No Condemnation

By Renee Duffy

Paul's words at the beginning of the eighth chapter of Romans are a beloved promise for Christians. "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." These are triumphant words for which Paul spent the first seven chapters of Romans preparing us. These words, on their own, are enough to elicit thankfulness and joy in every believer. Moreover, when we dive deeper into the theology behind God's promises and discover the paths that God takes in order to fulfill these promises, our love for God grows and our foundation of faith is made more steadfast. A better understanding of God's ways leads to growth in maturity so that we are no longer "tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:13). A better understanding of Paul's theology that leads to such a triumphant declaration will not only safeguard against false gospel messages but will draw us into a deeper relationship with God. And for these reasons, I want to answer the question, "Why?" Why is there now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? There is a quick and simple sounding answer: "Because Jesus died to forgive our sins." This statement focuses on our forensic justification, meaning the judicial verdict that we are no longer guilty by the means of Jesus' atoning death. If this is our answer, then it might be surprising to note that it is the Spirit who is mentioned eleven times in the first eleven verses of chapter eight and the Son's atoning death is only mentioned once (1:3). There may be more to Paul's answer than simply our forensic justification.

¹ All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is quoted from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 8:1.

Paul's thrilling statement, "Therefore there is now no condemnation" is a concluding statement, therefore the first step to answering the question, "Why?" is to examine what precedes this conclusion. Next, we can look to the verses that directly follow verse one. In them, Paul gives a chain of statements that begin with "For" that trace a line deeper through his logic. Finally, we'll draw some conclusions along with other NT scholars about the implications of Paul's argument.

Paul has been following a carefully crafted line of logic from 1:1 through 7:25 that concludes with the statement, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (1:1). In those first seven chapters of his letter he demonstrates for the reader the problem at hand, that all mankind stands condemned before the wrath of God against ungodliness (1:18). Jew and Gentile alike are guilty under sin (3:9). This is the bad news that gets our attention but he goes on to remind us of the good news. "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe" (3:21-22). No longer do Jews have the exclusive membership into God's family, all are able to be brought in and reconciled to God. Paul continues to explain how this has been accomplished. It was predicted and set into motion by God's dealings with Abraham (4:1-13), accomplished by the work of the Son (5:10), and is applied to us by grace (5:15) through faith (5:1). The current state of affairs for believers who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus and are reading this letter from Paul is that they are no longer slaves to sin (6:6) but are instead alive to God (6:11). This life as a servant of God leads to our sanctification which results in eternal life (6:22). Then, in chapter 7, Paul pauses his flow of argument to fend off a possible misunderstanding. He knows that some will wrongly conclude that the Law itself is sinful (7:7). Instead Paul shows that the Law

couldn't do the job of making man righteous, and therefore right with God, because of what is wrong with man. Instead, the Law makes clear to us that our ultimate need is not simply to do away with the Law but to be freed from our fleshly bondage to sin (7:14, 24). At this moment in his argument he gives us the triumphal statement of 8:1: "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Based on all that has come before it, how does Paul answer the question, "Why is there now no condemnation for those who are in Christ?" We all stood condemned and God ordained that our faith in him would be the instrument through which he would apply the gift of salvation secured by the death and resurrection of the Son. There is no condemnation because Jesus died, and we put our faith in him. Yes, but Paul wants us to grasp what lies underneath the surface. On the surface are the things that happen historically. Jesus died and we believed, but Paul goes down deeper to explain to us why these historical realities mean no condemnation for us. If we don't go this next step, we have a statement that is true and for which we are thankful, but we miss out on more that will fuel our worship and transform us as believers. For this reason, Paul goes on in 8:2-11 with a series of "for" statements that explain why there is now no condemnation. Each new "for" statement builds on or expands the statement that comes before it.

"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." (8:2)

In this first of the "for" statements, Paul introduces the Spirit as the reason behind our freedom.

Our freedom, which was purchased by the Son's death and resurrection, is contributed to "the law of the Spirit of Life." This emphasis on the Spirit will continue throughout the series of "for" statements. Paul is shifting here from his focus on the law in previous chapters, especially

chapter seven, to a focus on the Spirit's role in securing our declaration of no condemnation.² The thing from which we were set free is called "the law of sin and of death." We hear "law" in this statement and think of Paul's extensive treatment of the inadequacy of the law from the previous chapters.³ We should also hear "sin" and be reminded of our fleshly bondage to sin, freedom from which is the ultimate need of man and the focus of Paul's desperate cry at the end of chapter seven⁴; both are in view in this short statement. This first "for" statement summarizes the answer to "why" at the highest level: There is no condemnation (8:1) because we've been set free from the law of sin and death (8:2).

"For God achieved what the law could not do because it was weakened through the flesh. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and concerning sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (8:3 NET)

How did the law of the Spirit of life set us free? The second "for" statement addresses this question. Paul reminds us of his discussion about the law in chapter 7. The thing the law could not "achieve" was to bring life (7:10). Instead, it brought condemnation and death because sin had an opportunity through our weak flesh (7:11). God is the one who achieved bringing life by sending his own Son concerning the sin that was leading us to condemnation. I've chosen the NET translation of this verse for the phrase "concerning sin." NASB chooses to interpret the phrase as "as an offering for sin." The attempt here is to make clear what they perceive as an allusion to the Hebrew expression for "sin offering" as it is translated in the LXX. While this may be an allusion to that phrase, it is not explicit in the text and an unnecessary extension of the

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² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 216.

³ Ibid., 218

⁴ Chuck Lowe, "There is no condemnation' (Romans 8:1) But Why Not?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (1999): 244.

author's words.⁵ The thing that the Son did concerning sin was to condemn it "in the flesh." "In the flesh" could be modifying the Son or sin. If it modifies sin, then it could be describing a subset of sin, sin that is in the flesh as opposed to other types of sin, but Christ's condemnation of sin was total (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 10:14) so this interpretation would be contradictory to the rest of the NT. The word "flesh" could also be interpreted as "sinful man." If this is the case, then the Son condemned sin as it exists in sinful humanity. However, if it modifies he/the Son, it is describing the mode in which the Son condemned sin. The Son did the condemning while he existed in flesh. While both are theologically possible statements, the thrust of what Paul is saying is that the Father did through the Son what the law could not do because of our sinful flesh. The law could not produce righteousness in us, so it was necessary for the Son to condemn the sin as it exists in us. Therefore, the interpretation that the Father, through the Son, condemned the sin that exists in our flesh fits best with the context. This also fits best with Paul's cry at the end of chapter seven, that we be set free from "the body of this death." Here's Paul's chain of reasoning at the end of verse three: There is no condemnation (8:1) because we've been set free from the law of sin and death (8:2) by the Son's condemnation of sin (8:3).

"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" (8:4)

Paul shifts here from explanations of *what* happened to an explanation of *why* it happened. "So that" introduces the why behind the Son's condemnation of sin as the method of our subsequent freedom. So that the "requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us." What is this requirement of the Law? Several views have been suggested. The requirement of the Law could be referring

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⁵ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 303.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 220.

to the sentence of death or the condemnation which we were all under according to the Law. The Son's brutal death did indeed take the just punishment of our sin and so it would seem to fit here. However, if this were the case, we should expect Paul's statement as he continues to point to our forensic justification. The end of his "so that" statement clarifies in whom the requirement of the law is fulfilled: "us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." If Paul means to limit the purpose of Christ's sacrifice to our forensic justification, the information about us walking according to the Spirit does not seem to follow⁷. Another possible meaning of the phrase "the requirement of the Law" is the moral requirement of obeying the commandments of the Law⁸. If we take this to be Paul's meaning, the statement is rendered as follows: God condemned sin as it exists in our weak flesh so that we could live in such a way (according to the Spirit) that we fulfill the moral requirement of the law. This follows Paul's argument from chapter five to chapter six. The Son's work (5:10) means that they are alive to God (6:11) and now live as servants of God which means living a sanctified life which results in eternal life (6:22). Additionally, Paul will instruct his readers later in this letter to fulfill the law by practicing neighborly love because it sums up all the commandments (13:8-10). This second interpretation fits Paul's words and the rest of his message best. Rather than a restatement of what he already said (3:28), it demonstrates his intention for us to understand at a deeper level what was accomplished for us by the Son including the new role of the Spirit in our lives. Paul's chain of reasoning up to and including verse four: There is no condemnation (8:1) because we've been set free from the law of sin and death (8:2) by the Son's condemnation of sin (8:3) so that we can fulfill the moral requirement of the law according to the Spirit (8:4).

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⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 221.

⁸ Ibid, 221.

"For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit." (8:5)

In verse five, Paul ends his "so that" statement and returns to his series of "for" statements. In verse five he expands on his comment in verse four regarding in whom the requirement of the Law is fulfilled; specifically, how it is that walking according to the Spirit results in something different than walking according to the flesh. The flesh, as it occurs in verse three, is our sinful humanity. It stands for the totality of what humans are on their own, apart from God. It is weak (8:3) and this weakness is what gave sin an opportunity to enter into our humanity (7:11). Here, Paul describes individuals whose minds are set on, and thereby controlled by, their own sinful flesh. This phrase in Greek is literally translated "think on" or "are intent on." The idea presented here is not, as our English translations may suggest, a person who is preoccupied with things of the Spirit, but a mind, and therefore whole worldview, which has been shaped by the things of the Spirit. 10 Paul contrasts people controlled by the flesh with those whose minds are set on, and thereby controlled by, the Spirit. Morris uses the helpful image of a horizon to describe the difference between the two. He explains where one's mind is set can be likened to one's field of vision. When a person's mind is set on the flesh, their horizon does not reach above the things of this life. 11 In contrast, those who have set their minds on the things of the Spirit, are able to act in ways contrary to their sinful flesh, thereby fulfilling the moral requirement of the Law as intended, but was previously impossible (8:4).

"For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (8:6)

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⁹ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), Ro 8:5.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 305.

Now Paul gives us the result of these two contrasted walks (8:4) and mindsets (8:5). His statement here is similar to a statement he made in chapter six. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23). The similarity here to Paul's statement in 6:23 is alerting us to what the free gift of God is: it is our freedom by which we set our mind of the Spirit so that we receive life and peace. (He'll make this connection between his statements in 6:23 and 8:6 even clearer in 8:13.¹²) The mind set on the flesh earns for itself death as its wages. The mind sent on the Spirit results in life, an eternal life, which is the free gift of God found in Christ Jesus our Lord. The Son has condemned sin in our humanity so that we will live a life which can fulfill the moral requirement of the Law by walking according to the Spirit with a mind set on the Spirit which "is life and peace."

"because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so," (8:7)

Paul makes a smaller series of "for" statements in order to explain why the mind set on the flesh is death. The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God. It is hostile to God because it doesn't subject itself to the law of God. In fact, it is entirely unable to subject itself to the law of God. To make that train of logic a bit more succinct, we can restate it this way: a mind set on the flesh is death because that mind is unable to subject itself to the law of God. Paul connects his logic to the requirement of the Law again. A mind that subjects itself to the law of God would result in life rather than death. This was the original intention of the Law, to bring life, which it was unable to do because of the weakness of our flesh and it is the reason ("so that") the Son condemned sin in the flesh.

"and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (8:8)

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¹² Chuck Lowe, "There is no condemnation' (Romans 8:1) But Why Not?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (1999): 242.

In verse seven, Paul set out limitations of the person who is in the flesh and in verse eight he gives us the result of these limitations: they "cannot please God." There is not much more to be expanded on here, other than the hopelessness of the statement. It is not only that the one in the flesh wont please God or does not want to please God, (to be sure those things are also true,) but they *cannot* through any effort or desire of their own be pleasing to God in this life.

"However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." (8:9)

Next, Paul turns to the contrasting person, the one who has set his mind on the Spirit. Here is a review of what Paul has already said about this person. The requirement of the Law is able to be fulfilled in them (8:4), their mind is set on the things of the Spirit (8:5), and the result for this person is life and peace (8:6). In verse nine Paul defines this person as the person in whom the Spirit of God dwells. The Spirit has been prominent in the entire line of logic as the one by whom we are set free, the one according to whom we walk, and on whom we set our minds. Now Paul gives a most intimate description. The Spirit is *indwelling* those who Paul describes as "in the Spirit" much like he described them as "in Christ" in verse one. Paul is not identifying the Spirit and Christ as the same person. In Instead, the two statuses, being "in Christ" and being indwelled by the Spirit or "in the Spirit" are synchronous events. Therefore, if one status is true of an individual through their exercise of faith, then the other is also true. Paul drives home the necessity of the presence of the Spirit within a person who is in Christ by making the additional excluding statement that anyone without the Spirit does not belong to Him. This statement doesn't just point out that the opposite and contrasting situation is also true, but connects the

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¹³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 309.

indwelling of the Spirit as a necessary criteria to be "in Christ" bringing the synchronicity of in the Spirit and in Christ full circle.

"If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness." (8:10)

There is a just and inescapable consequence of the sin that is in our bodies, and it is death. Paul acknowledges this state of deadness and dying with the first half of this statement. However, because he is addressing believers in whom dwells the Spirit of Christ (8:9), Paul can say that despite the death and dying in their bodies their spirit is alive because of the righteousness they have gained from being in Christ. What good will that do if their body is surely dying?

"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." (8:11)

The Spirit who dwells in the believers is the same one that raised Jesus from the dead. This is good news because he can also raise our moral bodies because he has demonstrated his power to do so and he now dwells in us. These two verses point the reader beyond today to the rescue that they joyfully await, a complete rescue from death itself.

We've come to the end of Paul's explanation for his statement in 8:1. Since all the verses that follow 8:1 serve as an explanation of Paul's conclusion, it may be helpful to restate them with 8:1 as their conclusion. Anyone who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (8:9) has their mind set on things of the Spirit (8:5) so that their mind is no longer hostile to God and can now be subject to the Law of God (8:7) which is pleasing to God (8:8). This way of living is walking according to the Spirit (8:4) and walking according to the Spirit results in an eternal quality of life (8:6) which could not be accomplished previously because of our weak and sinful flesh (8:4). This is

now possible for us because the Son condemned the sin which was present in our weak human state (8:3) so that the law of the Spirit could be the law by which we now live (8:2), removing from us the condemnation that came through the law of sin and death (8:2). Therefore now, the life we live according to the Spirit is free from the law of sin and death so that we are no longer under any condemnation (8:1).

Synthesis

A key interpretation challenge is understanding the connection between "no condemnation" in 8:1 and the encapsulating reason given in 8:2. A variety of attempts have been made at explaining this connection. Three common explanations are as follows. 1. In order to explain the connection between 8:1 and 8:2 one must reinterpret "condemnation." The most obvious contrast to condemnation is forensic justification, but because Paul has already reached a conclusion on the believer's forensic justification in 3:21-4:25, he should be talking about something else here. Here. Here are reasons that the thing from which believers have been freed is "penal servitude," which is the punishment for their offenses. 2. Another attempt is to insist that in 8:2 "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" is referring to the death of the Son so that condemnation is escaped through the Son's work of justification and not the Spirit's work of sanctification. A third explanation is that 8:2 does indeed refer to sanctification, but it considers sanctification as the result of forensic justification instead of the grounds of justification. He Each of these solutions require a reinterpretation of the text that does not take Paul at his word. Chuck Lowe provides another explanation that allows condemnation to be the antithesis of justification and maintains

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 161.

¹⁵ Barrett, *Romans* 145 cited by Chuck Lowe, "There is no condemnation' (Romans 8:1) But Why Not?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (1999): 231.

¹⁶ Chuck Lowe, "There is no condemnation' (Romans 8:1) But Why Not?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (1999): 232.

that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" is sanctification without diminishing the work of Christ as the accomplishment of salvation. "According to 8:1-2, Christians escape condemnation because they have been transformed by the Spirit; that is because they now live in such a way that condemnation is no longer warranted."¹⁷ What Lowe gets right is his insistence on taking the whole of Paul's message into account when reading 8:1-2. In the line of Paul's reasoning through the first seven chapters of Romans, he has declared God's plan from the beginning to have been a plan of salvation by faith (chapters 3 and 4) for the outcome that we should gain the free gift of God which is eternal life in Christ Jesus (6:23). This life is characterized by a slavery to righteousness resulting in sanctification, and with the outcome of eternal life (6:22). Paul spent much of the previous chapters discussing our sanctification so it must be part of the final declaration of no condemnation. The responsibility to avoid the conclusion that our works save us is heavy at this moment in interpretation and so we tread carefully, but our transformation which is the result of true faith and the free gift of God is unmistakably on Paul's mind as he writes 8:1-11. When Paul moves on to his next thought in 8:12-13, he makes another summary statement to carry what he has just said forward. "For if you are living according to the flesh you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (8:13). This is remarkably similar to his previous statements, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23) and, "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (8:6). Sin and living according to the flesh earn death. The free gift of God and putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit are life. Perhaps, one could suggest, that Paul uses "life" and "eternal life" to mean two different things, but is there any other kind of life for Paul? "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (1 Tim.

¹⁷ Ibid., 232

6:12). "But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:8). The eternal life of the believer begins at the moment of their transfer from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13; Jn. 5:24). It is the only life that is truly life. So, the person who is putting to death sin by the Spirit is living the eternal life and this eternal life is the free gift of God. This free gift is only possible because of what the Son did, condemning sin in the flesh (8:3) so that we, who walk in the Spirit, now have the requirement of the law fulfilled in us (8:4). We no longer face condemnation because the Son made a way for us to now live with minds set on the things of the Spirit (8:5-8). The Son's death and resurrection gave us forensic justification (3:21-26), but it also made a way for us to be given the Spirit by which we live in newness of life (Jn. 14:16-17; 16:7). Which one is in view when Paul declares, "Therefore there is now no condemnation"? The statement is meant as a summary conclusion of all that has come before, so the answer is, in a sense both. This, of course, is the more nuanced and difficult answer to grasp, but that is to be expected. Paul is continually taking us deeper into his divinely revealed understanding of our salvation. He wrote about our salvation by faith and apart from works (3:28) and our obligation to live as those who are slaves to God (6:22). In this part of his letter, he ties the two themes together. Ultimately, they are inextricable; one cannot exist without the other. There is now no condemnation because of what the Son did (apart from our works) so that the lives we live can be lives free of condemnation by the power of the Spirit. The trinitarian God is responsible for both and both are the reason we are free from condemnation. Lowe describes sanctification's role as both inevitable and necessary. "God sent Jesus and bestows the Spirit for this very reason; namely, because sanctification – and not only justification- is necessary, and could be achieved in no other way (8:3-4)."18

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¹⁸ Chuck Lowe, "There is no condemnation' (Romans 8:1) But Why Not?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (1999): 247.

Paul wants us to understand what lies beneath the surface of the historical events of Jesus' death and our faith response because it's an amazing thing that God has done. He has purchased our life with his atoning sacrifice and made a way for us to receive the gift of eternal life which is due to those who have fulfilled his just and righteous conditions. We now get to claim the inheritance of this life by the cleansing of Jesus' blood and the power of the Spirit!

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