

Sunday July 16, 2023

Romans 8:1-11
“No Condemnation Do We Fear”

The story goes that there was a young couple, Mary, and John, who decided that the only way they could overcome their lack of funds was to begin doing robberies. It is Mary who does the actual robbing at gunpoint inside the banks, while John waited outside as the getaway driver. They are initially successful with a string of heists that make headlines and they become folk heroes. Until one day their luck runs out and they get caught.

At trial, the judge condemns Mary to ten years in prison, while John gets two years. However, once they get to their respective prisons, they discover that due to a clerical error, John will be serving ten years and Mary only two. Despite her insistence, John convinces Mary to keep quiet about it. After two years, Mary gets out and she continues to visit John faithfully every month and they exchange letters and phone calls regularly for the remainder of his ten years.

Finally, after he does his time, John gets out and is joyfully reunited with Mary. They get married and move to a different state and start anew, leaving their life of crime behind. They raise a family with children and grandchildren and eventually reach old age, after having had a happy marriage. At their 50th wedding anniversary party, the entire group of family and friends are gathered. A great celebration is had, with many laughs and stories, recounting their life together.

The conversation turns to the secret to a happy marriage. One of the guests asks Mary why she decided to stick with John while he was in prison, despite all the hardships. Mary answers: "Well... you know you have found that Special One when you finish each other's sentences." There are few cinematic images in the movies, or on television, that are more powerful than that of a courtroom as a verdict is announced. In classic movies, which are often American, the judge often verbally polls each individual member of the jury. Each offers crushing repetition. It's especially poignant when the verdict is "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!"

The fear of having some great power, or person, pronounce us guilty, shadows nearly our entire lives. Few of us are free of that fear, no matter how innocent or powerful we may think we are. This is part of what makes racial profiling such a terrible scourge. In a country that at least claims people are innocent until proven guilty, some Canadian authorities perpetually suspect some people are guilty just because of the color of our skin or ethnicity.

This too makes the kinds of racially imbalanced sentencing so troubling. We're all guilty in one sense of the word or another. But to listen to the Canadian judicial system, all too often it tells us, people of color or indigenous persons are often guiltier than most. It isn't, however, just the prospect of being pronounced legally guilty that haunts us. Some of us also worry about having people tell us that we're guilty of being somehow unable to measure up.

As long, as I have memory, I'll never forget the many times someone told me I didn't measure up. The old school yard tradition of lining kids up and having two captains choose their respective teams can be humiliating. Especially if you happen to be the last one standing, and no one wants you because it will make the teams uneven.

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I know this may shock you but as a student, I was never near the top of the class. I never earned academic awards, and at the time it weighed heavily on me. It still, at times, is a painful memory. Yes, I have a fragile ego.

Yet, what about measuring up spiritually. How many of us have felt the sting of being afraid we are not good enough in God's eyes? I know as a pastor; I have heard such self evaluations from people for my whole pastoral career. I have heard, way too often, from people that they cannot come to church because they aren't good enough. That the roof may fall in. They fear being judged by others and by God. So, its better not to expose yourself to that pain.

Christians created this problem because for a long time, and still in many Christian circles, the method of evangelism is to terrify people to make decisions. Hellfire and brimstone are the key points of such presentations I think a good part of this approach is to perhaps try to convince ourselves that we are not under the condemnation we pass judgment on others. "They are out, and I am in".

Albert Camus' novel, **The Fall**, introduces its readers to a successful man named Jean-Baptiste. He says, "I was altogether in harmony with life; my company was in demand ... to tell the truth, I looked upon myself as something of a superman."

A walk home through Paris' streets one night, however, rattles his conceit. Just after Jean-Baptiste passes a young woman standing on a bridge, he hears her fall into the water. However, he doesn't stop, even when he hears her call out for help. He simply returns to his home and refuses to report the incident to anyone.

Afterwards, Jean-Baptiste wrestles with his failure to try to save the drowning woman. He admits, "I couldn't deceive myself as to the truth of my nature ... It was not love or generosity that awakened me [towards others], but merely a desire to be loved and to receive what was in my opinion due me." After he recognizes this about himself, he becomes a sort of social fugitive, saying, "Above all, the question is to elude judgment."

The process of "eluding judgment" teaches Jean-Baptiste, "People hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves. The idea that comes most naturally to man ... is the idea of his innocence. From this point of view, God's adopted children are like that Frenchman at the Buchenwald concentration camp who insisted on registering a complaint with the clerk, himself a prisoner. The clerk said, "Useless, old man. You don't lodge a complaint here." 'But you see, sir," said the Frenchman, "My case is exceptional. I am innocent."

"We are all exceptional cases," Jean Baptiste concludes. "Each of us insists on being innocent at all costs, even if he must accuse the whole human race and heaven itself... The essential thing is that [we] should be innocent."

To make matters seem worse, at first, is Paul's consistent message in his letter to the Roman Christians that may, at least initially, haunt those who worry that we don't spiritually measure up. We perhaps cringe as we hear him repeatedly say, "Not innocent!" "Not good enough!" "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!" Paul calls it "the law of sin and death."

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What he refers to as “law” here is what Fleming Rutledge calls a kind of process, like the law of gravity or the laws of thermodynamics that no one can escape.

It’s a kind of force that unconditionally shapes some part of us. When our first parents sinned, all people fell under the power of sin from which, we can no more, free ourselves, than we can free ourselves from, for example, the law of gravity. So, we have reason to fear condemnation and eternal separation from God and from each other that comes from that. Is this the thought that keeps you up at night, or forces you to try and create the illusion that all is right with you when it is decidedly not?

Now here is the rub, as we say. Why on earth do we stop at condemnation in considering Paul’s letter? Why? Why, do we not read on and get to the true heart of his words, and really the entire New Testament? Consider the marvelous nature of Paul’s message of God’s pardon for Christians that is the gospel message. This good news is, in fact, what may, and should still draw people to Christ despite all of Christ’s Body’s foibles and demands.

Do we who fear God’s guilty verdict, and long for what is at the heart of the gospel message the Church proclaims every Sunday. We long to hear something like what Paul celebrates in Romans 5:18: “Just as the result of one’s trespass was condemnation for all men, so the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.” Because of what we’ve done, we naturally hear God’s, “Guilty! “Guilty!” “Guilty!” verdict.

Those in the Reformed Christian tradition profess that even a Christians’ own “conscience” accuses us of “having ... sinned against all of God’s commandments and of never having kept any of them.” Yes, we are guilty. We are all, every last one of us guilty, but there is more to the message. Something greater and more wonderful to cling to.

Why do we not hold tight to the hope we have because of what Jesus did? It is Jesus’ followers who also hear God’s gracious, “Not guilty! Not guilty! “Not guilty!” After all, the only One who has the power to overturn our guilty verdict has, in fact, reversed the verdict. What’s more, as Reformed Christians also profess, we “await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in” our place before God.

Like in the crazy story I shared of Mary and John, someone finished our sentence. There is now no condemnation for those who have received God’s grace with our faith. By God’s grace, there’s no reason for God’s beloved people to any longer fear not “measuring up.” Christians don’t have to worry that God will tell us that we’re not good enough.

When, after all, Jesus gave himself up to death and he became what Fleming Rutledge calls “the Judge judged in our place.” When the only perfect person, let the Romans crucify him, he submitted himself to the judgment God’s dearly beloved people deserve. Though Jesus was perfectly “good enough,” he let God pronounce him not good enough in our place. He let God somehow abandon him, so that God would never abandon his adopted brothers and sisters.

By doing so, Jesus “set us free from the law of sin and death” so that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

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Yet, as Romans 8 proclaimers, we want to do all we can to help our listeners understand for what purpose God has freed us from the threat of condemnation. God has not pronounced us “not guilty” to let us go back to our old ways of living.

When God, as Paul writes in verse 3b, “condemned sin in sinful man,” God also completely changed our situation. Jesus Christ graciously frees Christians who had been slaves to sin and death from that captivity. However, he also has given us, through the Holy Spirit, the freedom to serve the Lord and each other. Paul doesn’t just speak of “Christ for us,” but he also speaks of “Christ in us” or Jesus’ adopted siblings being “in Christ.” Christ’s Spirit, after all, frees his followers to live according to that Spirit.

A woman visited one of her acquaintances as she was recovering from foot surgery. This visitor had become a Christian only a few months earlier. Patient and visitor had a delightful conversation about the things of their newly common faith. The visitor told her that she’d read in her Bible that the way of anger was not the Christian way. So, she reported that she was asking God to make her more patient and less irritated with her co-workers.

The patient also reported, however, who had been a Christian far longer, rejected this. She insisted that to be angry is to simply be human. Yet the newer Christian visitor, with the kind of 20/20 spiritual eyesight new converts sometimes have, recognized a new power at work in her life. She recognized the “law of the Spirit of life.” So, she told her friend, “Shouldn’t I expect Jesus to be working in me to help me change my anger?”

Some Christians live in a kind of uneasy limbo between thinking about condemnation and not thinking about it. Our fear of not being good enough for God bubbles to the surface only periodically. If things are going well, we keep our fear buried most of the time. Others have convinced others, and maybe us as well, that we’re superheroes. We don’t, as Rutledge notes, “Get ulcers.” However, even Jesus’ followers sometimes “give them.” We judge others instead of worrying about them judging us.

Still others live in a kind of perpetual spiritual panic. We join Paul in knowing, all too well, that “nothing good lives in” us.” We want to do what is good, but we don’t do it. For us, the cry of “Guilty!” rings in our ears almost constantly, making our lives, but especially the prospect of our deaths, terrifying. Only individual Christians can decide into which of these categories we fall. Yet in whichever group we think we find ourselves, we’re all in the same group.

After all, as Paul writes in Romans 3, “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin ... There is no one righteous, not even one ... There is no difference, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” To every single one of Romans 8’s proclaimers and hearers, the great gospel word comes. To those who have ears to hear and hearts to believe, God pronounces a new verdict and creates a new world.

Yes, God’s adopted children remain guilty of sinning against God and each other by what we do and fail to do, by what we say and neglect to say. Yet, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit has set me free from the law of sin and death.

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J. Dwight Pentecost used to say, “Mercy is God’s ministry to the miserable.” It is both intensely personal and immensely practical. For when I am treated unfairly, God’s mercy relieves my bitterness. When I grieve over loss, it relieves my pain and anger and denial. When I struggle with disability, it relieves my self-pity. When I endure physical pain, it relieves my hopelessness. When I deal with being sinful, it relieves my guilt”. (The Tardy Oxcart, pg. 237)

You can dwell on your own flawed self assessments all you want. You can declare yourself and others guilty. You can delude yourself into thinking you are a hopeless case, beyond redemption. Others may also join that awful chorus of judgment and condemnation towards us but it does not matter. The assessment is wrong. Thoroughly wrong. The only assessment that matters comes from the Judge of all things. Namely God in Christ.

And no matter what a jury of our peers may say about us or what we think about ourselves, the judge declares, because of his son’s sacrifice, that we are “Not Guilty”¹