

Pardoned in him

The Christian's True Identity

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For those of you who haven't been with us, we are just starting a series that's taking us through the summer months on the doctrine of union with Christ, what it means to be in Jesus. So we're looking at a couple of key passages in the Bible that talk about being in him. Today it comes from Romans 8 and just the first verse, and for context, even though we're going to really just hone in on verse one, I'll read the first four verses of Romans chapter 8. This is the word of God. Let's give it the attention that it deserves.

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

God add his blessing upon the reading of his holy word.

I watched the coverage live as perhaps some of you did back in, I guess January it was, as the sentencing for Larry Nassar, the sentencing for his very public trial was finally handed down. Nassar was the well-known USA Gymnastics national team doctor, also worked with Michigan State, who after nearly three decades was finally caught in an unimaginable sexual scandal that claimed nearly 300 victims. And as I watched that trial, you see Nassar there, and he's on the stand, and he's about to hear his sentencing, and he's defeated, and he's gaunt, and he's exhausted, and here comes the ruling from the judge, 40 to 175 years in prison. I think I will always remember the words of Judge Rosemary Aquilina, or at least the way she said it, after announcing that this was indeed his sentencing, she says to him, "I have just signed your death warrant." Next, she had to quiet the courtroom as her words were met with praise and approval from those watching in person, many of whom were victims themselves, the sighs of relief, the cheers, the applause, not just from those in the courtroom, but really from people all around the world who were watching this unfold. It said something powerful about the human race, and that is that we have a need, we have a need for justice. This is where we're starting this morning, so it's important to understand that the human race has a need for justice. In

a time where our nation is divided on nearly every topic and sociopolitical issue imaginable, here was something that was strangely unifying. We loved witnessing the vindication of the innocent victims. We loved the merciless punishment that was finally handed down upon the guilty. This is just natural to us. We innately have a need to see wrongs righted, to see the guilty condemned and the innocent set free. It's within all of us. This is why, you know, true crime is kind of this blossoming, exploding phenomenon in media and culture, all kinds of documentaries, TV shows that explore real people who have been imprisoned for crimes they don't commit and we get obsessed with these. We listen to the podcasts and we watch the shows. We binge watch them on Netflix. We want to know what's going to happen. We want to see the guilty caught. We want to see the innocent set free.

This is our natural desire, but what I want to say is that we have a tendency to be inconsistent with this desire because if it were us standing in the place of the defendant, if it was us standing in the place of Larry Nassar on that day in Lansing, if we were the ones who were defeated and gaunt and exhausted, knowing full well our guilt, we would not have a desire for justice, we would have a desire for mercy. This is the case for us spiritually speaking, isn't it? As miserable offenders against God's law, we fully expect to hear God to speak to us those words from Judge Aquilina. "I have just signed your death warrant," and we know he would be right to do so. He would be right to do so because that would be just and in any other scenario, justice would be what we would want but not in this scenario, where the weight of justice would crush us. In this scenario, we want mercy. And in Romans 8:1, in just a mere eight words in the Greek, Paul reveals to us how God is able to give both justice and mercy. He is able to execute justice and therefore maintain his holy character, his righteous character, but he is also able to grant mercy, the mercy that we so desperately need.

It seems like a contradiction, doesn't it? I mean, after all, how could God possibly be just and simultaneously let guilty sinners go free? And the answer is, of course, through union with Christ. The answer is in him. Packed into those two little words, we find the answer to this paradox. That's what Romans 8:1 unfolds for us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." It would be hard to overstate how crucial grasping this concept is for understanding the Christian life. James Boice says that this is the theme of the entire word of God, Romans 8:1 is the theme of the entire word of God. He says it's the gospel's very heart and so that's what we want to explore for a few minutes today. We're looking at really under two main headings. First, the idea of justice and how it's natural to all of us, but then we're going to look at mercy, supernatural mercy, that is, mercy that comes outside of us from God's divine pleasure.

First, natural justice. The Bible is not shy regarding this attribute of God. Deuteronomy 32:4, "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." Psalm 11:7, "the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds." Or Isaiah 61:8, "I the LORD love justice." He says it himself. And it's because God loves justice and righteousness that you and I also have a desire for righteousness and for justice, because we're made in his image. We reflect the character of our Creator, especially in terms of knowledge and righteousness and holiness,

according to Westminster Confession of Faith. We could say it like this, if God did not inscribe these things on our hearts, we would have no desire for them but it's because he made us like him that we have this innate, this innate sense of right and wrong. C. S. Lewis famously made this observation in his book, "Mere Christianity." He's recalling the inconsistencies of his former atheism and this is what he writes, this is fascinating, and maybe this was you at one point, or maybe this is you now. So listen to what he says. He says, "My argument against God was that the universe seemed too cruel and unjust." We follow that so far. We understand that. We've heard that before. Maybe you have felt that way. If there's a God, why do bad things happen is essentially what it comes down to. So C. S. Lewis says, "My argument against God was that the universe was cruel and unjust," but then he says, "but how did I get ideas of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he first has some idea of straight. What was I comparing the universe to when I called it unjust," Lewis concludes. He has touched upon what scripture reveals to us, that in creating us, God has revealed to us his moral law, he has given us that straight line so that we can know what is crooked so that we can say, that's wrong. He's given us the straight line. Good theology.

Now this might surprise some of you but good theology will tell you, good theology, Reformed theology will tell you, you don't need the Bible to live a good life. You don't. You don't need the Bible to live a good, now I'll put it in air quotes now, a good life, or an upright life because the knowledge of what is good or what is upright is inside all of us. It's hardwired into us. It comes to us naturally, although the ability to put that into action does not come to us naturally. But this is what Paul says in Romans. If you're open to Romans 8, flip over to Romans 2. This is the argument that the apostle makes. Romans chapter 2, verses 14 and 15. Paul says, "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law," and once again he's referring to the Mosaic law, things we find in Exodus and Deuteronomy, "when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature," that's key, "by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them." They show, what does he say there in verse 15, they show that the law is written on their hearts. Gentiles or pagans, non-Christians we could say who do not have the Ten Commandments and yet live by them prove that long before God ever wrote his law on tablets of stone he was writing his law on the very flesh of our hearts.

Now the problem is, as we've said, that although we know what is right we so rarely do what is right. We know. We know, right? If you're raised in the church, you know these verses, but even if not, you know the truth behind them. You know that all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God. You know that none is righteous, no, not even one, and that means that we stand guilty, all of us, before the Almighty Judge. As we look at ourselves and the lives that we lead, we know there is nothing that we can bring to the table to present to God that would warrant any kind of commendation, rather, we would receive only condemnation. We think evil thoughts. We say nasty things. And sometimes we just simply do bad stuff.

This is what the English reformer Thomas Cranmer summed up so beautifully in his famous prayer of confession. "Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and the desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things we ought to have done. We have done those things which we ought not to have done." And then he says, "and there is no health in us." That's what the Bible says. There is no health in us. There's no spiritual good in us. And the Bible is very clear regarding the sentence that will be meted out against us because of this. Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." That's why Ephesians can say that we are so entrenched in our sins and trespasses, it's as if we're dead in them because we have a death penalty hanging over our heads.

We stand condemned before the judge with a death sentence hanging over us and then C. S. Lewis appropriately says that the Christian religion begins not in comfort but in dismay. What does he mean by that? He means it begins with this sense of our unworthiness, of our sinfulness, of the guilt that we have before Almighty God. The Christian religion begins not in comfort but in dismay. But comfort comes. Comfort comes. And it comes quite clearly in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." When Paul says that there's no condemnation for us, it's another way of saying there's no death penalty. We've received a pardon. But how can that be, friends? I want you to really think about this question. How can it be that there is no death sentence? Isn't the guilty getting off free the kind of thing that gets our ire up because God built us with a passion for justice? The guilty getting off free is not justice. How can God, the same God who says, "I love justice," let guilty sinners go? Doesn't that spit in the face of justice, is God not violating his own standards, his own ethic? Isn't he ignoring the intrinsic qualities of straight and crooked with which he has endowed us? And isn't that by definition unjust? And the answer is no. The answer is no, actually. It's not unjust. How can that be? Well, look at verse 1 again of chapter 8. It's a quick verse. Maybe we're just kind of going right by, but notice what it does not say. It does not say, "There is therefore now no condemnation." Period. Full stop. End of sentence. As if God throws out any and all conceptions of justice or punishment or comeuppance for the wicked. He just says, "There's no condemnation tossing out that part of what I do as a judge." No. What does it say? It says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," that is, if one is not in Christ Jesus, they can expect the full weight of God's judgment to come and fall upon them on the last day.

So the question is why do those in Christ, why do they get a free pass? Are not Christians just as much sinners as non-Christians and therefore just as equally deserving of God's wrath and punishment? Of course they are. Puritan Matthew Poole states that in Romans 8:1, Paul is not asserting that there is no matter of condemnation, that there is nothing damnable in them that are in Christ. He says there is more than enough of that, is what Matthew Poole says. So yes, we deserve condemnation, but the glorious good news of the gospel is that to be in Christ means that Christ takes the blow for you. We are, Colossians 3 tells us, we are hidden with Christ. We are hidden inside of Christ and therefore the divine punishment, the wages of sin which are death, they can't reach us. We're hidden from them. They can't find us. There is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus

precisely because Jesus was condemned in our place. There is no condemnation if you are in Christ because Christ was condemned for you.

Now that might sound, if you're thinking about it, like the absolute paragon of injustice, right, where a judge would place the penalty of someone else's guilt and wrongdoing on another person, an innocent person, making them an unwitting scapegoat. That would be unjust, except for in this instance, Jesus volunteered. Jesus volunteered. You remember last week when we talked about the covenant of redemption, that plan before time even began between the Trinity where they devised this plan to redeem sinners, that God would send, God the Father would send the Son to represent his chosen people and by the power of the Holy Spirit, he would redeem them. Guess what that entailed? That entailed the Son coming to earth to take the divine penalty for his people. He knew this. Jesus knew this. He volunteered for this. He knew what he was getting into. And so it's within that eternal counsel of God that the Father can be heard, as it were, saying to the Son, "I have just signed your death warrant." That's the cost of our redemption, friends, and Jesus knew it. That's what it would take to reconcile us to God, that he would take upon him the wages of sin, death itself.

This is why Christ came, that he might receive the brunt of God's relentless justice so that we might receive the blessing of God's relentless grace and mercy. Although somewhat veiled at first, the Bible has been revealing since the very beginning that the Son was sent to suffer. Genesis 3:15 prophesies the coming Messiah is one who would defeat the wicked serpent, but in the process, his heel would be bruised. He would be wounded. Or Isaiah 53, this is a passage you well know, but if you'd like, you can turn there, verses 4 through 6, this gives us even more detail about the nature of Christ's suffering as being substitutionary or in our place, that he did it for us. Isaiah 53, beginning in verse 4, as we read these verses, listen to the pronouns that speak of our union with him. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted, he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Brothers and sisters, this passage shouts at us about our union with Christ. It tells us in vivid language what Christ gets from being united to us. When he's united to us, what does he get? He gets grief and sorrows and afflictions and piercings and chastisement and iniquity. And what do we receive when we're united to him? No condemnation.

Isn't that amazing? This is the gospel. It's the good news of the gospel, that Christ came to be our substitute, to stand in our place, to take the wrath of God for our sin. That's what the Old Testament foreshadowed. Paul alludes to this even in those following verses of Romans 8, which we read in verse 3. He said, "God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin." This is why he came, Paul says. So the Old Testament prophesied this. New Testament authors confirmed it. Jesus himself even taught it. If you've been coming in the evening as we go through Mark, three times now, Jesus has said that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed. You notice that Jesus doesn't just say the Son of Man has come to be killed, he starts by saying to suffer many

things. The price for our sin was not only paid at the cross, but it was being paid for throughout the entire life of Jesus. The moment that Jesus took on human flesh, his suffering began. Think about it. He left the riches and the glories and even the comforts or the luxuries of heaven to live in poverty. So even from his birth, Christ came to bear our griefs. He came to live a life marked by the misery of this sin-cursed world. He came to know our weaknesses, to be tempted in every respect as we are yet without sin.

Theologians, if you want a little theological fun fact, here you go. Perk up, I know everybody wants to hear this. Theologians call this the passive obedience of Christ, the fact that he suffered throughout his entire life. They call it passive, not in the sense that he doesn't do anything, he just allows it to happen to him, but passive in the sense of its original Latin root, *passeo*, which means to suffer. The passive obedience of Christ is his suffering and while that is not only at the cross, it's certainly culminated at the cross. At the cross, the Father threw the entire weight of his wrath for our sin against his beloved, perfectly obedient Son, and as Jesus hung from the cross, think of it, he's defeated, he's gaunt, he's exhausted, knowing full well though his innocence and what does he do? He cries out to his heavenly Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And what does God say in response? Nothing. And that deafening silence was for us a certain guarantee that Jesus had been condemned in our place because in this way, God rejecting his perfectly obedient Son and throwing the weight of divine judgment upon him, in this way, God maintains his justice and his righteousness because at the cross, no sin goes unpunished. All of our sins were laid upon him and he took the punishment for them all.

And some feeble attempt to grasp the height and the depth of this love which truly does surpass all knowledge, you need to picture yourself at the cross. I want all of you in your mind's eye, truly right now, to imagine yourself hanging on the cross. We need to imagine the entire weight of God's wrath thrown at us. We need to recognize the horrors of hell that Christ underwent for our sake because the sobering reality is this, if I am not in Christ, then I'm on the cross. If I am not in Christ, then I'm a dead man. The protection from God's condemnation only extend to those who look to Jesus in faith and are therefore hid in him. If Jesus doesn't take the blow, friends, then you do. I mean, this is really important stuff for you to understand. This is the difference between hell and heaven. The cross is what could have been, what should have been your punishment, your experience, your reality, your torture, but by faith the only crucifixion you ever have to know is the one that Christ endured for you. Paul says in Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ."

This is the essence behind one of the most famous lines on union with Christ in theology coming from John Calvin. He says, "You need to understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to you." Calvin's saying, "Wake up. You need to understand this. If Christ is apart from you, everything he's done is worthless to you." Doesn't matter how good you are. Doesn't matter how often you go to church. It doesn't matter what charities you give to. It doesn't matter how often you pray. None of it matters if Christ is not dwelling in us and we are not dwelling

in him because as long as he remains outside of us, we are still condemned because God will punish every sin.

But to be in Christ, brothers and sisters, that's the greatest comfort imaginable, isn't it? There's no place that is more secure than to be in Jesus. In Christ, we are saved from the curse of sin because he took the curse for us and it is only when we are in Christ that we can meaningfully sing those climactic words of Charles Wesley's hymn "And can it be," when he says, "No condemnation, now I dread, Jesus and all in him is mine." This is our reality now. We now possess that guarantee of a free pardon and this should give us boldness, this should give us confidence because, friends, the godly have an invincible fortress for we know that while we abide in Christ, we are beyond every danger of condemnation.

In the case of Larry Nassar, Rachel Denhollander received international recognition as being the very first victim to publicly step forward and truly get that investigation going underway. I know some of you know her or know of her. She came and spoke in Grand Rapids recently. Rachel's a mother of two, practicing attorney, but most importantly, she's a Christian, and it was Denhollander's faith that in great part encouraged her to pursue justice while everybody else turned a blind eye because as we said at the beginning, she had that innate, that natural desire to see wrongs righted, to see the guilty be caught, to see the innocent vindicated. She knew that that desire came because she was made in the image of God. But as a self-professed sinner, Denhollander also knew of the need for mercy and in her victim impact statement, Denhollander invited Larry Nassar, the man who had harmed her, who had abused her, she invited him to experience a different kind of justice than he could ever experience in human courts. She invited him to see a judge who would not say to him, "I have just signed your death warrant," but rather to see a judge who says, "I have just signed my Son's death warrant for you." This is what Denhollander said in her statement, speaking directly to Nassar. She says, "Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing and that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet." I mean, this is being broadcast all over the world and Denhollander is getting up there and she's preaching the gospel. "Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing and that's what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you. I pray you experience the soul-crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me, though I extend that to you as well."

Denhollander could forgive him because she knew she had been forgiven and she knew that in Christ there was no condemnation against her and that reality, friends, is offered freely to everyone, no matter the sin, no matter the sinner, because of the love and the mercy of God. Do you have that grace today? Do you have that mercy today? Are you in Christ, my friend? Know that it is only by being united to him that you will escape the wrath of God that you deserve for your many sins. So cover yourself in Christ and as he takes the blow of God's wrath, you can receive the blessing of God's grace and mercy.

Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we are at a loss of words for the love for which you have shown us that while we were still sinners, you have loved us and sent Christ to die for us. And we thank you that by faith, as we are found in Christ, we have confidence and boldness there is no condemnation to dread. We thank you that this is part of our identity as Christians, that we are a people who are freely pardoned because of your grace and mercy. We thank you and we praise you for Christ's sake. Amen.