



## Wesley on Romans: The First Fruits of the Spirit

### Romans 8:1-11

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\*All words printed in *italics* come from Wesley's original publication.

John Wesley, the founder of our worldwide denomination, is said to have written upwards of 15 sermons in a given week. Fifteen. It takes me a full week to formulate one sermon. In truth, it takes me a full week just to re-write any one of Wesley's already published sermons. That is the task this month – to rewrite some of Wesley's sermons from the 1700s in hopes that we may learn from our founder, even some 225 years after his death.

Today we look to Wesley's sermon titled, *The First Fruits of the Spirit*, which was first published around 1746. May God bless our hearing of Wesley's sermon that through his words, we might be called to faithful discipleship even still today.

In Romans 8:1, Paul begins, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." We should know that Paul is speaking about those who believe in Christ, who "[having been] justified by faith, have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." He's talking about people who don't long for things of the flesh or give in to corrupt temptations. He's speaking of those who, because of the work of the Spirit in their lives, are pure in thought, word, and deed.

To say such people no longer have condemnation is to say that they have been justified by the free grace of God, through the redemption that is in Jesus. Through the great sacrifice of Christ, these people have been forgiven for the things they've done wrong. They have no condemnation from God, nor should they have condemnation from within. They have a clear conscience as children of God who are filled with godly sincerity.

Though this scripture ought to be easy to understand, it is often difficult to fully comprehend what Paul is saying. Misunderstanding this passage is dangerous because failing to understand can lead to poor mistakes in our personal walks and in our relationship to Christ. So, I will show, *as clearly as I can, first who those are "which are in Christ Jesus," and "walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit:" and, secondly, how, "there is no condemnation to" these. I [will] conclude with some practical inferences.*

First, let's take a look at what it means that someone "is in Christ Jesus." The people to whom Paul is referring are those who have found through faith in God their righteousness in Christ. We are talking about people who have united themselves with the Lord in one Spirit. Just as the branches of a vine are grafted onto the root-stock, a person in Christ has united themselves with Christ.

Paul defines those in Christ as people who do not lust after the flesh. He isn't simply speaking about sexual immorality; Paul is using the term 'flesh' to describe anything of a corrupt nature. In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul names the works of the flesh, which include such things as idolatry, strife, jealousy, anger, envy, and dissensions. If someone walks in the Spirit, they will not give into such things. In Galatians 5:17, Paul names quite plainly, "What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; they are opposed to each other to prevent you from doing what you want." That is, the Spirit opposes fleshly desires – sinful desires – to keep you from giving in to such temptations.

Those who abide in Christ have put aside such affections and lusts of the flesh. Those who have united themselves with Christ abstain from such acts as "*adultery and fornication*"; from "*uncleanness and lasciviousness*"; from "*idolatry, witchcraft, hatred...*"; from every design, and word, and work, to which the corruption of nature leads. Even though such people may encounter the temptations of such acts, those who are united with Christ have been given the power to turn away from such sinful temptations. At each temptation, they reject the call of the flesh, and they praise God for giving them victory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Such persons have a focus on God's love through the work of the Spirit. They are led into holy desires, into *divine and heavenly temper*, being led to a place where every thought that comes into their hearts is made holy for the Lord.

Not only are the acts of such people made holy, so too are the conversations of those who are led by the Spirit. Their "*speech is always in grace, seasoned with salt*"; with the love and fear of God. The only words that come out of their mouths are just and holy, used to edify others, and to speak God's grace into the hearts of others. Not just their spoken words, but every action they enact follows the example of Christ. In all they do and say, they walk in justice, mercy, and truth. All that is said and done is offered to the glory of God.

**These are the people who walk after the Spirit, these are the people who are in Christ Jesus:** *Being filled with faith and with the Holy Ghost, they possess in their hearts and show forth in their lives, in the whole course of their words and actions, the genuine fruits of the Spirit of God, namely, "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance," and whatsoever else is lovely or praiseworthy.*

Next, we should consider what it means that for those in Christ Jesus, "there is no condemnation to them."

First, we are saying that for those in Christ, there is no condemnation for past sins. For those in Christ, it is as if their past sins had never been, for God remembers their past sins no more. God sent his Son, that through the faith and blood of Christ, all past sins of the righteous shall be forgiven. God has forgiven and does not maintain a grudge for sins of the past. "All former guilt-eliciting acts are taken up into the pardon of God."<sup>i</sup>

There should also be no maintained condemnation within the self. Not only does God forgive the faithful, but so too should the faithful forgive themselves and maintain no sense of guilt or

*dread of the wrath of God.* Those who are justified by faith have *the peace of God ruling in their heart, flowing from a continual sense of pardoning mercy.* In other words, since God doesn't hold on to past sins, faithful disciples are also invited to let go of them.<sup>ii</sup>

Some might wonder, what happens if a person of faith loses sight of God's forgiving mercy? Is it possible a person falls from the light back into darkness, and once again latches on to personal condemnation? To answer, assuming this is truly the case, supposing [a person] no longer has faith in the mercy of God, then that person is not really a believer. *Faith implies light, the light of God shining upon the soul.* Therefore, if someone loses the light of God, at least for that time, they have lost faith. And this is certainly possible, for a true believer to lose the light of faith, and for that time to fall back into condemnation. But this is not how we would describe someone who "is of Christ Jesus," who currently believes in the name of God. As long as someone believes in Christ, who walks in the light of the Spirit, neither God condemns them, nor should they condemn themselves.

Not only are those in Christ forgiven of past sins, nor are they condemned for any present sins. This should go without explanation. If a person is not walking after the flesh, but instead is following the Spirit, they should have no sins worth condemning. As John says in his Gospel, "Whoever is born of God shall commit no sin. ... They cannot sin, for they are born of God." If someone is living fully in Christ, in faithfulness they can commit no sin, and clearly, one can not be condemned for that which they are not doing. This is easy to understand. The law of God that says, "Thou shalt not steal," *condemns none but those who do steal.* ... *The law, which says, "Remember the Sabbath-day, to keep it holy," condemns [only those] who do not keep it holy.*

It can also be said that a person who is in Christ is not condemned for inward sin. As children of Adam, the first of humanity, the corruption of nature still remains in all people, even for those faithful to God. *The seeds of pride and vanity, of anger, lust, and evil desire, yes, sin of every kind* still remains in the hearts of the faithful. They will have carnal desires, even if they maintain true faithfulness. But they are not condemned for having an evil nature. So long as faithfulness to God is maintained and they do not give in to the lustful desires of the flesh, there is no condemnation. *God is well pleased with sincere, though imperfect, obedience.*

Take heart in this: even though sin is lurking around every corner, even though there are times when perfect faith and perfect love will be lacking, even though self-pride will come out on occasion, even though the faithful will fail to uphold the perfect will of God at all times and in all places, there is still no condemnation, either from God, nor should there be from within one's heart. The inability to remain perfectly committed to God should only serve as a further reminder of how great God is for continually offering such great mercy and all-powerful love. The knowledge that one is so capable of sinning, the constant reminders of the times a person fails to share God's love, should only give a deeper desire to know the great mercy of God, whose love never fails.

The faithful are also not condemned for accidents or involuntary failings. For example, God does not condemn, nor should the faithful condemn themselves, for the accidental pain inflicted upon another. If, in trying to help another, a person causes harm, they are not

condemned by God for the accident. If a person says something believed to be true, only to later find out it was false, they are not condemned for their mistake. Though accidental pain and harm do not line up with God's perfect will, they should not bring guilt on the conscience of those who are faithful to Jesus Christ. Such mistakes are not to be seen in the same way as intentional acts that go against the will of God.

Finally, the faithful are not condemned for that which they do not have the power to control. There is no condemnation for things over which a person has no choice. For example, if a person is sick, and unable to attend church and participate in the corporate gathering of worship, they are not condemned for missing church. *There is no guilt, because there is no choice.*

It is quite normal that a faithful believer may grieve because they cannot do what they so committedly yearn to do. A person may long to be present for church gatherings, small group gatherings, or to take part in sharing food with the hungry of the community. But if they earnestly cannot be present, they should feel no guilt and no sense of God's displeasure, but instead should be cheerful and give thanks to God who cares for them while they are yet unable to be present elsewhere.

There are some times when a person may do something that is contrary to their normal behavior. They may have, as it can be termed, *sins of surprise*. Such a slip of character may take place in a moment of violent temptation, or a person may speak in a manner that doesn't reflect God's eternal love. There is perhaps no way to formulate a general rule concerning sins of this temporary, abnormal nature. However, it can definitely be said, that if such *sins of surprise* give way to more common occurrence, God will be more or less displeased.

But one cannot write themselves off as fully innocent when such *sins of surprise occur*. This is especially true if there have been similar outbursts in the past. If a person knows where they are likely to give in to temptation and sin, and they do not take active steps to avoid such temptations, they are in effect committing a willful sin for having refused to follow God's call to avoid such danger.

It's also possible a person does something they don't know is wrong. In such a case, God will most certainly make them aware of their foolishness. The Spirit of God would convince them that they had *swerved from the perfect law and from the mind which was in Christ*. As charged by God, any person can learn from true mistakes, and should take confidence that they are not condemned by God for mistakes, nor should they condemn themselves.

Finally, I want to highlight just a few practical inferences from what we have been considering.

First ... you may have done numerous things wrong in your life prior to this moment right now. You may have made more mistakes in your life than there are grains of sand on the beach. But you can be sure, that as you are born anew of the Spirit, all that you have done wrong in the past is swallowed up in the great love of God and the sacrifice of Christ, and is remembered no

more. You have no more reason to fear, but you have great reason to rejoice in God and to give thanks for the mercy of the Lord.

You may say each week, I have again failed to live according to the perfect will of God. It is good that you can come before God and this community and name that you have failed. But it is also good that you come and claim that in the great love of God, you have been given a new life, empowered by the Spirit, washed of all your sin. So stand fast in the freedom of Christ who has made you free, once more freeing you from the power of sin, of *guilt, and the punishment of it*.

Secondly, maintain your focus on Christ. Do not think that because you were faithful before, that you are forever forgiven for future sin. The work of God does not fail because of the passing of time, and so the work of the disciple should also stay focused on faithfulness. Cry out to God in your times of temptations and in your times of wrongdoing. Let the Spirit of God fill you with true love and goodness, that you may maintain a focus on God's love in all you do.

Thirdly, knowing that we have a bent toward giving in to sin, don't think you are incapable of sin. But pray continually to God, saying, *Show me, as my soul can bear, the places where sin is tempting me*. Humble yourself before God and acknowledge that it is God's mercy that allows us find new life in God's love. Keep going to God to help you stay focused on the goodness of the Lord and to continually turn from the sinful temptations that lie within your heart. Maintain the work of faith, and the faithful Lord will continue to be present as promised.

Fourth, knowing you are not condemned by God for mistakes or accidents, do not let the evil one convince you of personal condemnation. Trust in the joy of the Lord who is the giver of all good things, of mercy and of forgiveness. Do not let yourself be convinced of self condemnation when God has so clearly offered forgiveness.

Finally, know that it is the Lord who offers grace. We will all make mistakes. We will all fail from time to time to uphold the true love of God. Pour out your heart before the Lord, and confess where you have trouble, and pray that God might establish true love in your life that you might be strengthened in the way that leads to everlasting life. Know that in Christ you are not condemned, but raised to new life. Give your life to God, and know that in your love of Christ, the mercy of God holds you in perfect love through Christ. And as you call on the Lord and receive the great love of God, *wait in peace for that hour, when the God of peace shall sanctify thee wholly, so that [your] whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

For the glory of God, we give thanks for the great forgiving love of our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas C. Oden. *John Wesley's Teachings: Volume 2, Christ and Salvation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*