

Sermon: "No Condemnation"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Romans 8:1-11 (NRSV)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. [5] 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. [6] To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, [8] and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

[9] But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. [10] But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

A GOOD SIGN

Churches pay big money for a good sign and with good reason. According to research done on the subject, a good sign can help a church grow.

In a church magazine I saw an advertisement for a sign that looked vaguely familiar. After a few moments I recognized that sign. It was that huge electronic sign purchased by a church on Pleasant Hill Road. The pastor said, "After purchasing this sign, our church has grown at an incredible rate. I give much of the credit to our new sign!"

Actually, I remembered when that sign first went up. The county commissioners were not as excited about the sign as the pastor. But, it's an interesting thought. Suppose a church could grow at an amazing rate just by purchasing a new sign? Would we give it a try? I suspect we would.

But, what would we put on the sign? Would we do as we do now and just put the name of the church and the times of the services? Maybe we could get one of those fancy electronic signs that give the weather and the time? That would get people's attention.

Perhaps we should put a slogan on the sign, words that would epitomize the mission of the church? What is your suggestion for our new sign? What could we say in just a few words to convey the message of the gospel?

I liked the slogan that the Presbyterian Church used in an advertising campaign a few years back, "Open-Minds and Open-Hearts." We could do a lot worse than that slogan.

NO CONDEMNATION

But, I think we can do better.

Let's use two of the words that are found in the first verse of our lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans. I suggest we write on our church sign, "NO CONDEMNATION."

I suggest we write the message in big bold capital letters so no one misses the point. This is who we are. This is what we believe. Come and join us.

What if the church really lived up to that message?
What if the church really was a place where there was no condemnation?

What if our church was a place where conservatives and liberals felt at home? What if our church was a place where blue bloods and rednecks could mingle? What if our church was a place that accepted rich and poor, straight and gay, black, brown and white? What if our church was a place that valued the work of men and women, young and old?

The message would be the same for everyone ... no condemnation.
You are accepted and loved in this place.

The church would be a safe haven, a sanctuary for all people.

Do you think people might respond positively to a message like that? I do.

To coin a phrase, I think more things are "wrought by guilt than this world dreams of." Imagine how many guilt ridden people would be attracted by that sign, "No Condemnation"

LIVING THE MESSAGE

But, would those who read our sign believe it?
Could they believe this message given the church's track record down through the years? Historically the church has not been a "condemnation free zone."

Many outside of the church are quite frankly afraid of us. Many, with good reason, think that we are judgmental. Many, with good reason, think that we don't practice what we preach when it comes to grace.

For the person weighed down by a load of guilt, the last thing they need is a community that does not accept them as Christ accepts us, with no strings attached.

We may not live up to our calling as Disciples of Jesus, but the goal of the Christian community is clear. It is stated clearly in the first verse of our lesson,

"There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

If we believe that, we have to put that belief into action.

This is not just a good idea for a sign slogan. It also represents the essence of the Christian faith. Grace is the distinguishing mark of the Christian community. As the old campfire song puts it, "They will know we are Christians by our love."

GRACE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Many years ago during a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated whether any one doctrine was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities.

Is the Incarnation a unique doctrine?

No, other religions had different stories about a god or gods appearing in human form.

Could the Resurrection be the unique doctrine that sets the Christian religion apart? Again, the answer was no. Other religions had accounts of a return from death.

The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room.

"What's the topic of discussion?" he asked, and his colleagues explained that they were talking about Christianity's unique contribution among the world's religions.

In his forthright manner Lewis responded, "That's easy. It's grace."

After more discussion, the conferees had to agree. No other religion taught the notion of God's love being offered to the world free of charge with no strings attached. All of the world's great religions offer a way to earn God's approval, except for Christianity.

Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.

THE PROBLEM WITH GRACE

You would think that the concept of grace would gain a great following in the world. Who doesn't want unconditional love? Who doesn't want to experience the grace of God?

Well, apparently there are many who find the doctrine of grace to be right down heretical. It's not that we dislike the idea of our sins being forgiven. It's the sins of the other guy or gal that we're not so sure about.

Perhaps that's why the doctrine of grace seems to go against every human instinct.

Even those of us who claim to be Disciples of Christ sometimes have a hard time accepting the depth of God's grace. We want to put boundaries on grace. We want to say, "Yes, God is gracious, but grace has its limits."

It seems like common sense to say this.

Surely God isn't gracious toward some people? All of us could name someone who doesn't deserve the grace of God. Each week we hear the news about some terrible sinner who hurts an innocent person in a terrible way. And we say to ourselves, "Surely God isn't gracious toward that person."

If we put the words "no condemnation" on our church sign without any "ifs, ands or buts" respectable people might be offended.

The respectable and religious people were definitely offended when Jesus started accepting sinners and tax collectors at the dinner table. People were startled and scandalized when Paul wrote that salvation was by grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus.

People asked, "What about works? Shouldn't we do our part to earn salvation in some way?"

NO CONDEMNATION FOR SOME?

So maybe we should change the slogan on our church sign to reflect what we really believe. Maybe we could write on our sign, "No condemnation for some people."

But, then the sign doesn't quite have the same punch does it? After all, if we begin to put a limit on grace, who is in a position to say where the line should be drawn? Who are the people that should be condemned and who are the people that get a free pass?

The apostle Paul also struggled with this problem. He knew that some people would use the doctrine of grace as an excuse for immoral living.

There were apparently some in the early church who were doing whatever they wanted to do and then saying, "God will forgive us. He's in the forgiving business."

Paul made it clear that the grace of God should not be used as an excuse for an immoral lifestyle. (Romans 6:15) We are saved from our sin. We are not saved to lie down and get comfortable with our sin!

WE TOO ARE SINNERS

But, the Apostle, to his great credit included himself in the long list of sinners who fall short of the glory of God.

When Paul evaluated his life, he found many reasons to be dissatisfied.

He knew what was good. He knew what he should be doing.

But, quite often he found himself neglecting what was good. Instead of doing what was right, he found himself doing what he knew to be wrong. It was as if he couldn't help himself.

There was a war going on inside the Apostle Paul, and the wrong side was winning.

Have you ever felt that way? I have. I can identify with Paul's words. I imagine him literally shouting out the words we find in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

I think that in order for us to accept the "No Condemnation" sign without reservation; we need to be as honest as the Apostle Paul. We need to think about the many different ways that we still fall short of the person that God wants us to be.

AMAZING GRACE

In the course of my ministry I have run into some people that were very harsh and unyielding in their views. Religion for them seemed mainly like an exercise in finding a person whom God was definitely going to punish.

They might have quoted the verse that says "all have sinned" but to hear them talk it didn't seem like they included themselves in the "all" that had sinned. God's primary job seemed to be condemnation, and they were God's designated enforcer!

And heaven help the preacher who got in the way of the enforcer. With these people you are with them or against them. There is no middle ground.

But, then they had something bad happen in their lives, a significant failure of some sort, and that terrible experience made them re-evaluate everything, especially their own standing before God. In many cases it became painfully clear that they had fallen short of even their own standards, much less God's standards.

And in that moment of pain, sadness and guilt, a healing process began. For the first time in their life they were able to hear the message of the gospel. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Instead of being a problem and a scandal, for the first time in their life that statement became a wonderful promise and a word of hope.

In their moment of despair, they didn't care about how unjust it seemed that God might pardon others with grievous sin. They only knew that God's grace toward them was as the old hymn puts it, "amazing." For the first time in their life they could see the breadth and depth of God's grace and that grace included them.

GOD REVEALED

"There is not condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
I think this is Paul's way of saying what Jesus also said,

"God didn't send His son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved." (John 3:17)

God's self-revelation in Jesus is all about the loving Father who welcomes the prodigal son or daughter home. God's self-revelation in Jesus is about finding those who are lost.

We might be tempted to tinker with the "No Condemnation" sign and make it fit our scruples about the sins of others. But, when we are confronted with our own sin, we are reminded that it might be good to just leave the sign just as it is because it is our only hope.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a loving and a just God. There will be a final judgment of all that is wrong in the world. But, it is not our job to judge. It is our job to love others in the name of Christ Jesus.

I'm not sure about the limits of God's grace, but I do know that the grace of God as revealed in Christ Jesus is a lot wider and deeper than most of us can imagine. Thank God for that because we live by that grace. We are dependent upon that grace.

That grace allows us to pick ourselves up and try again when we fall. That forgiveness allows us to continue working for God even when we fail Him miserably.

LIVING ACCORDING TO THE FLESH

In verse five of today's lesson we read,
"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."
Romans 8:5 (NRSV)

Living according to the "flesh" is living by the world's standards. The world lives by the standard of the "bottom line." What's in it for me? How have you helped me lately? Those are the questions that the world asks.

There is no grace in such a standard. Today condemnation seems to be the primary tool used to evaluate everything from schools to businesses to government officials to family members.

We have seen the results of such condemnation, and it is not pretty. Paul tells us that if we live by this standard, it is a sure recipe for disaster. (Romans 8:6) As he put it, it leads to "death."

LIVING ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT

But, those of us who are Disciples of Christ are called to live by a different standard. It is the standard of grace. It is the "no condemnation" standard modeled by the life and death of Jesus.

That same Jesus is not dead; He arose from the dead. And His Spirit is with us even today, helping us to be gracious toward others even as Christ was first gracious toward us.

That's what Paul means when he talks about being "in the Spirit" as opposed to being "in the flesh." It means living in a way that is patterned after Jesus instead of letting ourselves be caught up in the standards of the world.

We cannot do this on our own. Indeed, living in a gracious "no condemnation" style is a miracle patterned after the ultimate miracle.

Just as the Spirit of God raised Jesus from the dead, that same Spirit can now give new life to us. That Spirit can make us into the kind of loving and accepting people that we need to be.

Instead of death dealing condemnation, the Spirit fills us with life giving affirmation. Instead of judgment and despair, the Spirit fills us with grace and peace. (Romans 8:11)

THE JOY OF AMNESIA

A preacher told of a woman in one of his churches who had senile dementia. To put it in layman's terms, she began to forget things, lots of things. Mostly she forgot about things that happened long ago. Her short term memory was just fine.

The pastor tried to sympathize with her about the disability, but she had a way of laughing it off. She said,

"Actually, it's not that bad. There are a lot of things in my past I am only too happy to forget. I would rather be able to remember only the good things that happened a few minutes ago, rather than having my memory dredge up things that happened 30 years ago."

She had a point. Many of us spend way too much time with the regrets of the past, condemning ourselves and others for things that cannot be changed. Forgetting the past can be a gift.

HISTORY VERSUS LIFE

Many churches have a person like this. In this particular church, they referred to him jokingly as the church's "unofficial historian." He had been a member of the church for over 30 years. He didn't hold any prominent office in the church, but he played a big role in what went on in that church.

Whenever anyone would come up with an idea, he would say, "Nope, we tried that back in 1967. It didn't work." His memories of what didn't work kept the church from moving forward for a long time.

If only our churches didn't have so many unofficial historians, we might be more open to the wind of the Spirit. New life in the Spirit can only come when we forget the past.

I sometimes jokingly say that my memory is so bad that I have a hard time holding a grudge. Unfortunately, when it comes to grudges, our memories work all too well.

But, we need to remember that when Christians talk about forgiveness, it is about more than just forgetting the past. It is an act of the will. We decide to forgive the debts of others just as Christ has forgiven us. We decide to forget. We decide not to condemn as an act of discipleship.

In the gospels Jesus quite often said,
"Your sins are forgiven."

ALL WE NEED IS FORGIVENESS

Jesus often said this even before he healed someone of a dread disease.

Apparently, in Jesus' mind forgiveness was the number one priority for everyone.

This Spiritual healing was even more important than physical healing

This is true for us as well.

All of us need forgiveness.

There is some part of our past that all of us need to forget.

We need to quit condemning others, and we need to quit condemning ourselves as well. It doesn't matter what happened in 1967 or 1985 or whenever.

All that matters is what Christ is calling us to do and be here and now.

The promise of the Resurrection is about more than just a promise for life beyond this life. The promise of the Resurrection is about an abundant life here and now. The promise of the Resurrection is a promise about how we can change through the power of the Spirit.

"NO CONDEMNATION"

What do you think? Should we put it on our sign? Maybe.

But, we should surely put those words in our heart.

They are definitely words to live by.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN