

Did He Die for You?



by Timothy J. Keller

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. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you,

your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Romans 8:1-14

When I first embraced the Christian faith there were a number of things in my life that profoundly needed change. But nothing seemed to work until some Christian writers took me to Romans 6, 7, and 8. When I began to understand the teachings of these chapters, my life began to change.

How does faith in Christ actually lead to real change in one's life? In Romans 8, we see that in Jesus we get three things:

1. a new freedom to know yourself
2. a new method to change yourself
3. a new power to be yourself

**Tim Keller is Senior Pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.*

A New Freedom to Know Yourself

In the verses that lead up to this Romans 8 passage, Paul says this: Every one of us, even the best of us, even the St. Pauls of the world, has a dark mass inside of us, a cancer of self-absorption, self-concentration, self-centeredness. It is far worse than anyone of us wants to admit. This dark mass within us makes us capable of terrible sin and evil. Paul says this is true of you; this is true of me; it is true of all of us. Immediately after telling us that we are evil, he writes, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

The Greek word for condemnation is *katakrima*, which means to have a judgment against. To be condemned or to be guilty means to have something against you. You are liable for something. You are in a state of estrangement until you pay your debt to society. But Romans 8:1 says that nothing we have ever done brings us under condemnation, even though we are capable of wrong-doing, even though we are doing wrong even at this very moment. With regard to God, there is now no liability in Jesus Christ. There is no condemnation. The Greek word translated as *no* is too strong a word to be interpreted by one English word. No single word conveys Paul's meaning in this passage. This word means *no more*. It doesn't simply mean that right now, at this moment, there is no condemnation. For a Christian, condemnation no longer exists. It has been destroyed. Never again. Romans 7 teaches that we are capable of tremendous evil. Then in the first sentence of Romans 8 Paul says, simultaneously, if you are in Christ, none of that evil can bring you into condemnation. This is astounding. It sounds contradictory.

In Luke 11:13 Jesus teaches His disciples about prayer and says, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

You who are evil. He is talking to the people He loves, those He delights in, people He is going to die for, to whom He is unconditionally committed. But He is also saying, (Can you hear Jesus saying this to you?) "I love you. I will never forsake you. I am unconditionally committed to you. I delight in you. But you are evil, you

know."

Have you heard Him say that? If you have, you have something that no system of thought, no philosophy, no religion, East-West, individualistic-collectivistic, liberal-conservative can give you. The person with a liberal mindset never calls anyone sinful or evil because all problems are really functions of psychological or sociological dynamics. And when you really do something far more cruel or cowardly or worse than anything you ever thought you were capable of, you have no category for what you have done, so you go into denial. The person with a conservative mindset uses the terms "sinful and evil" for those other people over there. Their very identity is based on "I am not one of them. I am one of the virtuous people. I am not one of those relativists, those anarchists. I am one of the virtuous people." Whether your mindset is liberal or conservative, when you find yourself doing things worse, more cruel, more cowardly than anything you have ever done—and you will—you won't have a category for it. You, too, won't know how to deal with it. You, too, will go into denial.

But the gospel of Jesus, Jesus' attitude towards us, Jesus' teaching that if you are in Christ, you are evil, but still absolutely loved—this gives us freedom. You say, "But that is crazy. That is contradictory." Yes, it is crazy. But let me show you how great and true it is.

First, it gives you an unmatched, unique sociological freedom. You can't divide the world into the good guys and the bad guys anymore. In Christ, you don't even see the world that way anymore. Some people say, "There are the good people, then there are the liberals." Other people say, "There are the good people, then there are the fundamentalists." But if you are a Christian, and you have any understanding of this, you know that the difference between you and a prostitute, you and a murderer, you and a Nazi, is that the seeds in your heart that make you capable of being that evil or doing that evil were never watered, so never sprouted. Therefore you have the freedom, in Christ, to find common humanity with people. When we sense our common, fragile humanity, we don't write other people off. We don't call them "those other people." We are like them. They

are like us.

Second, the gospel gives you psychological freedom to handle the wrong things that you will do. You won't have to deny, spin, or repress the truth about yourself. These things don't make it impossible to know who you are. Only with the support of hearing Jesus say, "You are capable of terrible things, but I am absolutely, unconditionally committed to you," will you be able to be honest with yourself. Some say that calling yourself a "sinner" is emotionally unhealthy. Oh, no. It is emotionally unhealthy to *not* call yourself a sinner.

One true account that has affected my understanding of this idea is a terrible event that happened to a young married couple in Virginia, in the late 1970s. Their three children were strapped in their car seats. The parents were not yet in the car when it rolled into the lake and all three children drowned. It was a horrible tragedy. But at the funeral, the husband and wife, to everyone's surprise, testified to their faith in God. They appeared incredibly

Here is a man who could experience the worst suffering that the world could give him, but he couldn't handle the possibility that he was a sinner. Is it emotionally unhealthy to call yourself a sinner? This man's inability to accept the reality of his sins was his deepest problem. To be able to say "I am capable of terrible things, but I am unconditionally loved," is the epitome of mental health. It is the gospel that gives us that. The gospel gives us freedom to admit who we are when the information comes, to see where we need to change, to know ourselves.

A New Method for Change.

In Romans 8:3, we read a reiteration of a theme of Romans 7. "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do." Paul makes the point in Romans 7 that we all have this self-centeredness, this self-absorption, this self-concentration, this mass in us that makes our lives miserable. It makes the lives of people around us miserable. But what are we going to do about it? Usually we apply our

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spiritually strong. Everyone for miles around talked about what wonderful, faithful, good Christians they were, what faith in God they had. This couple picked themselves up, had more children, and built a new family. They were pillars in the church. The husband was an officer in the church.

Twenty years later, as we visited in another church, the minister mentioned this same man who had been a pillar in the church and had gone through the tragic loss of his three children. The man came to the pastor in absolute agony because he was sexually attracted to a woman in his church who was not his wife. He was struggling. He was in agony. He experienced horrible guilt. He, a pillar in the church, an officer of the church, how could he feel this way? How could he do this? How could he want this? He got professional and spiritual counseling. But in the end, he killed himself.

Is that just a sad story? Yes. But listen.

willpower to the problem. We see the moral law and we say we are going to live up to the moral law. But Paul points out that trying to live up to the moral law doesn't help. The sins of self-centeredness and self-righteousness can take a "moral" form as well as an "immoral" form. You can be either a Pharisee or a criminal, and you will still make a mess in your life and your world. God has done what we could never do.

How can we change ourselves? Romans 8:13 gives the answer: "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if, by the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

When Paul talks about the flesh, he is not just talking about the physical body. When he talks about the deeds of the body or the deeds of the flesh, he is talking about your whole life being controlled by a self-salvation project. *Living in the flesh* means to be your own savior, to be your own lord, instead of knowing God as

your Savior and Lord. Everything in your life—everything your body does, all your actions, all your attitudes—everything is controlled by your effort to be your own savior and lord. You live out a self-salvation project.

Yet verse 13 says, if you live according to the flesh, you will die. If you just go with the flow, you will die. If you live according to a self-salvation project, you will die. But if you root out and destroy—by the Spirit—your particular ways of trying to save yourself, if you root out and identify and destroy your particular ways of doing self-salvation, then and only then, you will live.

How does that work? What is this new method? At the heart of the method is recognizing and changing what you hold in your *mind*. Look at verses 4 and 5 (a restatement of verse 13).

For those who live according to the flesh,
set their minds on the things of the flesh.
But those who live according to the Spirit,
set their minds on the things of the Spirit.
To set the mind on the flesh is death. To
set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

In the Bible, mind and heart are not two different things. In our normal way of thinking, *mind* means reason and cognition, while the *heart* means emotion. But in the Bible, the mind and the heart both mean the core of our being. When Paul says, “you set your mind on the flesh,” he is not just saying you have bad thoughts. He’s asking you to look at yourself and ask: What preoccupies your time? What engrosses you most? Where are your dreams? What has captured your imagination? What most preoccupies the core of your thinking? What engrosses the dreaming and fantasizing of your heart and your mind? Whatever that is, it is your way of justifying yourself, proving yourself. It is your own way of developing your own sense and worth. It is your way of being your own savior and lord. But the Spirit gives life and peace.

The movie *Chariots of Fire* illustrates this point. The movie portrayed the true story of Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell who won gold medals for Britain in the 1924 Paris Olympics. Liddell went on to be a missionary in China and died in a detention camp in World

War II. When the movie came out in 1981, Liddell’s sister, Jennie, was still alive. She gave a press interview and pointed out the one thing that bothered her about the movie. “It didn’t show Eric running the way he always ran. He always ran with his face straight to the sky and with his mouth open. He looked like a crazy man. He looked eccentric. But he was worshiping.”

At one level, both Abrahams and Liddell had set their minds on the same thing. Both loved to run, and both wanted to win—but for totally different reasons. When asked why he wanted to win the 100-meter dash, Abrahams answered, “When that gun goes off, I have ten seconds to justify my existence.” He essentially said, “If I can win this race, if I can be an accomplished athlete, I can face the world. Then I know I matter.” But Liddell had another answer. In the movie he says to his sister, “Jennie, God made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.”

One man runs to praise his Savior. The other man runs to become his own savior. One man runs for the sheer joy of it. If he wins, great. If he doesn’t, that’s okay, because his life is already justified. The other man runs, grinding and churning in anxiety and fear, because he is seeking to be justified. Then, even after he wins the race, he is still unsatisfied, because his idol “I am a winner” never delivers.

To set the mind on the flesh does not just mean having bad thoughts. Setting your mind on the flesh means you put your mind and heart on something other than Jesus Christ as your functional savior. Many years ago, I counseled two young men who had lost their jobs because of unfair actions by their bosses. Each had a blot on his career record. One man forgave the boss and moved on and soon was doing so well that he more than compensated for that blot on his record. It was a non-issue.

But the other man could not get past the experience. He stayed bitter and cynical, and this affected his whole future career path. Friends tried to help him by working directly on his emotions. They offered sympathy: “This has been very hard for you.” “This is awful.” “Your boss was wrong. He shouldn’t have fired you.” They tried to help him, yet, the more sympathy they gave, the more he felt justified in his anger,

and the more his self-pity grew. Other friends tried to work directly on his will. They said, "Come on. Get over it. Buck up. Forgive and move on." That advice didn't help either. He just couldn't get past what happened.

The gospel is different. The gospel doesn't work directly on the emotions and say "God loves you" in some general way. The gospel doesn't work directly on the will and say you just have to do the right thing (though of course, you do have to do the right thing). The gospel works on your mind. So it first asks, "What functions in place of Jesus Christ as your substitute salvation and savior? What are you looking for to justify yourself?"

Both men cared about their careers, but the second man looked at his career in the same way that Abrahams looked at running. He thought he could prove himself through his career. He thought that he mattered, that he could accomplish something. But when something went wrong with his career, he felt condemned. He became furious. He was paralyzed because the very foundation of his identity fell apart. It wasn't until our counseling uncovered his self-salvation project that he could understand how he had set his mind on the flesh. Then he said, "Wait a minute. It's not just that I have to forgive my boss. Yes, I do have to forgive him. It's not just that I have to get back to work and work hard. Yes, I have to do that, too. The real problem is underneath—something else besides Jesus Christ is functioning as my savior."

It is the same with all of us. There is always something underneath your inordinate and out-of-control problems, desire patterns, attitudes, emotions. Until you find it, you can't have life and peace. Until you find it, you will find things falling apart in your life. You will live in death until you find the true Savior who gives life.

A New Power to Be Yourself

We have seen that you have freedom in the gospel to be honest about what needs to be changed. We have seen that you have a method in the gospel to identify what you set your mind on, so you can understand where you need to change. But just how do you turn the corner?

That man who was bitter at his boss was a Christian. He said, "Technically I believe that

there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Technically I believe that I am loved. But here's the simple fact. I should be able to say, 'The King of the universe loves me', but I can't. My old boss is more real to me than what the King of the universe says. What the King says is on audio, but what my boss says is on video. I know with my head, but I don't know with my heart."

Where do you get the power to really make this change? The answer comes in verses 5, 6, and 13. You have to put to death the deeds of the body. You have to destroy and root out your fleshly way of living—your self-salvation project—with the help of the Holy Spirit. You have to take your mind off the flesh. You have to destroy the self-salvation projects. How? By minding the things of the Spirit. What does that mean? Now you move away from pure technique. You are not completely in control here. You can't just pick up the Spirit like a pair of scissors and use it. What does it mean to mind the things of the Spirit? Minding is more than thinking. To mind the things of the Spirit, your whole heart, mind, and being are enthralled, captivated by something. They are all brought together. You become engrossed in, preoccupied with, captured by something. Your imagination is captured by something. By what? In John 14:15 Jesus says this.

If you love Me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.

This is it. You may have a list of biblical teachings on a piece of paper, but it is the Holy Spirit who breathes life into them and makes them real to you. It is the Holy Spirit's job to smite you with the beauty of Jesus Christ and what He has done until you weep, until you understand that what He says about you is more real than what anybody else says about you. The poet John Donne speaks in this tone to Jesus in one of his sonnets:

Take me to you. Imprison me. For I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free;

Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.¹

He's saying "I'll never be chaste. I'll never have self-control until I see God's thoughts of me as far more important than any other person."

The only way you will have self-control, the only way you'll be able to forgive your boss, the only way you'll be able to not worry about money, the only way you'll be able to handle the rejections you get in life, the only way you can walk through life at large without it pulling you down is that you need the ministry of the Holy Spirit to make what Jesus Christ has done so real that you weep with the beauty of it. That replaces all those other things we try to push to the center of our being. That's the change. How does that happen? Paul gives us the answer in verses 3-6.

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.

Those little words 'for sin' look so innocuous. But all the experts, the commentators and the scholars, know it is a technical term used throughout the Old Testament, the Septuagint, for *sin offering*. It is not enough to know that God loves you in general. You have to fix your mind on how Jesus Christ was condemned in your place. How Jesus Christ sacrificially gave Himself and was condemned in your place. That is the heart of the gospel. You learn about the gospel story first, then you spend the rest of your life letting the Holy Spirit amass spiritually radioactive materials to work on those ego-centric tumors of your heart. Sin is a tumor. It is cancer. What is cancer? It is cell growth gone bad. It is going to kill you. What is sin? It is self-centeredness, self-absorption, self-concentration gone bad. It's going to kill you unless you kill it first. What is the radioactive isotope that will shrink and kill those tumors before they kill you? It is what Jesus Christ did on the cross, illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

Every person who has grown in grace, and who has been changed bit by bit by bit, has put

to death the self-salvation of the soul. A growing Christian, more and more, lives large, lives free, lives love. Anyone who has grown in their faith has gathered a store of biblical passages and sermons the Holy Spirit uses. The Spirit takes hold of these truths and turns them into spiritually radioactive material which shrinks those tumors. Look at this example from Scripture:

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. (1 Cor. 1:27-30)

This is a radioactive passage. The Holy Spirit uses this passage, and others like it, to destroy our self-salvation projects. Once you know to look, you can find examples of this radioactive material anywhere and everywhere: in movies, in books, in poetry. These examples add to the repertoire of radioactive material the Holy Spirit uses to touch our hearts and minds.

The 1992 epic film, *The Last of the Mohicans*, portrays the 1757 French and Indian Wars. In the film, Cora Munro has been captured by the Huron Indians and condemned to be burned alive by the Sachem (head) of the tribe. Duncan Heyward, a British officer, offers to take her place. He dies in the fire, as if crucified, arms outstretched, to save Cora's life. Does that get to you? It gets to me. I can't watch that without weeping about Jesus.

In the *Tale of Two Cities*, a man named Charles Darnay has been sentenced to death by guillotine. He waits in the Bastille for his sentence to take place. Sydney Carton, a man who strongly resembles Darnay, breaks into the jail with a few friends and knocks Darnay out. Carton exchanges clothes with him, and his friends steal the unconscious Darnay out of the jail. Carton then waits to die in Darnay's place. The next day, a young woman, also condemned to die, comes up to him to talk. Her eyes get really big when she realizes it is not Darnay. She

says to him, "Are you dying for him?" And he says, "Yes."

That touches my heart and shrinks my tumors.

The old King James Bible said you must "mortify" the deeds of the flesh (Rom. 8:13). Mortify your false self-saviors and you will live. Today the word mortification just means to feel embarrassed. But in the old days it meant to put something in the mortuary. When I hear Sydney Carton say "I am dying for him," it shrinks my tumors. It mortifies my stupid egocentric heart that's always worried about what I am getting here and what I am getting there. Is somebody helping? Is somebody noticing me? Am I getting what I want? It mortifies my self-centeredness with joy in what Jesus Christ has done for me. It mortifies my ego into silence.

The woman asks Carton, "Are you dying for him?"

And he answers, "Yes, for him and his wife."

Then she takes his hand and says, "Stranger, it's going to be hard for me to die, but if I can hold the hand of someone so brave, so courageous, and loving as you, I can do it."

This woman was smitten by the wonder of the substitutionary sacrifice made by this man for someone else. How much more, when the

Holy Spirit shows you what Jesus Christ has done for you, will you be able to put to death the things that are putting you to death?

Thank You, Father, for giving us a method, a power, and a freedom to really change. We ask that You help us gather a store of spiritually radioactive material to combat the dark, cancerous evil in our hearts that harms both ourselves and the people around us. We pray that You will become so real to us, so that by the power of the Spirit, we will grow more and more into Your image. In Jesus' name, amen.

¹ John Donne, "Holy Sonnet XIV: Batter My Heart." To ravish means "to transport with strong emotions of joy." This contrasts with secondary meanings that are negative and violent.