

Romans 8:1-4

The Law of the Spirit of Life

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What is real freedom? Can you imagine being truly free?

One of Paul's themes in this section of Romans is freedom in Christ. He demonstrated in earlier portions of the letter that all people are under sin and so are under God's wrath. Then he went on to describe deliverance from sin.

The problem of sin is broken relationships—with God, each other, and ourselves. Sin's separation results in God's wrath against sin. God is against sin because it doesn't work—it never delivers what it promises, it deceives and destroys.

Sin finds us in our weakness and begins to dominate us. It becomes our master. Sin's power is so great it even distorts our relationship to God's law. Weakened by our captivity to sin, we are unable to obey the law. Still we try to get right with God by obeying the law, but we never can, so we're trapped.

Sin results in death. Something always dies when we sin—love or hope or a relationship, and eventually we die.

We seem to be completely trapped. Sin has mastered us in every way. And sin seems to have the last word.

But even while Paul demonstrates the depth and power of sin, he never forgets that God made us and God wants us back. God in grace meets sin, overcomes it, and sets us free.

Romans 7 gives an account of our struggle with indwelling sin that sounds like a ringside announcer reporting a losing fight. But now in ch. 8 the long and painful report is interrupted with great news. The contest has been reversed. Sin and law may have been over-whelming favorites, but victory belongs to "those who are in Christ Jesus."

"Unforeseen and from the outside, like a ray of hope extending backward from the future to the present, the Holy Spirit has broken into the dreary domain of sin, law and death with freedom from oppression,

strength for the struggle, and hope for the future” (James Edwards, *Romans* New International Biblical Commentary).

That reminds me of a scene in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* where Frodo and Sam come to a crossroads on their journey. They've been traveling under a thick darkness. The whole earth seems covered by the black cloud coming from the evil lord's realm. But as they approach the crossroads at sundown, the sun shines under the dark cloud and its rays illumine a statue of the true king of the land. A vine with small white flowers has grown across the brow of the statue, and in the sunlight it looks like a crown. "They cannot conquer for ever!" said Frodo. And then suddenly the brief glimpse was gone" (*The Two Towers* 311).

For Paul, the reality of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life is like that ray of hope shining in the darkness of our struggle with sin, law and death. That light of the Holy Spirit illuminates the face of our King, our Savior and Deliverer—Jesus Christ. And this light is not just a brief glimpse. It's ever-increasing in brightness.

As ch. 7 concludes, Paul, representing all of us, cries out in his dilemma with sin, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me?" His only option is to cry for help outside himself, and he finds that help in Jesus Christ. "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:24-25).

Then, at the beginning of ch. 8, he announces, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." He doesn't say we no longer struggle with sin, but we are delivered from the condemnation sin brings. In Christ, our focus is no longer on ourselves and our sin but on Jesus and his salvation.

For Paul, there are two basic ways we can live, two ways we can orient our lives: We can be simply in ourselves or we can be in Christ. We can be ruled by the law of sin and death or we can be ruled by the law of the Spirit of life. We can live according to the flesh (not physical life, but weak and rebellious human nature) or according to the Spirit of God. We can rely on our own efforts and strength or we can trust Christ's work and rely on the Holy Spirit.

Believers, those who are in Christ, do not stand condemned by God. The sentence of death and judgment on the Last Day has been canceled

and exchanged for life and acceptance with God. Our future condemnation has been placed in the past—at the cross.

This is true because “the ‘law’ of the Spirit of life has in Christ Jesus set *you* free from the ‘law’ of sin and death” (v. 2, Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*). The “*you*” here is singular. This is addressed to every person who reads and hears this passage. God wants you to take this very personally.

The law, apart from the Spirit, is a law of sin and death. We don’t have the inclination or the strength to obey it. But with the Holy Spirit, we have both the inclination and the strength to obey. The law of the Spirit overcomes the law of sin and death. He’s talking about the same law from different angles. On our own, in our sin, we experience the law as a law of sin and death. In Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we experience the law as freedom and life.

In nature we sometimes see the effects of one law overcoming another. An airplane can fly because the laws of aerodynamics overcome the law of gravity. The law of the Spirit of life overcomes the law of sin and death.

For those who are in Christ, the Holy Spirit fulfills the law. The Spirit is our guide, the Spirit creates community, the Spirit enables us to live as God’s redeemed people. And the law is one of the means through which the Spirit works. By grace, that is, the work of the Holy Spirit, the law shows us the way and keeps us on the way. Ezekiel 36:27 is an example of how the prophets looked forward to this: God says, “And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

Apart from Christ, we give in to sin and we even have trouble recognizing our sin. Augustine said about his pre-Christian life, “My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner” (*Confessions*, 5.10). If we just pretend to believe we are sinners, all we can do is pretend to believe we are forgiven. (Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* 136).

The “12 Steps” of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs start with a person admitting their need. They also include confessing one’s wrongs to God and each other. We have to be honest about ourselves, our sin, our bondage, our condition apart from God’s

grace in Christ. And then the law of the Spirit of life in Christ does set us free from the law of sin and death.

And though we still live with the effects of sin, we are no longer under its authority. An illustration of that comes from W.W.II. When Paris was liberated in 1944, the Allies declared France free, even though a large portion of the country was still in Nazi control. But with the loss of the capital, the Nazis' power base was broken and it was only a matter of time until their remaining forces were driven from the land (Edwards).

Paul consistently ties the Holy Spirit's work to the person and work of Jesus. At the cross, Jesus once and for all broke the claim and power of evil over the lives of believers. The "capital" belongs to Christ, even while mopping-up operations are still going on. The liberating power of the Holy Spirit is bringing Christ's victory to all of creation. The future is assured even if the present is still uncertain.

Verse 3 summarizes what God has done for our redemption. It was impossible for the law to make us right with God and give life—because it was weakened by sin. But *God sent his Son*. There's the story of salvation in four words. God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus shared our humanity, our frailty. He was human in every way, except he didn't sin. He could have. His temptations were real. But he overcame sin and fully obeyed his Father.

God sent his Son not only in human likeness, but *as a sin offering*. The cure for sin shows how serious sin is and how desperate we are. We don't need just a good example, or just more education, we need a Savior. And Jesus paid the price of deliverance from sin. Until Christ, death had been sin's ally. But Christ's death became sin's defeat. Our disobedience brought condemnation for our sin. Christ's obedience brought God's condemnation of sin.

Jesus, as the Messiah, represented all of his people. His death could be counted as theirs. The law given to Israel had caused sin to be heaped up in one place, namely Israel, but especially upon Israel's true representative, the Messiah. In this way, sin could be dealt with and condemned once and for all. Jesus met sin on its own turf, drew it out in

the open, condemned it, and defeated it. We are no longer condemned because sin has been condemned in Jesus.

Here's God's purpose in all this: "In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not in keeping with the flesh but in keeping with the Spirit" (v. 4, Fee). Not only does the Spirit make Christ's redemption effective, the Spirit also upholds the law as a moral guide. Righteousness comes through faith, not through obeying the law. Yet through the Holy Spirit, what the law demands is fulfilled. Those who live in the Spirit are enabled to see the true intent of the law and to begin fulfilling it. "The Spirit is the supernatural reinforcement of God's grace who empowers Christians to fulfill the intent and requirements of the law" (Edwards). As Paul will say later, love fulfills the law (13:10).

That's part of the contrast between legalism and grace.

This speaks to us about our relationship with God regarding God's acceptance and forgiveness and our obedience.

In terms of acceptance, the law of sin and death, legalism, says that if you do a lot of good things God will love you a lot and if you don't do so many good things God won't love you as much.

But the law of the Spirit of life, grace, says that you can't do enough bad stuff to make God love you any less and you can't do enough good stuff to make God love you any more—God already loves you to the fullest.

Regarding forgiveness, legalism says that if you sin and repent and then sin again, you can't believe God hears your feeble repentance. So your sin compounds—it grows and grows. It begins to loom over you so big that you get your eyes on the problem and off your source.

Grace says that if you sin and repent and then sin again you can believe God is a good God who hears even your feeble repentance. Your sin doesn't have to compound because every time you repent is a fresh start, a new beginning.

Concerning obedience, in legalism we hear God saying, "I've saved you, now live up to it."

In grace we hear God saying, "I've saved you, now I will empower you to live out your salvation."

The New Covenant that the prophets saw in which God would forgive sins, purify his people, give them the inner motivation and the strength to obey—this covenant is fulfilled in Jesus and becomes a reality for us through the Holy Spirit.

A friend of mine told me about a woman coming into his office. She just handed him a piece of paper and said, "This will make things simpler and save some time." The paper listed her name, told a bit about her family, and described how she had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, among some other information. David read it and said, "O.k." Then she started talking rapidly, and went on for forty-five minutes. She told about the abuse she was going through and a variety of other struggles. After forty-five minutes, David stopped her and asked, "What can I do for you? Why did you come here?" She asked, "Do you believe, can you believe that God loves me?" He said, "Much of what I do is subjective. It requires faith. But if nothing else, I do believe that God loves you. God loves you when you are abused. God loves you wherever you are." She said, "Thank you" then got up and left. David says, "That was a good day in ministry."

If you're feeling condemned because of your disobedience and sin, if you feel trapped and powerless, the Holy Spirit is here to shine light on the face of Jesus, your Savior and Liberator. Look to him and be forgiven, walk with him out of your bondage, and receive his power to live a new life.

This calls us to make a choice and a commitment. How will we live? According to the flesh—relying on our own efforts and strength to get to God and please God? Or, according to the Spirit—trusting what Christ has done to put us right with God and relying on the Holy Spirit's power to enable us to love and so fulfill the law?

Invitation

How are you living? Do you have faith in Jesus? Do you trust that God forgives you and accepts you? Are you relying on the power of God's Holy

Spirit to help you know you are forgiven, to give you life, to empower you to walk "in the paths of righteousness for the sake of God's name"?

God, I need you. I am tired of the condemnation, bondage, and death that sin brings into my life. Thank you for sending Jesus and giving him to set me free. Thank you that your Spirit is present right now to make that freedom real in me. I say yes to you. I receive your love, your life, your power to forgive me and bring me into new life. Amen.