

No Condemnation in Jesus. Really?

Romans 8:1 scares me. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (ESV). It scares me because it seems to offer more than I think it should. If you are in Christ, there is no condemnation. That is, there is no damnatory judgment or sentence of damnation. This is based on what Paul said earlier in **Romans 5:16-18**. One man’s sin brought condemnation. Just so, one man’s righteousness brought justification. When we are in Christ, we aren’t condemned; we are justified. That is, we are declared innocent no matter what we have done. Punishment, damnation, and condemnation are taken away. This is not done based on our lives, but based on Jesus.

However, I am always tempted to modify the verse. I want it to say, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are trying really hard to be righteous.” Or, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who don’t commit big sins.” I want to make these changes because I’m afraid some will think it means if they get baptized they are in Christ and now they can live how they want because there is no condemnation there. Instead of changing the verse, I simply need to revel in the confidence it gives. If we are in Christ, there is no condemnation, there is only justification. In Christ, my sins are wiped away, forgiven, no longer held against me. My sins don’t have to lead me to debilitating fear of hell.

And yet, Paul has already laid a foundation in **Romans 6:1-2**. “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (ESV). Further, while writing to those in Christ, he taught that the wages of their sins was death (**Romans 6:23**). That is, if they simply continued in their sins they were going to die just like everyone else. That sounds like condemnation for those who are in Christ to me. How do these seemingly contradictory principles fit together? What confidence is **Romans 8:1** actually offering?

In **Romans 7:14-24**, Paul talked about his enslavement to the law of sin and death. Despite wanting to obey God, Paul repeatedly fell to sin. In fact, he recognized a law of sin working in his life. This law dictated that no matter how much he wanted to obey God, he usually ended up sinning. He ends this description with the despairing cry, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (ESV). In **Romans 7:25**, he had an answer. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (ESV). Then he wrote that there is no condemnation in Jesus. But he kept writing. In **Romans 8:2** he explained why there is no condemnation in Jesus. “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (ESV).

Why is there no condemnation? Because Jesus has set us free from the law of the sin and death that brings condemnation. But what does that mean? Certainly forgiveness is entailed, but there is more. The law of sin and death was not a law of righteous requirements that we had to maintain. Therefore, setting us free from that law does not mean making us unaccountable to God’s set of righteous requirements, thereby making us innocent no matter how we live. Rather, that law of sin, according to **Romans 7:21-23** was the law that even though Paul wanted to do right, evil was close at hand.

The law of sin and death is a law like gravity (a natural law); not a law like the speed limit (a decreed law). Gravity is not a law because someone wrote it down in the books, decreeing it to be so. It is just the way things work. What goes up must come down. If I jump up, I’m going to come back down. You try it. It happens every time. That does not happen because someone declared it unlawful to jump and just hang in the air, but because there is a natural law of gravity. That is the kind of law Paul is talking about when he speaks of the law of sin and death. Certainly, God has never decreed that it is unlawful to do right when I want. He has never decreed that I must sin even though I want to do right. But Paul discovered that was a natural law. That is, Paul discovered that is just how it worked. Having become slaves to sin (cf. **Romans 6:16**), even though we want to do right, sin pulls us to its way just as gravity pulls us to the ground when we jump. Paul could have just as easily said, “I find it a law that when I want to stay in the air, the ground lies close at hand.” That is the kind of law that Jesus Christ is setting us free from.

Notice what Paul has said in this entire context. He wants to do right, but the law of sin keeps pulling him down to death. Jesus breaks that law. Therefore, there is no condemnation for those in Christ. Why? Because, if I may stick with our metaphor, when we jump up in the air, Jesus steps in and holds us there, keeping us from falling to the ground. That is,

Jesus gives us the strength to do what we wanted to do—pursue righteousness. There is no condemnation, not because Jesus is ignoring all our sin, but because Jesus is setting us free from sin.

Having said all of this, we need to understand from the entire context of the New Testament that this is a growth process. Paul does not mean Jesus will miraculously keep a baptized person from ever sinning. Rather, **Romans 8:1-17** describes a growth process of learning to live by the Spirit instead of the flesh. Consider **II Peter 1:5-11** in conjunction with what we are reading in **Romans**. Through growth, Jesus is providing an entrance into the eternal kingdom. We will add virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love to our faith. Additionally, we will be constantly increasing these attributes. As we do that, we will not fall. Also, consider **Galatians 5:22-23**. As we grow in walking by the Spirit, He will increasingly bear this fruit in us.

What then was the confidence that Paul is offering us? If we are in Christ, He is working in us, setting us free from the law of sin and death. As we grow in Him, He will bring us victory over sin and He will provide an entrance into His heavenly kingdom. That means when I mess up, I don't have to give up. I can remain confident, knowing there is no condemnation in Jesus because He is working in me to provide victory. That sets me free to keep growing in Christ.