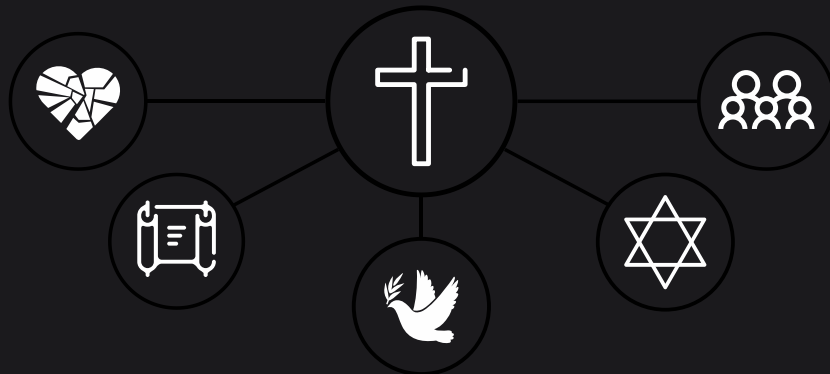




ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



Title: Romans and the Future Gospel

Text: Romans 8:1-8

Date: March 5, 2023

Main Idea: In Christ, we are free from our sin that once condemned us.

Personal Study Guide

READ ROMANS 8:1-8

Highlight – What stands out?

1. “Flesh” and “Spirit” appear several times in this passage. Record below what the passage says about them:

Flesh	Spirit
Verse 2	Verse 2
3	
4	4
5	5
6	6
7	
8	

2. What strikes you about the differences in these columns?
3. Verse 1 says that believers no longer face condemnation. What does that word mean? (Hint: Look it up in a dictionary.)
4. Did anything else stand out to you in the passage?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. By using the word “therefore” in verse 1, Paul is linking “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” with the chapter that came before it. How does Paul’s point in chapter 7:20-25 then relate to 8:1?
2. What, according to verse 3, weakened the law? What stories or passages from the Old Testament come to mind?
3. What does life in the flesh, ultimately, look like? Read Galatians 5:19-21.
4. What then happens when we set our “minds on the things of the Spirit” (v. 5)? What do we gain when we turn ourselves away from the flesh and toward the Spirit?
 - Galatians 5:22-26
 - Ephesians 2:19-22
 - Matthew 5:3-12

Apply – How does this change me?

1. If you filled out a time use chart for a week, how much of your time and focus would be spent on things of the Spirit compared to things of the flesh? And, as a follow-up, what distracts us from the things of the Spirit?

2. John Piper wrote, “The flesh exists in the body, and also in the brain—our neural pathways are affected by the flesh. That is why it is so difficult, oftentimes, for believers to break old habits and patterns of sin. We live for years building habits in the flesh that agree with the ‘old man’ and then when the ‘new man’ arrives, in agreement with the Spirit, we are suddenly in conflict. Some of these habits submit to the Spirit immediately and others are stubborn.” Where have you seen quick victory against sin as a believer? What has been more stubborn?

3. Go back to Romans 8:1. In what ways do you feel condemned today? What “law” are you trying to fulfill to feel more accepted by him? How does Christ’s finished work and your union with him give you freedom?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Where are you slow to obey God? Why?

2. What steps do you need to take to walk more faithfully in obedience? Read Mark 9:42-49 to help you in identifying areas that need to be cut off.

3. How have you seen living in the flesh affect someone in your life? Take time to pray for them, asking God to turn their hearts and lives over to Him.

4. Read Hebrews 12:1-4. Where are you growing weary in the fight against sin? Who can you turn to with your struggles? Who can pray with and for you? Ask that person or people to help you with accountability.

Commentary: Taken from John Stott's Commentary on Romans

Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven't received yours.

1. The ministry of God's Spirit (1-17)

The word *Therefore*, with which the chapter begins, indicates that the apostle is summing up, or expressing an interim conclusion. The deduction he draws, however, does not seem to come from chapter 7 alone, but from his whole argument thus far, and specially from what he has written in chapters 3, 4 and 5 about salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. And the word *now* emphasizes that this salvation is already ours if we are in Christ, as opposed to being in Adam (5:12ff.).

The first blessing of salvation is expressed in the words *no condemnation*, which are equivalent to 'justification'. In fact, the opening statements of Romans 5 and Romans 8 complement each other. Chapter 5 begins with the

positive declaration: 'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.' Chapter 8 begins with the negative counterpart: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*. Paul will almost immediately go on to explain that our not being condemned is due to God's action of condemning our sin in Christ (3). Then later in the chapter he will argue that nobody can accuse us because God has justified us (33), and that nobody can condemn us because Christ died, was raised, is at God's right hand and is interceding for us (34). In other words, our justification, together with its corresponding truth of 'no condemnation', is securely grounded in what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ.

a. The freedom of the Spirit (2-4)

The second privilege of salvation is expressed in the next statement: *because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death* (2). Thus a certain 'liberation' joins 'no condemnation' as the two great blessings which are ours if we are 'in Christ Jesus' (a clause which is applied to both in the Greek of verses 1 and 2). Moreover, these two blessings are linked by the conjunction *because*, indicating that our liberation is the basis of our justification. It is because we have been liberated that no condemnation can overtake us.

From what, then, have we been set free? Paul replies: *from the law of sin and death*. The context seems to demand that this is a description of God's law, of Torah. For a major emphasis of Romans 7 has been on the relation between the law on the one hand and sin and death on the other. True, Paul was at pains to stress that the law is not itself sinful, yet he added that it reveals, provokes and condemns sin (7:7-9). True again, he stressed that the law does not 'become death' to people; yet it had 'produced death' in him (7:13). So, shocking as it may sound, God's holy law could be called *the law of sin and death* because it occasioned both. In this case, to be liberated from the law of sin and death through Christ is to be no longer 'under the law', that is, to give up looking to the law for either justification or sanctification.

This liberation has been Paul's own experience. It is noteworthy that verse 2 contains the only use in Romans 8 of the first person singular (*set me free*), which has been such a prominent feature of Romans 7. By this Paul is indicating that he has himself been delivered, in Christ and through the Spirit, from the law and so from the humiliating situation with which he identified himself at the end of Romans 7.

The means of our liberation Paul calls *the law of the Spirit of life* (2) or 'the life-giving law of the Spirit' (REB). At first sight it seems strange that law should liberate us from law, especially when commentators are determined to give 'law' the same meaning in both expressions. Some take 'law' as meaning 'principle' or 'power', and translate 'the power of the Spirit of life' which frees us from 'the power of sin and death', but both expressions are then too imprecise

to be meaningful. Professor Dunn argues that in both cases the law is Torah, and that Paul is reaffirming 'the two-sidedness of the law' as a law of both death and life, that is, of sin and death belonging to the old epoch, and of Spirit and life belonging to the new.³ But it is questionable whether the Romans would have grasped this subtlety.

The alternative is to understand 'the law of the Spirit of life' as describing the gospel, just as Paul calls it elsewhere 'the ministry of the Spirit'.⁵ This makes the best sense, as it is certainly the gospel which has freed us from the law and its curse, and the message of life in the Spirit from the slavery of sin and death.

How the gospel liberates us from the law is elaborated in verses 3–4. The first and fundamental truth which Paul declares is that God has taken the initiative to do *what the law* (even though it was his own law) *was powerless to do*. The law could neither justify nor sanctify. Why not? Because *it was weakened by the sinful nature* (3a), or 'because human weakness robbed it of all potency' (REB). That is, the law's impotence is not intrinsic. It is not in itself but in us, in our 'flesh' (*sarx*), our fallen selfish nature (*cf.* 7:14–20). So then, what the sin-weakened law could not do, *God did*. He made provision for both our justification and our sanctification. First, he sent his Son, whose incarnation and atonement are alluded to in verse 3, and then he gave us his Spirit through whose indwelling power we are enabled to fulfil the law's requirement, which is mentioned in verse 4 and expanded in the following paragraph. Thus God justifies us through his Son and sanctifies us through his Spirit. The plan of salvation is essentially trinitarian. For God's way of justification is not law but grace (through the death of Christ), and his way of sanctification is not law but the Spirit (through his indwelling).

What *God did* Paul unfolds in five expressions. First came the *sending of his own Son*. The word 'sending' does not necessarily imply the Son's pre-existence, since God is also said to have 'sent' his prophets in the Old Testament and his apostles in the New, who of course were not pre-existent. Nevertheless, the statement that it was *his own Son* whom he sent may well be intended to indicate that he had enjoyed a prior life of intimacy with the Father; it certainly expresses the Father's sacrificial love in sending him (*cf.* 5:8, 10 and 8:32).

Secondly, the sending of the divine Son involved his becoming incarnate, a human being, which is expressed by the words *in the likeness of sinful man*, or better 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' (RSV). This somewhat roundabout phrase, which has puzzled commentators mainly because of its use of 'likeness', was doubtless intended to combat false views of the incarnation. That is, the Son came neither 'in the likeness of flesh', only seeming to be human, as the Docetists taught, for his humanity was real;⁷ nor 'in sinful flesh', assuming a fallen nature, for his humanity was sinless, but 'in the likeness of sinful flesh', because his humanity was both real and sinless simultaneously.

Thirdly, God sent his Son *to be a sin offering*. The Greek expression *peri hamartias* (literally, 'concerning sin') could be a general statement that he

came 'for sin' (AV, RSV) or 'to deal with sin' (REB), without any indication how he did it. But probably the reference is specifically to the sacrificial nature of his death. For *peri hamartias* was the usual LXX rendering of the Hebrew for 'sin offering' in Leviticus and Numbers, and should clearly be translated 'sin offering' in Hebrews 10:6, 8 and 13:11. And since the sin offering was prescribed specially for the atoning of 'unwilling sins', which is exactly what the sins of Romans 7 are ('I do what I do not want to do', 20), Tom Wright concludes, 'There can no longer be any room for doubt that when Paul wrote *kai peri hamartias* he meant the words to carry their regular biblical overtones, i.e. "and as a sin offering"'. In any case, 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' is clearly an allusion to the incarnation, and 'to be a sin offering' to the atonement.

Fourthly, *God ... condemned sin in sinful man* (3, literally, 'in the flesh'), that is, in the flesh or humanity of Jesus, real and sinless, although made sin with our sins. God judged our sins in the sinless humanity of his Son, who bore them in our place. Friedrich Büchsel points out that 'when it [*sc. katakrinein*, to condemn] refers to human judgment there is a clear distinction between the condemnation and its execution'. But in the case of the divine *katakrinein* 'the two can be seen as one'. Hence in Romans 8:3 'the pronouncement and execution of the sentence' are both included. The law condemns sin, in the sense of expressing disapproval of it, but when God condemned sin in his Son, his judgment fell upon it in him. As Charles Cranfield puts it, 'for those who are in Christ Jesus ... there is no divine condemnation, since the condemnation they deserve has already been fully borne for them by him'.¹³

Fifthly, Paul clarifies the ultimate reason God sent his own Son and condemned our sin in him. It was *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* (4). One might have expected Paul to write that 'God condemned sin in Jesus in order that we might escape the condemnation', that is, 'in order that we might be justified'. Indeed, this was the immediate purpose of the sin-bearing death of God's Son. Consequently, most of the early Fathers, the Reformers and subsequent Reformed commentators seem to have interpreted Paul's statement of verse 4 in the same way. Hodge, for example, insists that verse 4 'must be understood of justification, and not of sanctification. He condemned sin, in order that the demands of the law might be satisfied', the law's main demand being the sentence of death for sin. Yet if God's purpose in sending his Son was limited to our justification, the addition of the final clause (*who ... live ... according to the Spirit*) would be a *non sequitur*.

It is this phrase which directs our attention to law-abiding Christian behaviour as the ultimate purpose of God's action through Christ. In this case the law's *dikaiōma* or 'just requirement' (singular, not plural 'requirements' as in NIV) refers to the commandments of the moral law viewed as a whole, which God wants to be 'fulfilled' (i.e. 'obeyed', not 'satisfied') in his people. For Jesus had himself spoken of fulfilling the law, and Paul will write later of neighbour

love as the chief 'fulfilment of the law' (13:8–10). Moreover, the law can be fulfilled only in those 'who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (RSV). The flesh renders the law impotent, the Spirit empowers us to obey it. This is not perfectionism; it is simply to say that obedience is a necessary and possible aspect of Christian discipleship. Although the law cannot secure this obedience, the Spirit can.

Some modern scholars find Paul hopelessly confused, even self-contradictory, since he writes of both the abolition and the fulfilment of the law, of our being both released from it and committed to it, our discharge and our obligation being both attributable to Christ's death (7:4; 8:3–4)! The most outspoken critic of Paul's supposed inconsistency is Heikki Räisänen. He rejects all eulogies of Paul which depict him as a profound, logical, consistent theologian. Instead, 'contradictions and tensions have to be *accepted* as *constant* features of Paul's theology of the law'. In particular, 'we find two conflicting lines of thought in Paul's theology of the law. Paul asserts both the abolition of the law and also its permanently normative character'.¹⁸ Indeed, 'Paul's thought on the law is full of difficulties and inconsistencies', for (Dr Räisänen presses the question) how could a divine institution be abolished or abrogated?²⁰ But I fail to see any inconsistency in Paul's declarations that, because the law is unable to justify or sanctify us, it has been abolished in those roles, whereas the Spirit can enable us to fulfil or keep the moral law. This was certainly the prophetic expectation. Through Ezekiel God promised, 'I will put my Spirit in you', and through Jeremiah, 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.' These promises are synonymous. When God puts his Spirit in our hearts, he writes his law there.

Verse 4 is of great importance for our understanding of Christian holiness. First, holiness is the ultimate purpose of the incarnation and the atonement. The end God had in view when sending his Son was not our justification only, through freedom from the condemnation of the law, but also our holiness, through obedience to the commandments of the law. Secondly, holiness consists in fulfilling the just requirement of the law. This is the final answer to antinomians and adherents of the so-called 'new morality'. The moral law has not been abolished for us; it is to be fulfilled in us. Although law-obedience is not the *ground* of our justification (it is in this sense that we are 'not under law but under grace'), it is the fruit of it and the very meaning of sanctification. Holiness is Christlikeness, and Christlikeness is fulfilling the righteousness of the law. Thirdly, holiness is the work of the Holy Spirit. Romans 7 insists that we cannot keep the law because of our indwelling 'flesh'; Romans 8:4 insists that we can and must because of the indwelling Spirit.

Looking back over the whole passage which runs from 7:1 to 8:4, the continuing place of the law in the Christian life should be clear. Our freedom from the law (proclaimed for instance in 7:4, 6 and 8:2) is not freedom to disobey it. On the contrary the law-obedience of the people of God is so important to God that he sent his Son to die for us and his Spirit to live in us, in

order to secure it. Holiness is the fruit of trinitarian grace, of the Father sending his Son into the world and his Spirit into our hearts.

b. The mind of the Spirit (5–8)

Paul has asserted that the only people in whom the law's righteous requirement can be fulfilled are those who live not *kata sarka* (according to flesh) but *kata pneuma* (according to spirit or better the Spirit), that is, those who follow the promptings and surrender to the control of the Spirit rather than the flesh. It is this antithesis between flesh and Spirit which Paul now develops in verses 5–8. Implicitly or explicitly, it recurs in every verse. Paul's purpose is to explain why obedience to the law is possible only to those who walk according to the Spirit.

We begin with some definitions. By *sarx* (flesh) Paul means neither the soft muscular tissue which covers our bony skeleton, nor our bodily instincts and appetites, but rather the whole of our humanness viewed as corrupt and unredeemed, 'our fallen, egocentric human nature', or more briefly 'the sin-dominated self'. By *pneuma* (spirit) in this passage Paul means not the higher aspect of our humanness viewed as 'spiritual' (although in verse 16 he will refer to our human spirit), but rather the personal Holy Spirit himself who now not only regenerates but also indwells the people of God. This tension between 'flesh' and 'Spirit' is reminiscent of Galatians 5:16–26, where they are in irreconcilable conflict with each other. Here Paul concentrates on the 'mind', or (as we would say) 'mindset', of those who are characterized by either *sarx* or *pneuma*.

First, our mindset expresses our basic nature as Christians or non-Christians. On the one hand, there are *those who live according to the sinful nature*. They are not now those who 'walk' according to it (4, literally) but those who simply 'are' like this (5, literally). These people *have their minds set on what that nature desires*, whereas *those who live in accordance with the Spirit* (literally, 'those according to the Spirit'—there is no verb) *have their minds set on what the Spirit desires* (5). The meaning surely is not that people are like this because they think like this, although that is partly true, but that they think like this because they are like this. The expressions are descriptive. In both cases their nature determines their mindset. Moreover, since the flesh is our twisted human nature, its desires are all those things which pander to our ungodly self-centredness. Since the Spirit is the Holy Spirit himself, however, his desires are all those things which please him, who loves above all else to glorify Christ, that is, to show Christ to us and form Christ in us.

Now to 'set the mind' (*phroneō*) on the desires of *sarx* or *pneuma* is to make them the 'absorbing objects of thought, interest, affection and purpose'. It is a question of what preoccupies us, of the ambitions which drive us and the concerns which engross us, of how we spend our time and our energies, of

what we concentrate on and give ourselves up to. All this is determined by who we are, whether we are still 'in the flesh' or are now by new birth 'in the Spirit'.

Secondly, our mindset has eternal consequences. *The mind of sinful man* (literally, 'of the flesh') *is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit* (literally, 'of the Spirit') *is life and peace* (6). That is, the mindset of flesh-dominated people is already one of spiritual death and leads inevitably to eternal death, for it alienates them from God and renders fellowship with him impossible in either this world or the next. The mindset of Spirit-dominated people, however, entails life and peace. On the one hand they are 'alive to God' (6:11), alert to spiritual realities, and thirsty for God like nomads in the desert, like deer panting for streams.²⁶ On the other hand, they have peace with God (5:1), peace with their neighbour (12:16), and peace within, enjoying an inner integration or harmony. We would surely pursue holiness with greater eagerness if we were convinced that it is the way of life and peace.

Thirdly, our mindset concerns our fundamental attitude to God. The reason the mind of the flesh is death is that it *is hostile to God*, cherishing a deep-seated animosity against him. It is antagonistic to his name, kingdom and will, to his day, his people and his word, to his Son, his Spirit and his glory. In particular, Paul singles out his moral standards. In contrast to the regenerate who 'delight' in God's law (7:22), the unregenerate mind *does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so* (7), which explains why those who live according to the flesh cannot fulfil the law's righteous requirement (4). Finally, *those who are controlled by the sinful nature (sarx)*, literally those who are 'in flesh' (*en sarki*) or unregenerate, lacking the Spirit of God, *cannot please God* (8). They *cannot* please him (8) because they *cannot* submit to his law (7), whereas, it is implied, those who are in the Spirit set themselves to please him in everything, even to do so 'more and more'.

To sum up, here are two categories of people (the unregenerate who are 'in the flesh' and the regenerate who are 'in the Spirit'), who have two perspectives or mindsets ('the mind of the flesh' and 'the mind of the Spirit'), which lead to two patterns of conduct (living according to the flesh or the Spirit), and result in two spiritual states (death or life, enmity or peace). Thus our mind, where we set it and how we occupy it, plays a key role in both our present conduct and our final destiny.¹

Spend some time reading or listening to this hymn and let the words encourage you that what Paul says in Romans 8 is true of you if you are in Christ.

And Can It Be?

¹ John R. W. Stott, [*The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 217–224.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5n9HFHIp6jA>

VERSE 1

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood
Died He for me, who caused His pain
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

VERSE 2

He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace
Emptied Himself of all but love
And bled for Adam's helpless race
'Tis mercy all, immense and free
For O my God, it found out me!
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

VERSE 3

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light
My chains fell off, my heart was free
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God shouldst die for me?

VERSE 4

No condemnation now I dread
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine
Alive in Him, my living Head
And clothed in righteousness divine
Bold I approach the eternal throne
And claim the crown, through Christ my own
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou my God, shouldst die for me?

Additional Resources:

Sermon: [The War Within: Flesh Versus Spirit](#) – John Piper

Video: The Bible Project. Overview Romans 5-16.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSVTI4Xa5fY&t=119s&ab_channel=BibleProject

Podcast: [Knowing Faith: Freedom in Christ \(Romans 8:1-18\)](#)

Song: [Who You Say I Am by Hillsong](#)