.

He is like a father who is compassionate toward his children. When our children were little and began to take their first faltering steps, they fell flat on their face. Did we give them a 10-minute lecture? Did we spank them and send them to their room? No, of course not. We simply picked them up, dusted them off, and helped them get going again!

Did you ever realize that God is not disappointed with you when you fail? Because in order to be disappointed with someone, you have to expect them to do something different. But the fact is, God knows already all the mistakes you’re going to make tomorrow and during the rest of your life. So it won’t surprise Him when it happens. That’s one of the reasons God is not angry with you when you’re inconsistent — He made you.

(b) He is not angry with you because He has been there Himself. Look at Hebrews 4:15-16: He is our High Priest, “for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One Who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help us in time of need.”

Why does God not get angry with us? Because Jesus came to earth, and experienced the same temptations we do; and He knows where we’re coming from. So He says, “When you

become a Christian, you don't need to say, every time you sin, 'Oh I had better hide from God.' When we sin as believers, so often we run from God instead of running to Him. And running to God is how we get over the sin — through repentance and restoration. No matter how many times we fail in some particular way, God says, "Come back to Me. I'm not angry with you because Jesus understands your temptation." And that is surely a liberating truth. "No condemnation" means a third thing:

3. It means that God does not punish me when I sin as a believer. What is punishment? It is payment for past sin. Why does God not punish me? Because Jesus took all the punishment for all of my sins on the Cross 2,000 years ago. So why would Jesus receive the punishment 2,000 years ago, and then have God say, "Oh that wasn't enough; I'm going to punish you too." Jesus took our punishment, so a Christian is never punished for his sins. He is disciplined, and we'll explain that in a moment. There's a big difference between punishment and discipline.

So, if I am a Christian, and I sin, God does not condemn me: He does not become angry with me; and He does not punish me. Now, when we fail to understand what I've just said, then, when we sin, we start expecting God to punish us, and we start looking for things, and we say, "Perhaps this is God getting back at me." You get sick or you lose your job, or sorrow enters your life, and you say, "God must be repaying me for that sin I committed twenty years ago." But do remember, God settled the score at the Cross. That's what it means to live under no condemnation. As a Christian your sins have all been paid for, and God does not hold a grudge. You are not His enemy; you are His child.

Look at Psalm 103:9-12: "God will not always accuse, nor will He harbor his anger forever; He does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities." (If He did, we'd all be dead!) "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." How far is the east from the west? You can go east forever, and you'll never reach west! You can never be brought back into condemnation for those sins you have committed.

Now why am I making such a big case about this? Because the reason a lot of Christians can't get close to God and enjoy fellowship with Him is because they are afraid of God. As a believer you do not have to be afraid of God. You respect God, you stand in awe before Him, you love Him; but you don't have to be afraid of Him because, as Christians, Christ has paid for every sin you and I will ever commit.

Now, some of you have been sitting on the edge of your pew waiting to ask this question — "Pastor, if I'm saved totally, and God accepts me no matter what I do, then why should I strive to be good?" That's what Romans 6 was all about, you remember. Let me say this — your sin makes no difference at all so far as God's acceptance of you is concerned; but it makes a tremendous difference so far as your daily happiness is concerned. It makes a big difference in your rewards in heaven; and it makes a big difference in lots of other ways.

So what does happen when a Christian sins? Seven things, the Bible says.

1. It brings conviction from God. In John 16:8 it says that the Holy Spirit will convict of sin and righteousness and judgment. That is the Holy Spirit's ministry. And conviction means God making me aware of my sin, and that can sometimes be a terrifying experience. Acts 2:37 gives us an illustration of this. Peter had been preaching, and when the people heard his message they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Here we have a clear example of conviction. Have you ever heard a sermon that did that to you? Many a time we can be cut to the heart when we realize that we have grieved the Lord by our sinful disobedience. How do you tell the difference between condemnation and conviction? Condemnation says, "I'm no good and I'm never going to be any good." Conviction says, "What shall I do?" Conviction says, "All right; I'm going to change by God's grace. I want to be different. Oh God, work for good in my life."

2. Sin hurts other people around us, especially those closest to us. When King David committed sin with Bathsheba his family suffered terribly as a result; and David knew full well that he was to blame for the tragedies that took place in his family.

3. Sin hurts us and destroys our happiness. Every sin we commit has a harmful effect on our body, our emotions, our spirits. Remember Galatians 6:7-8, "Do not be deceived; God cannot be mocked. A man reaps when he sows." I know there are people who want to sow their wild oats and then pray for a crop failure! God does not exempt you from the natural consequences of your own folly. A Christian can smoke until he gets lung cancer, or he may become grossly overweight and have a heart attack, and God would let it happen. People say, "Is AIDS a judgment of God on homosexuality?" It's not a judgment, but it is a consequence. Folks, everything in life, good or bad, has a consequence. What you sow, you reap; even though God still loves you.

4. Fellowship with God is broken when you sin. Relationship and fellowship are two different things. Our relationship with God is not broken. A born-again person cannot be unborn! You're still a child of God, but the fellowship is broken because God does not agree with what we do when we sin. How do you know when you are in fellowship with God? You have joy! A joyful Christian is in harmony with God. When David sinned, he didn't lose his salvation, but he lost the joy of his salvation; and that is why in Psalm 51:12 he says to God after he had repented with anguish in his heart — "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation."

5. When you sin, your usefulness in God's service is limited. You're going to be an unproductive Christian if you allow sin to pile up in your life. In John 15:4 Jesus says, "Remain in Me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." Do you want to see fruit in your Christian life? If you do, you have to be in tune with the Lord. You must maintain a godly lifestyle by remaining in the vine.

6. Sin brings loving discipline from God. It's very important for us to understand the difference between discipline and punishment. Hebrews 12:5-11 says, "...my son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline. . .because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He chastises (RSV) everyone he accepts as a son." That word "chastise" does not mean "punish" in the sense of condemnation. It literally means to "spank"! Get it?! He continues, "For what son is not

disciplined by his father?” When our children were small I did not spank the kids down the street; but when Alan and the others needed it, it was entirely appropriate for me to “correct” them! By the way, never discipline a child with your hand. The hand is meant for hugging, not hitting. You use a neutral object, a light rod, and you apply it to that part of the child’s anatomy which is cushioned to receive correction!

One of the ways you know that you are a Christian is that when you get out of line, God corrects you. In fact, if you see someone who claims to be a Christian, and he is living in blatant sin, and you see no correction, no discipline, then you must question if that person is indeed a Christian. You see, one of the things that proves you are a Christian is that you cannot sin and get away with it. And God’s discipline is positive — it is meant to get you back on track.

The writer continues in verse 11, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Do remember that the purpose of punishment is to pay back for a wrong; the purpose of discipline is to correct and promote growth.

The focus of punishment is the past — you pay for what you did in the past. The focus of discipline is on the future: “Here is how I am going to change!”

The attitude behind punishment is righteous anger: God gets angry with the wicked who defy Him. But He doesn’t get angry at Christians; and that’s a big difference. The attitude behind discipline is love. God disciplines us because He treats us as His children, Whom He loves and wants to correct.

What’s the result? The result of punishment is guilt, fear, and hostility; the result of discipline is security. Psychologists will tell you that the most insecure children are those who are undisciplined. Every child needs some parameters, some walls, some rules that say, “You may go this far and no farther.” And the child goes up to the line and crosses it, and he wants to see, “Do you care enough to do something about it? Who’s in control here?” The children with security and self-esteem are those who are brought up in homes of loving discipline, not punishment.

What’s the difference between punishing your child and disciplining him? Well if you do it in anger, it’s punishment. Wham! Discipline, on the other hand, is setting him down and saying, “You’re going to get this because I want you to understand that I love you and care about your future and want you to be different.” God does not punish His children: He disciplines us. And that is a model for every parent to follow.

7. Sin causes loss of rewards in heaven for the Christian. Look at 1 Cor. 3:12-15: “If any man builds on this true foundation, Christ Jesus, using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day (of Judgment) will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.” He’s saying that the Judgment Day will test your life and character, whether your life was built on

solid principles, gold, silver, or costly stones; or whether your life was just a bunch of fluff — wood, hay, straw, which will burn up in an instant blaze. Now verse 14, “If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward (not salvation, but reward). If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” This fellow makes it into heaven just by the skin of his teeth, with little or no devoted Christian service to present before the Lord. And this brings us to ask our final question:

What should a Christian do when he sins? Three things:

1. You remind yourself that Jesus Christ has already paid for your sin. Look at 1 John 2:1-2, “My dear children (Christians), I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins...” You see, Jesus is in heaven now, speaking to the Father in our defense. He says, “Father, I bore the penalty 2,000 years ago; and there’s no such thing as ‘double Jeopardy’ — being punished twice for the same crime.”

2. Then you confess your sin. Look at 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” That word “confess” in Greek means, “I agree with the statement that someone else makes.” Confession simply means, “I agree with you, Lord. That thing I said or did was downright wrong. God, I got angry and blew my top today unnecessarily. God, I had a judgmental, critical attitude. Lord, I gossiped, and Lord, You are right. That was wrong.”

There are three things confession does riot mean:

- (a) It doesn’t mean to BEG: “Oh God, please, please, please forgive me!” God wants to forgive you.
- (b) It doesn’t mean to BARGAIN: “God, if You forgive me, I will never do this again.” Folks, if you have a problem with a certain sin, it’s going to be a lifelong struggle, and God knows that; and you may be back asking forgiveness for that same old sin. Confession doesn’t take care of the future: It simply gets you back into fellowship with God right now.
- (c) It doesn’t mean to BRIBE: “God, if You forgive me, I promise I’ll read my Bible everyday; I’ll begin to tithe; I’ll even take notes on the sermon every Sunday. (If you did that, I’m sure He would forgive you — that’s the one thing that touches His heart!) “I promise: I promise.” Don’t make promises. You may break every one of them!

3. Accept forgiveness from God and forgive yourself, and focus on the future. Remember Philippians 3:13, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Now when you understand all this about grace — that you are not under condemnation

but forgiven in Christ — then remember this also: God does not want you to condemn yourself either. God gets no pleasure in watching you emotionally whip yourself; in fact, it grieves Him. Putting yourself down doesn't do anything to make you more spiritual. Some people think they haven't been preached to unless the preacher has given them a spiritual beating! "Oh Pastor, that was such a good sermon: It made me feel so bad!" Some folk think they haven't worshipped unless they have been run over by a spiritual bulldozer.

God wants you to serve him with a clear conscience. When you refuse to accept God's forgiveness, and when you refuse to forgive yourself, you're not living under grace: You are a prisoner of the law. Remember, God always responds to us out of love. Why? Because we deserve it? No — because we are "in Christ Jesus."

Look at this piece of paper. It is scribbled over and crumpled up. It is torn, and it has dirty marks all over it. But when I put it in this Book, you don't see the paper. All you see is the Book!

Now when you are "in Christ," God looks down at you, and He doesn't see your mistakes, your imperfections, your sins. He sees you "in Christ"; and Christ is perfect, and for God to reject you, He would have to reject Christ. And that is the good news of "no condemnation"!

AMEN.