

We've had a lot of bad news in 2020. According to scientists 2020 has officially been the worst year since 2019. There is the Coronavirus pandemic and everything that followed— lockdowns, shutdowns and economic slowdowns. We lost our sports, our movies, our concerts. We cancelled trips and parties and get-togethers. We had to take classes online and work online. Then there are the masks.

2020 has brought us protests, riots, and civil unrest. It has been filled with natural disasters, hurricanes, wildfires, and devastating swarms of locusts. There is a contentious election with Americans the most polarized in generations.

But do you want some good news? In fact, it's the best news you will ever hear.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." – Romans 8:1-2

There is now, today, not tomorrow, not next week, not next year, not next election, but RIGHT NOW there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

No matter what you did last night. No matter what you said last week. No matter how you felt when you woke up this morning. No matter what anyone else thinks about you, no matter what anyone else says about you, if Jesus is your Lord and Savior, there is no condemnation. None. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Nada.

Whether you've been a Christian for 50 years, or you start follow Jesus today, this is the best news.

Picture yourself in the shoes of an accused defendant. You are standing in a courtroom before the judge. The Jury has just come in after deliberating for hours. The foreman hands a piece of paper to the bailiff who in turn hands it to the judge. Her honor unfolds the paper and looks up.

What is going through your mind in that moment? Some of you have been there. Your mouth dry. Your palms sweaty. Your stomach twisted into more knots than a strand of Christmas lights locked in the attic for five years. The judge begins to read "We, the jury, unanimously find the defendant..." In a bench trial, it is purely the decision of the judge, "I find the defendant ..."

The word or words that fall next could define the rest of your life. At the very least they could define years of your life. It is something that will follow you forever.

Imagine being condemned in court. Guilty on all counts. The law says throw the book at them. Lock them up and throw away the key. You are sent away and shut up never to be free again. Prison is worse than the darkest prison drama. You lose all hope, when the most amazing thing happens. You are granted a reprieve. The governor suspends your sentence. The president intervenes and pardons you. Imagine the feeling when the last steel gate shuts behind you, the first ray of free sunshine washes over your face.

This is one of the greatest pronouncements in Scripture. It is a pounding of the divine gavel on the sound block of history and a declaration of "Not Guilty." Cleared of all charges. The case is dismissed. You are free.

Many Bible scholars and arm chair theologians will tell you that Romans 8 is their favorite chapter in the Bible. Any theologian worth their salt will say it is one of the most significant passages in the Bible. One has called it, "the brightest jewel in the casket of gems in the Word of God."

I. The Struggle is Real

To understand the power of Romans 8:1 we need to understand what leads up to it. The clue that something bigger is going on is the word “Therefore.” Whenever you read the word therefore in the Bible, you need to find out what it’s there for.

Therefore points us back to Romans chapter 7. As helpful as Bible verse and chapters are, keep in mind they ARE NOT a part of the original text. And to stick a new chapter right between 7:25 and 8:1 is just unfortunate timing because it cuts off a most important train of thought.

In Romans 7 Paul talks about our struggle with sin and how under the Old Testament Law we were powerless to stop it. The Law told that what we were doing was wrong. It told us what we should be doing instead, but it could do nothing to keep us from doing wrong, and it offered zero help in doing right.

All it could do is pound the gavel and declare, “Guilty on all charges.” Guilty of lying, guilty of selfish, destructive anger, guilty of pride and arrogance, guilty of selfishness and greed. Guilty of lust and vile thoughts and unfaithful acts. Guilty of hateful and hurtful words. Guilty of serving false gods of all sorts. Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!

The struggle of Romans 7 is one we all know too well.

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Roman 7:15b-19

Paul is saying that even when I know what I ought to do, even when I want to do the right thing, there is still something in me that makes me want to do the opposite. How many of you can identify with that? This isn’t just Paul’s story. This is my story. This is your story. This is something we all struggle with and the struggle is real.

We first see this tendency and children, when mom says, “Do this,” and we want to “Do that.” Allison as a toddler would do the exact opposite of what you told her to do with a smile on her face. The first time I remember really being aware of this aspect of human nature was in elementary school. We had just come in from recess and were sent to the restroom. There was a urinal taped up with a sign, “Do not flush. Out of order.” So, what do you think a couple of friends and I proceeded to do?

We took turns pushing the handle to see you could push the handle the furthest without flushing. I lost. That’s what we do with right and wrong. We want to push it as far as we can. We want to get as close to the line as possible. We don’t mean to go over the line. We don’t intend to do bad, but you flirt with the line enough and the day comes that you just blow right past it.

There is a problem with our “flesh” as Paul calls it. Our human nature is infected with a contagion, and it’s not COVID. It is sin. No matter what we do. No matter how hard we try, sin always messes us up. Sin isn’t just a problem with what we do. It’s a part of who we are. The struggle is real

We struggle with our greater desires and our lesser desires. We blurt out things that we know before we ever say them we shouldn't say. We know that we're regret saying them before we ever say it, but we say it anyway. We just have to get in that last word. We just have to land that one pointed barb.

We desire things we know we're going to regret. We do things that we know that in an hour or by the next morning we wish we hadn't done. We do things that we know later, we'd give anything to not have done. We surrender to habits that we know will lessen our lives, diminish our potential, and minimize our happiness in the long run.

As you near the end of Romans 7, you begin to feel the situation is hopeless. We are helplessly trapped in these bodies where we can't help but sin. We want to cry out with Paul in verse 24, *"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"*

Praise God Romans doesn't end in chapter 7, verse 24. Verse 25 declares, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. End of chapter.

But wait! Where's the good news? Paul said, "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" I thought there was supposed to be good news, but the chapter just ends. He's just summarizing the struggle he's spelled out so clearly in chapter 7. So, what is Paul thankful for?

This is where it rolls right on over into chapter 8 and our Core Verse. In fact, 8:1 should really be written as the same sentence as 7:25. Let me read that way.

"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin, but there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

II. In Our Struggle there is No Condemnation

Here is our good news. Our struggle is without condemnation. Yes, the struggle is real, but God's love for you is not threatened by it.

Though we keep on sinning even though we don't want to. Though it feels like sometimes we can't help but sin, even when we don't want to. Though our bodies seem like they are wired for sin. Though the struggle is real, thanks be to Jesus there is now no condemnation for those in Jesus. Not guilty. Cleared of all charges.

It's not because you're innocent. It's not because you didn't do it. "No condemnation" doesn't mean there is no cause for condemnation. That wouldn't be true. My life gives plenty of cause for condemnation. Just ask Teresa. She'll tell you. It's not because I'm innocent, or you're innocent. It's because Jesus is innocent. It's because of what Jesus has done on the cross. He was convicted in your place. He paid your penalty.

The key phrase here is "in Christ." "No condemnation" isn't about who you are. It's about who Jesus is. You are covered by who He is. You are covered by His goodness, so that when God sees you. He doesn't see all your mistakes, all your failures, all your screw ups. He sees Jesus.

Let me mention a couple of things that "No condemnation" means for you, for your life right now.

A. No Rejection

First, it means there is no rejection. You are still a child of God. Even though you struggle with sin, even though you blow it far more than you want to admit to anyone here this morning, Jesus still says, "You are my brother. You are my sister." God still says, "You are my child and I love you." God isn't hoping you make one more mistake so He can kick you to the curb.

He wants to love you through this. He wants to help you get beyond it. He wants you to overcome it. He wants you to know victory, and the key to all of that is knowing Him. That's why He gives you His Holy Spirit- to strengthen you for the struggle.

God never promised that when you are saved, He would take the struggle away, that he would make the struggle smaller and easier. What He promised is that He would help you through the struggle, that He would make you stronger so that you could overcome it.

Remember Jesus' story of the prodigal son. A father has a selfish son. He resents being home. He resents being under the authority of the father. He wishes he didn't have to work for his dad's business. He asks for his share of the inheritance early. In essence, that was like saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead."

He takes his money and runs off to Vegas and he blows it all on fast cars, fast women, and fast times. It's a grand time. Everyone wants to come to his parties. He's voted the hottest young bachelor in sin city. He gets easy access into all the hottest clubs. Then the money runs out. The girls run out. The cars get repossessed. The backstage doors close in his face. Suddenly, he is persona non grata.

Gone is the fine wine. He can't even afford the cheap booze. No more room service. He can't even afford the bargain buffets. He wanders the strip alone. People cross to the other side of the street when they see him coming.

Soon he finds himself working minimum wage at a pig farm out in the desert. He pours buckets of food scraps brought in from the casinos into the feeding troughs for the pigs. He is so hungry that even this two day old slop looks delicious. He looks over his shoulder, and when no one is looking he waves the flies away, reaches into the bucket and pulls out a half-eaten ...something.

It's at this moment that he realizes, that even that lowest rung employees for his dad's company make enough to live better than this.

With his pride shattered and his tail tucked between his legs, this broken and beaten son heads home. He rehearses his apology speech as he goes. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I should have never done this. I'm not even worthy to be your son. Just hire me as your lowliest employee. Let me work in the mailroom, the kitchen, as a janitor. Something. Please."

What the son doesn't realize is that every day, every morning and every evening, his dad goes outside looks down the road that runs to their property. He looks just hoping that maybe his son is coming home.

One morning the father walks out and looks down the same road that he's looked at least a thousand times now. And there on the horizon he sees a silhouetted figure. The shoulders are hunched. The hair is long and scraggly, but this father would recognize that stride anywhere. That's his son.

And he runs. He runs faster than his tired, old legs have carried him in decades. Before the son has even made it to the driveway, the father meets him on the side of the road. The son starts his apology speech, but dad isn't listening. "My son has come home. Let's have a party."

Here's what you need to know. That's how God feels about you.

B. No Judgment

Secondly no condemnation means no judgment.

There are some of you who really need to hear what I'm about to say next. God isn't angry with you. God isn't mad at you. God isn't looking to punish you. This is really difficult for some people to grasp.

I remember the most angry my father ever was at me. I was in about 5th grade. We were getting ready to go on vacation. Dad had the camper on our old 68 GMC pickup truck. Old green we called her. The boat was all hooked up. Dad was trying to get all the camping supplies loaded. Mom was trying to pack everything but the kitchen sink. It was already 3 or 4 hours after dad wanted to be on the road. His patience was out.

He didn't want to deal with a snotty son who wanted to talk back to him. I don't remember what I said, but I remember what he did. He grabbed me by the head, one hand on each side, and he lifted me up, carried me into their bedroom, and threw me on the bed.

Never before and never after had he done anything like this. I was so scared I screamed. Dad left for a little bit, and when he came back, he spanked me. I was so scared because I just knew he was going to beat the living tar out of me. He didn't. In fact, the spanking seemed so mild from what I was expecting that I began to laugh. I thought he'd kill me for that. He didn't.

I found out later that he scared himself so much with his display of anger that he left the room to calm himself down.

For my dad this was an unusual outburst of anger.

Some of you grew up with that kind of fatherly anger all time. Your father was angry a lot. He would lash out with his words. He would lash out with his fists. If you grew up with that kind of father, it can hard to view God as a loving heavenly father. It can be easy to see him as an angry heavenly father, just wanting to lash out at you for every little thing.

This lie comes with other lies like, "God will never accept me as I am." "I'll never be good enough for God." "God could never forgive me."

1 John 4:8 says, "*God is love.*" He love the world enough, He loved you enough to give his son that you could believe in Him and have eternal life. Jesus loved you enough to die for you, to pay the price for your sins. He knew before he ever went to the cross. He knew before He ever came earth all the horrible, awful things you would do. But guess what? He came anyway. He died for you anyway. He loved anyway.

Yes, God hates sin, and he will judge sin. But all of that anger and judgment against sin was poured out on all the sin that Jesus carried to the cross. When you come to Jesus, your sin is forgiven. Cancelled. Erased. Wiped Out. There is nothing for God to be mad at. Colossians 2:13 and 14 says that when we

were dead in our sins, *“God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.”*

Did you get all that? He forgave ALL your sins. How many of them? All of them. Even that one? Yes. Even that one.

All charges against you— canceled. Not Guilty! On all counts. Not Guilty! When the nails were pounded into the hands and feet of Jesus on the cross, the gavel of divine justice for all your sin slammed down. The penalty was paid in full. There are no more charges against you that remain.

Can we just affirm this as a body here this morning? God is not angry with me. God is not angry with me.

No matter how much the devil whispers in your ear, “guilty, guilty, guilty,” believe God’s word when it says there is now, NOW, today, not tomorrow, not next week, not yesterday, not last week, not before you messed up; there is NOW no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

You are free. You are free from sin. You are free from its guilt and shame. You are free from its blame. You are free from the hold it had over your life. You are free from its grip and power. You are free from its past. You are free from its present. You are free from its future. Sin no longer has anything to say about who you are, what you will do, or where you will go, whether now, next week, next year, or for all eternity. You are free.

You only need to believe that what God says is true.ⁱ

ⁱ This sermon is adapted from an outline of a sermon by Ray Stedman.