

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** Set Free

**Sermon Text:** Romans 8:2-4

**Rom. 8:1** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

**Rom. 8:2** For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

**Rom. 8:3** 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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

**Rom. 8:4** in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

**Main Point:** Because God has condemned our sin in Christ and given us the Spirit of life, we are truly set free from sin's dominion so that, as beloved children, we can now live to please the Father and fulfill the righteous requirement of his law.

## **Outline:**

1. The Spirit of Life (v. 2)
2. Freedom by Condemnation (v. 3)
3. Liberated to Be Righteous (v. 4)

## **Introduction**

We talked back in Romans 3 about this question of the law in the life of the Christian, and how the gospel protects us from these two extremes of antinomianism and legalism... it protects us from falling into either lawless living or from scrupulous obsessive law-keeping that doesn't come from a heart of love for God, but from a fear of being condemned. But both of these approaches to the law make one common mistake: they forget or ignore or deny the goodness and love of our father. Both antinomianism and legalism result from seeing God as a cosmic policeman, fundamentally antagonistic to us, ready to catch us on our first slip-up.

And when we see God that way, we're *naturally* going to try to get away from him. The legalist tries to get away from God by *doing* all of these things that he thinks will get God off his case. The antinomian tries to get away from God by *denying* that God expects anything from him at all. But both of these extremes misunderstand the character of God, they neglect his grace, and they forget his kindness and love.

And here today Paul wants us to know that the secret of holiness is something that he says in verse 3 "the law could not do." In other words, the answer to growing in grace isn't a doubling down on the law as law. Instead, the answer is in Christ and something he has done, and something that his spirit continues to do for us and will work out in our lives.

So after laying out the gospel in chapter 5, Paul addressed why the gospel doesn't encourage sin in chapter 6, by telling us that something fundamental has changed in the heart of the person who is "in Christ," then in the last chapter he responded to the inner struggle of the Christian: if I am in Christ, why do I still want to sin? Why do I still have this struggle? And Paul reminded us that until glory, life *will* be a struggle between the old man – the flesh – and the Spirit. That struggle is real and ongoing for this life.

But does this mean that for the Christian, the flesh and spirit are like to equals just battling each other but never seeing one conquer the other? Well Paul says, no. The Christian has an incredible advantage in this lifelong battle against sin, and that advantage is what he is giving us here today. And the secret weapon is that the things that the enemy comes at us with have been destroyed, done away with, and condemned by God in Christ. Meaning that yes, the old man has some fight in

him, and he will go down fighting. But we are not alone in this fight. And much of Romans 8 is God letting us know that, in Christ, we have the home court advantage, we have weapons that will ultimately dispatch these great foes that we battle against.

Let me show you the advantages and blessings that the gospel gives us today.

## **1. The Spirit of Life**

First, I want us to know the one who is the key to everything Paul is talking about here, and that is The Spirit of Life.

Paul tells us in verse 2 that “the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” The key actor here in the good news isn’t you or me. It is the one he calls “The Spirit of Life.” He’s the one who has set us free from the dominion of sin!

But why does Paul call him the Spirit of Life? Well it’s because of who the Spirit is. He is the author of life, he is life itself.

- He was the one in the beginning who hovered over the face of the deep when the earth was created in Genesis chapter 1.
- In Job 33:4, Job says, “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”
- In Ezekiel 37:14 God speaks, saying, “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.”
- Jesus, in John 6:63 says, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.”

And so it makes sense here that Paul keeps up that theme: our helper in this battle is the Spirit of Life.

Okay, then what is this “*Law of the Spirit of Life*” that Paul says has set us free from the law of sin and death? He’s saying that one law (the law of the Spirit) sets us from another law (the law of sin and death).

Well it might help us to start by thinking about what the “law of sin” is, and from that we should be able to discern what the law of the Spirit of life is. In Romans 7, Paul talked about how this law of sin and death is in his members, waging war

against the Spirit, causing a life of conflict in the believer. And the Law of the Spirit is the opposite of that law.

So I think at this point we can put a couple things together: the law of sin and death is the power of sin and death operating in the lives of fallen people, exerting its influence over them.

And therefore the Law of the Spirit of life is the power of the Holy Spirit working to make us *free* from the power of sin and to make us stop living under sin's dominion. Sin is still present, but it no longer rules our hearts and affections at the core level. Why doesn't it? Because we live with faith. And that faith is upheld by someone who loves us and lives in us. That's what the Spirit does! He gives us faith where previously there wasn't faith. And he keeps us believing.

You might think, "well my faith is weak." Listen: even if our faith hangs by a shoestring, it's still faith.

When it comes to this battle against sin's dominion, Christians commonly make two mistakes: one is to "let go and let God" without taking responsibility for their role in sanctification. Passivity is a mistake, thinking that I'm just supposed to sort of do this Zen thing where I let go, relax, and don't take responsibility for my own actions, desires, or for my own pursuit of holiness. That's one mistake, right? Just extreme passivity. Maybe think of this as, instead of pursuing holiness we're sort of *waiting* for holiness. That's one approach: extreme passivity.

The other extreme is to *acknowledge* the Spirit with our mouths, or acknowledge Him intellectually, but then act as if everything is still really up to me. Like with my mouth saying, "I have the Spirit," but with my life saying, "Really I'm all alone in this."

And both of those approaches will wear you out, discourage you, and leave you focused on yourself and your failures. We are indwelt, but we are not passive. We are responsible, but never ever alone. Christ constantly reminds us, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Why does Paul tell us that it is the "law of the Spirit of life" who has set us free? Because the one who sets us free is a person who is life himself. Paul is building us up for battle, and he's equipping us with the love, the power, and the presence of

the creative life giving person who was there from the beginning of creation in its most primordial and terrifying chaotic beginnings. And the one who was *there* is also *here*.

*That* is the person who dwells in us, who empowers us for our daily battles against sin, and who has set us free from the destructive and intimidating forces of sin in our own heart and life.

If you are in Christ Jesus by faith, then you are indwelt by the Spirit of Life. And it is *his* law that has freed us from sin and death. If we are in Christ Jesus, do we have the advantage now in a way we never did before? Absolutely.

## **2. Freedom by Condemnation**

Okay, so there is this law of sin and death over here. And the Spirit is the key to experiencing freedom from that domination of sin. But if we have the Spirit, why do we even care about the law of sin and death? Well that law is still a danger to us. It kills! And if the law of sin and death isn't dealt with, then the enemy will run rampant, and if it could it would destroy us.

So what is the answer? It's our second point today: Freedom by Condemnation.

The answer is that God condemned sin in his Son. When Christ was crucified, he was willingly laying his life down as a substitute for sinners. This means that we deserved that death, and he received it instead. And the very punishment that ought to have come to his people, he stood in the way of – he took it on himself instead, because of the great love with which he loved us.

One of the great powers that sin has is that it separates us from God, it makes us liable to judgment, it introduces fear into our lives. Because of sin, people carry about guilt and sorrow, but also terror of God. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we are constantly on the run hiding ourselves from his gaze. And the only hope we really have is that God himself would clothe our nakedness and shame... that we would no longer have any reason to flee from his gaze, but that instead we would be able to behold his face and never have any reason to look away again.

How is that possible? Here it is: the very thing that causes us to run and scramble to escape from him has been eliminated in Christ. The very reason for our shame

and hiding has been crucified. The very thing that would have been our undoing has been judged and put down by Jesus.

This is why Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him *to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” He became sin for us. And in that becoming sin he was then put to death like sin deserves. There is no more judgment for anyone whose sin has been crucified with Christ. So now we get to pray like Paul did in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

There Paul sort of brings all of this together, doesn't he? He loved me. He gave himself for me. He was my substitute. My old man was crucified when he was crucified. I have the Spirit in me, but this Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, so it is also Christ who lives in me. I'm not alone. Sin doesn't stand a chance. It's there, but it no longer rules the roost that is my soul.

This takes us back to that exasperated question from Paul: “Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death?” No wonder that his answer at the very end of chapter 7 was “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Do you see how Christ is the answer to this question?

Now, there's one more issue here: okay, God has done this for us. But still, how can I experience it in practice?

### **3. Liberated to Be Righteous**

Third, we've been liberated to be righteous.

Verse four of this passage always threw me a bit. Because you read the argument Paul is making and you see him saying, “God did what the law couldn't do...he condemned sin in the flesh,” and you think he would then say, because the “righteous requirement of the law has been fulfilled in Christ.” But he doesn't do that!

He says that God did these things so that “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

Honestly, it’s another one of those ways that Paul catches us off guard. “Me? Fulfill the righteous requirement of the law? You’re confusing me with Jesus, Paul!” No, actually. Paul isn’t. He’s saying that we’re redeemed people now!

Because think about this: Romans 7 ends with this cry of despair: “wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” And if all that the gospel has to say is, “You are declared innocent.” “You are not guilty in God’s eyes,” but there is no actual hope in this life, in this world, to ever see progress against our own wretchedness, you almost have to wonder: “But wait. I’m still wretched! I’ve got this not guilty verdict, but that does nothing for me now when I yearn to be like Jesus! I don’t just want a declaration. I want this to show up in my life, too! I love God and I want to please him. Do I have any hope of ever doing that? Or am I waiting until heaven for *everything*?”

And this is Paul saying, this doesn’t just begin and end with a theological affirmation. It touches our life and how we live today.

Here is the answer that Paul found in Christ: we’re not alone.

We have Christ, who condemned sin in his own flesh. He became sin for us, and then was crucified in our place. Our sin has objectively been dealt with once and for all.

We have the Spirit. He is the Spirit of life. He is the Spirit of Christ. And he ensures that Jesus didn’t just do this thing *over here*, but he takes the work of redemption Jesus did, and actually applies it to us. And our affections, and the things we love, and the things we’re ashamed of. And the Spirit takes what Jesus accomplished, and he makes it real in our life and in our experience.

And what that means is, there is a person within us whom we did not have or know before. It’s not just that now we have a conscience and we didn’t before. No, we *had* a conscience already, and it testified against us. What the Spirit gives us is more than just knowing right from wrong. Now, we have a love for God within our hearts and we do want to please him because we love him. Our heart is oriented to God and his glory in a way it wasn’t before.

Now, we still have the ability to sin. But we also have this heart longing not to sin, and to actually please the Father.

Living for the pleasure of God the Father is something we only do because an incredible work has been done in our heart. Now, we live with an eye on our Father.

The missionary John Paton left his father to go serve as a missionary in the New Hebrides islands. And he tells in his autobiography about the day he left. His father walked him to the train, and he remembers how his father had very few words and prayed silently as they walked to the train and he saw him off. But listen to what Paton said later reflecting on this moment:

“I watched through blinding tears, till his form faded from my gaze; and then, hastening on my way, vowed deeply and oft, by the help of God, to live and act so as never to grieve or dishonor such a father and mother as He had given me. The appearance of my father, when we parted – his advice, prayers, and tears . . . have often, often, all through my life, risen vividly before my mind . . . It is no Pharisaism, but deep gratitude which makes me here testify that the memory of that scene not only helped, by God’s grace, to keep me pure from the prevailing sins, but also stimulated me in all my studies, that I might not fall short of his hopes, and in all my Christian duties, that I might faithfully follow his shining example” (John G. Patton, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides – An Autobiography* pg. 25-26).

You may have had an incredible relationship, a terrible relationship, or no relationship with your earthly father. But in Christ, we have God as a Father. And we should take some inspiration here from Paton. Because we love the Father, because we have no reason for fear of him, now we can live and vow, “by the help of God, to live and to act so as never to grieve or dishonor such a Father.”

Let me give you some practical examples of what all of this looks like, now that we are in Christ, now that our sin is condemned, now that we have the Spirit of Life in us.

John Owen says that the killing of sin is driven by the sight of Christ’s love, not by bare willpower. So you start by saying in temptation, “I can’t do this to my Father

who loves me,” rather than, “I must not do this or he will crush me.” See, there’s the practical side of this: fear isn’t an option for what drives us, because Christ has taken our condemnation. What do we have to be afraid of? Nothing.

Here's another example. Another way that we now please God that we didn't before: worship. Before we were in Christ, we might go to church or come to worship. But it was a chore, a box to check; a religious duty to quiet a guilty conscience. Before we might drag our feet towards prayer, the word and sacraments so that we could “get something out of it.” Maybe we even looked at the church as something which provides us a certain something – a benefit. But now, with God as our father and his Spirit within us, we prepare for the Lord’s Day not so that we can earn the Father’s smile, but because we already have it in Christ. Now we come because we want to hear his voice, receive his grace, we want to see our faith grow. We want to sit at his table. Those are very different things!

Let me give you one more example of what it looks like for “the righteous requirement of the law to be fulfilled in us” from the heart. In everyday life before Christ, you worked mainly for yourself. Things were about us: our advancement, our comfort, our image. What other people think of us. But now our loves are ordered differently, so that now we live so that every lawful calling becomes another place to serve our Father. Now, we change diapers or answer emails or speak kindly to a difficult neighbor and can honestly say, “My Father takes pleasure in this, done in faith, for his glory.” Now, you can walk into the most ordinary Tuesday and say, “Father, I want to do this in a way that makes you glad.”

There are many more examples of what this change of heart and life look like, and we will have more opportunities to talk about that as we go deeper into Romans 8. But for the moment I just want you to know: when Paul says, “that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit,” that is where the theology meets everyday living. God really does intend for us to keep his law, from the heart, by the power of the Spirit, without any fear.

## **Conclusion**

Our hope in all of these things... our hope of seeing success over sin in our daily lives... our hope of living before the face of God... will not come by mere will power. It won't come by the law, or by keeping our nose clean, or by avoiding sin, or by parading our good works or successes.

Fundamentally, the only hope we have comes from Christ himself, who loved us, gave himself for us, and now lives within us. Because look at the end of verse 4. What does Paul conclude with? He says that we do have hope of fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law, but not on our own. Instead he says, it can only be fulfilled "in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Next week we're going to look more closely at what that means.

But what I hope even now is that you feel this hope... this hope of real success over sin... this hope of growing in grace... this hope that all of the Christian life can be lived joyfully because all fear is gone, and the law of sin and death has really been destroyed by the law of the Spirit of Life.

*Let's pray.*