**Romans 8:1-6** March 26, 2017

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 *Romans 8:1There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. 3For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, 4in 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.*

 *5Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Freedom! From My Past, For My Future**

 I know that many of you don’t work 8-5, Monday to Friday jobs. But most of you do have certain days you work, and others you don’t—even if you are retired. I hope and pray (and I really do, because that is how God made us, that is part of why God gave us a day of rest) I hope and pray that you usually have at least one day off a week.

 For the sake of argument, let’s just imagine that all of you have 8-5, Monday to Friday jobs. And the weekends are your days off. No, I know: days off aren’t always restful. You have groceries to buy, homes to repair. But on Friday afternoon, between the busy-ness of the work week and the busy-ness of the weekend, for about six hours, you have freedom to do what you want to do. So, imagine 5pm Friday, punching your time card, or scanning your work ID. Physically imagine yourself at that moment. Imagine what you feel in here (heart) and up here (head). Just imagining that moment, that freedom, brings a smile to my face. How about you?

 If you were here last week, you remember something akin to that. Jesus miraculously healed a man who had been blind from birth. And if you went to our Bible study time, you saw that miracle beautifully enacted on the screen. Yet after he got his sight, that formerly blind man was criticized and persecuted and kicked out of his community.

 *“Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ ‘Who is he, sir?’ the man asked. ‘Tell me so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said, ‘…he is the one speaking with you.’ Then the man said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him”* (John 9:35-38).

 In my imagination, in a way that man felt like you feel when you clock out for the weekend. Life was not over, but so many struggles were! His sight was restored. He could move on from his life of begging. He had a Savior who chased away the rejection the world hurled at him. So he didn’t just thank Jesus. He worshiped Jesus.

**Freedom from the Guilt of My Sins**

 What that blind man felt is where today’s reading starts. ***“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*** Let me repeat that: ***“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*** Don’t you feel like you just punched the time clock? Freedom, “no condemnation” for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

 You are, I am, “in Christ Jesus” when you believe in him as your Savior from sin. Imagine drawing a circle on the floor labelled “Jesus”. When you are brought to faith, the Holy Spirit leads you into that circle, and like a goal in a game of tag, as long as you are in that circle, you are safe. Sin cannot condemn you. Satan cannot bring up your past. You are forgiven, hundred percent, in Jesus Christ.

 This is one of those Bible passages I would encourage you to memorize. It’s a Bible passage we need to hear time and again. Some might say, “I already know that Jesus is my Savior. I was told that by my parents. I have been told that by my pastor almost every week. This is something I know so well that I am wondering why we even spend time on it in a Sunday sermon. Pastor must have run out of things to say today.”

 Well, if you don’t need to repeatedly hear ***“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,”*** then you are a better Christian than most of us.

 Do you ever think about the past things of your life. Do you have anything, anything at all, that you wish you could undo? Sometimes you can go weeks without thinking about those things. Then suddenly, something brings them back. Regret assails you day after day, night after night: moments of shame and embarrassment where you not only remember but even relive those moments when you said the hurtful words, perhaps physically hurt someone, didn’t help someone, took credit for something that wasn’t yours, did something you knew you shouldn’t. You *know* it is forgiven, but still you wish you could go back. And even though you are a Christian who has taken those sins to Jesus, and you have laid them at his altar, and he has announced your forgiveness saying that the guilt is gone—in spite of all that you still have a guilty feeling. You find yourself confessing those sins that you did once and have confessed so often.

 If you are the sort of person who can just blow it all off and say, “Nope. I never relive or think about the past,” then maybe you don’t need to hear Romans 8:1. But if you ever think about the past and are plagued by it, remember, ***“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*** Punching the time clock on my guilt, my failures. Thank you, Jesus! Thank you for giving me rest. Let me take a place beside that blind man kneeling at your feet!

 Like that blind man, let the truth of “No Condemnation” sink into your mind and your heart, and let it find a way, like a gentle spring rain soaking into the ground, to produce life.

**Freedom from the Law of Sin**

 Usually we think about how Jesus’ work affects our past. He forgives all that we have done. The guilt is gone. But here is what ***“No condemnation”*** means for your future. And by “your future” I mean your life in this world. Verse three: ***“Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”*** Like much of the book of Romans, we need to slow down and think about that again. ***“Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”*** So, when we enter that circle on the floor labelled “Jesus”, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts and sets us free from the ***“law of sin.”*** What does that mean?

 “Law” is a tricky word. “Law” can mean several different things. But then every child knows that.

 Think of Looney Tunes – Road Runner and Coyote. Coyote falls off a cliff and smacks the ground, but Road Runner just stands there, hanging in mid-air and coyote asks (with a sign), “Why doesn’t the Law of Gravity apply to you?” Roadrunner signs, “I never studied law.” “Law” can mean a few different things, also in the Bible. It can be a set of written rules (such as Roadrunner never studied) or it can be a ruling force (such as Coyote was subject to.)

 The word “law” in the Bible can also mean both things. “Law” in the Bible sometimes means written rules and laws, like the Ten Commandments. But there is another kind of “law,” a bit like the “laws of nature.” They are not written down because they don’t have to be! Gravity affects you whether you know about the “law of gravity” or not. And in verse 2 we hear about this kind of law in spiritual things, a ruling force.

 So let me read verse two this way, ***“Through Christ Jesus the [ruling force] of the Spirit… set me free from the [ruling force] of sin.”***

 Every person, by nature, is ruled by the force of sin until the Holy Spirit pulled us into that circle of Jesus Christ. Up to that point, every action we did was sinful. Verse 7 says, ***“The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”*** Like a form of spiritual gravity, sin was the ruling principle of our life pulling us down. Without and before faith in Jesus, every deed we did, every word we said, every thought we imagined was ruled by sin. No matter how hard we tried, we only made things worse.

 It was like a bonfire. You know, not just a fire in a fireplace, but when you grab every bit of wood you can find and you throw it on the pile. And you keep on walking off into the woods to find more branches and sticks and logs and the fire gets bigger, it gets so big that you can’t even stand close to the fire. Before Jesus, while under the law of sin, the ruling principle of sin, that is what we were doing.

**Freedom for Following the Spirit**

 Which is why that ***“No condemnation”*** is so wonderful. With “no condemnation” our spirits are given life. Now we can defy the gravity of sin. When Jesus gave us freedom from the guilt of sin, he also gave us freedom from the ruling power of sin. We are no longer bound to sin like an apple falling from a tree must fall to the ground.

 Freed from slavery to sin, the in-Christ person has a changed mind-set. ***“Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.”***

 The Christian asks, “What does God want?”

 To me, it is one of the most humbling moments of being a pastor, when people ask a question like that, “What does God want?” It is humbling, and a bit frightening, because the spirit God has put in them through faith in Jesus Christ is wanting, not my opinion, but God’s opinion. I am just a messenger. And I pray that I don’t mess it up, that I can give answers and guidance that are God’s.

 But whether you ask a pastor or not, that should be the sort of question you often ask. Whether the situation is a problem, an opportunity, a relationship, a choice, whatever, inside the Christian the spirit of God leads us to joyfully ask that question all the time. It asks, not with the “What do I gotta do?” tone of voice. It asks with the “How can I most please my loving God?” tone of voice.

 The gauge for the answer to that question was spoken by Jesus in our Gospel reading. *“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant… just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve”* (Mt 20:26,28). A spirit-led question about the situations in life isn’t “What I get out of it?”, but “How can I help others?”, and “How will God be honored?”

 Here I think of a rural African woman who, many years ago, was talking about a funeral at a neighbor’s house. Now, you have to know that every rural funeral involved the entire community because there was a lot of work to be done. Caskets were made on sight, the body was washed, the grave was dug – not by paid professionals, but your neighbors. It took a lot of work! This woman said that it was very important for her to go and help at her neighbor’s funeral because if she didn’t go to other people’s funerals, what would she do when there was a funeral in her own house? They wouldn’t come! Look into it, and you will see that the world’s appeals to do good always have their base in doing what will benefit you.

 True spirit-inspired love for neighbor does not even ask that question. I help, not to get anything out of it, not even in the long run. And spirit-inspired love for God doesn’t ask what you will get out of God by going to church. Instead, it says that I honor and worship God because of what he has done for me. That is what happens when God’s spirit is the ruling force in our lives.

 And it happens when we remember the freedom that we have. Not that we actually punched the time clock, but Jesus did on that cross when he said, *“It is finished”* (John 19:30). ***“Now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*** In that freedom, may you, ***“have [your] minds set on what the Spirit desires.”*** Amen.