

The Liberating Law of the Spirit of Life

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the vital role of the Holy Spirit in experiencing justification and living a life free from condemnation through faith in Christ.

Duration: 26:51

Scripture: Romans 8:1, Romans 14:23, Galatians 3:2

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Justification"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses various aspects of biblical truth that are essential for leading a life according to Jesus' teachings. The first topic addressed is the essence of sin, emphasizing that anything not done in faith is considered sin. The second topic is the final judgment, exploring who will be judged and the consequences of either wrath and fury or eternal life. The third topic is the foundation of the gospel, highlighting that God justifies the ungodly through the death of Christ for our sins. The speaker also emphasizes the importance of a lifetime of faith, stating that we are justified by a life of belief in the promises of God. The sermon concludes by emphasizing the liberating power of the Holy Spirit, which frees us from the law of sin and death and leads to sanctification and eternal life.

Transcript

We've come now to a fourth part in our five-part series of messages dealing with aspects of biblical truth which I think we have to know in order to lead the life Jesus has called us to. First, we talked about the essence of sin from Romans 14, 23. Whatever is not from faith is sin.

Secondly, we talked about the final judgment. Who will be judged, on what basis, and what are the alternatives? Wrath and fury or eternal life. Third, we talked about the foundation for the gospel, the good news.

The good news is that God acquits the guilty. He justifies the ungodly. The foundation is the death of Christ for our sins.

Christ, who suffered so much to the glory of the Father, that he brought enough honor to God that God can now seem to be righteous, even though he is passing over sins which have belittled and defamed his glory. But now we have to make another crucial step in this process. And I'd like to make it in Romans 8, verses 1 and 2. Justification is an act of God, not man.

It's an act that happens outside ourselves on the basis of a transaction that happened outside ourselves. Nevertheless, even though justification happens outside ourselves, and even though it's based on a transaction that is outside ourselves in history, something has to happen inside ourselves in order for us to benefit from what comes from God's justification. The death of Christ did not take away the wrath of God from every person.

Not everybody is justified. In order to benefit from the work of God outside us, we must also experience the work of God within us by the Holy Spirit. And that's the topic this morning.

What is that work and how is it related to justification? And the text is Romans 8, verses 1 and 2, Romans 8, 1. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No condemnation. I wonder what you would put on a list if I asked you, list for me all the things you can think of that bring you the most tension, pressure, anxieties, and depression.

List them out. What are the things that make you feel like it's just not worth getting up in the morning? Or the things that make the prospect of life going on as it is now very unappealing? Now I don't know what that list would look like for every person, but I know this. If you were to add to your list this, namely a constant or repeated sense of guilt before God and fear of His constant displeasure, then life would be almost unlivable, wouldn't it? I think we've experienced enough of that to know that it would be.

Guilt paralyzes us and creates suicidal tendencies. If that's true, then the phrase, no condemnation, are the most beautiful words in the world. Come in off the ledge, there's no condemnation.

Rise up off your bed of dismay, there's no condemnation. Those are beautiful words, words that I want very much for this church, for my family and for myself. But are they addressed to me? Are they addressed to you? That's a very important question.

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. It can be said of no one else, for everyone else there is condemnation. Who are those who are in Christ Jesus? What does that phrase mean? Verses 9 and 10 of Romans 8 begin to answer the question.

Notice as we read these two verses that the Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ and Christ are simply interchangeable. You are not in the flesh. You are in the Spirit.

If the Spirit of God really dwells in you, anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. It's evident from those two verses that the Spirit of God is one with the Spirit of Christ.

There are not two spirits. There is one Spirit and He is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. And therefore when we have the Spirit, we have the Father and the Son by the Spirit.

But now Romans 8.1 says that some are in Christ. Whereas verse 10 talked about those who are inhabited by Christ, that is, in verse one, Christ enfolds us in verse 10, we enfold Christ. Is there a difference? Verse nine, I think, is written to make plain that there is no difference between these two ways of talking, two ways of describing our relationship to God.

You are in the Spirit if the Spirit really dwells in you. It would follow then, wouldn't it, to say that you are in Christ if Christ or the Spirit of Christ is really in you. Therefore, the first thing we can say about who those are in Romans chapter eight, verse one, is that they are people in whom the Spirit of God and of Christ

really dwells.

To be in Christ Jesus is to be so related to Him that the acquittal He purchased on the cross now becomes ours. And what the verses make plain is that only those who have the Spirit of Christ can lay claim to that acquittal and say that there is no condemnation for them. There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

That is no condemnation to those in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells. Now, this understanding of verse one is confirmed for us in verses 13 and 14. Notice what verse 13 says.

If you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. Now, the life and the death spoken of in verse 13 are eternal life and eternal death.

But what is eternal life? But the words no condemnation. And what is eternal death? But the opposite condemnation. And therefore, I think it's plain that what verse 13 is saying, that unless the Holy Spirit is ruling in the life, overcoming our sinful tendencies, we cannot lay claim to no condemnation or the hope of eternal life.

And that confirms verse one, that it means no condemnation is for those who are in Christ. That is, in whom Christ Jesus dwells mightily by his Holy Spirit. Verse 14 says the same thing in different words.

All who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God, nobody else. Verse nine had said negatively, anyone who does not have the spirit of Christ doesn't belong to him. Now, verse 14 gives the positive counterpart.

All who are led by the Holy Spirit are the sons of God to be adopted into God's family as a son means surely to pass from death into life, from condemnation into no condemnation. But that would mean then that the adoption that we receive by the Holy Spirit is a criteria for whether or not we can lay claim to the phrase no condemnation for ourselves. It is clear, therefore, from verses 9, 10, 13 and 14, that those of whom it can be said no condemnation for you are people in whom the spirit of God dwells or more specifically and more radically, the people in whom the spirit of God is putting to death the deeds of the body or in whom the spirit of God is the leader.

Verse 14. Now we're ready for verse two to hear it for all that it's worth and its full force and its connection with verse one. Paul signals with the little word for at the beginning of verse two that he means to give in Romans eight to a basis or a foundation for verse one.

He is answering the question, why is it that only those who are in Christ have no condemnation? And he answers, because the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. The liberating law of the life giving spirit has freed us from the enslaving law of death giving sin. Now the term law in verse two of Romans eight does not mean a written code.

It doesn't refer to the Old Testament law, at least not primarily. It refers rather to the authority or the power of the spirit or the authority or the power of sin, so that when it says the law of the spirit of life, it means the authority and power of the spirit who gives life. And when it says the law of the sin and death, it means the authority and power of sin in our lives.

We can see this if we look back up into the previous chapter, verses twenty one to twenty five of Romans seven, which says Paul here lamenting his own imperfections. So I find it to be a law that even when I want to do right, there lies close at hand evil, for I delight in the law of God in my inmost self. But I see in

my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive.

Notice the phrase to the law of sin, which dwells in my members. Now, we can see from that little phrase that the law of sin is not the Old Testament or a written code because it dwells in his members. It's the power and the authority of sin.

And now he continues with his holy rebellion against his own sinfulness. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. So then I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh, I serve the law of sin.

I conclude, therefore, that the law of sin and death in verse two of chapter eight is the power and the authority of sin. In the life. Which is ruled by the flesh rather than dominated by God's authority.

Now, the flesh is that old nature that we have that hates to rely on mercy and wants to do its own thing and refuses to delight in God's ways. And you remember, verse 13 of chapter eight said those who live by the flesh will die, which is why the little phrase law of sin in chapter seven now becomes the law of sin and death in chapter eight. Because if one is dominated by that law or that power and authority, he will die.

But he need not die. We need not be in that category. For as verse two says, the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed us from the law of sin and of death.

God is omnipotent and his spirit is a spirit of power and authority. He transforms and renews the mind. He sanctifies the heart.

He liberates us from the law of sin and death. But the relationship between verses two and one of Romans eight show that without that liberating power of the spirit at work in our lives, there will be condemnation rather than no condemnation. Notice, by way of confirmation, how Romans six verses 20 to 22 teaches exactly the same thing with different words, only slightly different.

Romans 6 20. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what return did you get from those things of which you're now ashamed? The end of those things is death.

Now, that's a picture, isn't it, of the law of sin and death. But now that you have been set free from sin, now there's Romans eight to the liberating law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus frees from the law of sin and death. Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, which is just another way of saying are led by the Holy Spirit.

The return you get is sanctification and it's in eternal life. Or to paraphrase, the return you get from being freed from the law of sin and death and being ruled by the spirit of life is sanctification and it's in no condemnation. The logic of Romans 8 1 and 2 is exactly the same as the logic of Romans 6 22.

Those who can count on eternal life, those who can say of themselves no condemnation are only those in whom the Holy Spirit reigns to liberate us from the law of sin and death. As many as are led by the spirit, these are the sons of God and nobody else. Now, I want to step back for a moment and make sure that you really understand what I'm saying because it is not very often said this way.

There is a real sense in which our justification depends on our sanctification, which is just reversed from the way it's usually taught. There is a sense in which whether or not we are acquitted by God in his courtroom depends on whether the liberating law of the spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and

death. But how in the world can that be? Romans 5 1, we have been justified by faith.

How then can I say the past sentence of no condemnation is now somehow dependent on the present process of sanctification? And how can I say that to experience justification, one must not only have faith in Christ as savior, but also have the mighty Holy Spirit reigning in his life, overcoming the law of sin and death? Now, to answer those two questions, I need to make two more observations from the New Testament. Number one, the faith which justifies is not the single act of faith of accepting Jesus Christ. It is a life of faith, not a single decision of faith which justifies.

The faith by which we are justified is an ongoing life of faith, and that can be shown easily from the New Testament. Look at Romans 4 and James 2, don't look it up, but you can look at it later. When you read Romans 4 and James 2, here's what you find.

You find Abraham, and what you find about Abraham is that Abraham believed God and his faith was counted to him for righteousness. He was justified by his faith. But then you look a little more closely and you know what you find? You find that the illustrations that Paul and James use in Romans 4 and James 2 for that faith are not the act of faith when he left Ur and believed God to follow him to Canaan.

It's also the act of faith in Genesis 15, where God promises him, you're going to have a son by your own wife and he's going to be the heir, and he believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. And it's also Genesis 22, where he offered up his son Isaac and was about to kill him, and that too was the faith by which he was justified. Abraham was not justified by that first single act of accepting God as his leader.

He was justified by a lifetime of belief in the promises of God. And now Paul, therefore, says in Colossians chapter 1, verses 21 to 23, listen to this carefully. You who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before God, if indeed you remain in the faith, stable, steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel, or as he says in 1 Corinthians 15, 1 and 2, I preach to you the gospel which you received, and that's usually the one we focus on, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast, unless you believed in vain.

We are justified not merely by one single act of faith at an invitation, we are justified by a life of faith or not at all. That's the first observation. Second, the coming of the Holy Spirit into the life of a person and the reigning of that Holy Spirit to overcome the law of sin and death always accompanies genuine faith.

We learn this from Galatians chapter 3, verses 2 through 5. Paul asks a series of questions here which he expects the answer to be obvious to. I think they are. Let me ask you only this, did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish, having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so many things in vain? If it really is in vain, does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, do so by works of law or by the hearing of faith? And the answer is clear, not by works of the law, but by the hearing of faith.

It is faith by which we receive the Holy Spirit. It is faith by which the Holy Spirit reigns in our lives to overcome the power of sin and death. And wherever you find a person who day by day is putting his confidence in the promises of God, there you find a person in whom the law of the Spirit of life is liberating him from the law of sin and death.

To live by faith and to live by the power of the Holy Spirit are not two things, but one thing. They are the same thing viewed from different angles. Paul says in Romans 8, 14, all who are led by the Holy Spirit are the sons of God.

John says in chapter 1, verse 12, as many as received Christ, to them gave he the power to become sons of God, as many as believed on him. In order to be a son of God, we must believe. And in order to be a son of God, we must be led by the Holy Spirit.

And these are not two conditions, they are one condition, because it is by faith that we receive the Holy Spirit and it is by faith that the Holy Spirit reigns in our lives to overcome the power of sin. And now with those two insights, I think we can solve the problem raised earlier. On the one hand, Romans 5, 1 says we're justified by faith.

And on the other hand, Romans 8, 1 and 2 says there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, for in that person, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is freeing or has freed them from the law of sin and death. In other words, freedom from condemnation in Romans 8, 1 and 2 is made contingent upon whether or not the Holy Spirit is freeing us from sin in real life. And these two truths come together in one coherent and powerful condition for justification on the basis of these two observations we've just made.

First, the faith which justifies is not a single act of faith that you can then abandon. It is a life of faith, that's what justifies. And second, the faith which justifies is that by which God supplies us with the Spirit and by which he works liberation within us, so that the two conditions for justification are not two conditions, they are one condition, faith and being led by the Holy Spirit.

And oh, how I hope you grasp what I'm saying and do not commit one of two possible errors. Because this is so important. Salvation hangs on what we do in life, not what we did 20 years ago.

And here are the two possible mistakes that can be made. One person can be saying right now, that is a lot of baloney. All you have to do is accept Jesus as your Savior and it doesn't matter whether the Holy Spirit is reigning in your life, overcoming sin.

The grave danger that that person is committing is threefold. One, he is demeaning and distorting and belittling the nature of faith. Two, he is contradicting Romans 8, 1 and 2 and much of the teaching of Jesus.

And three, and worst of all, he is running the risk of hearing Jesus say on the judgment day, depart from me, you workers of iniquity, I never knew you. There's another mistake that's just as dangerous and maybe more common, I'm not sure. That mistake would be a person who says, oh no, not another legalistic load to carry.

I cannot do it. I've had it up to here with do's and don'ts. The Christian life is impossible, I quit.

That's a possible response to what I'm saying. But wait a minute. You don't want to believe in a Christ who makes no difference in your life.

Who wants a Jesus who is so nothing that all he can produce is a bunch of people who mouth religious platitudes and then go right on thinking, acting and believing the way everybody else in the world believes. We don't want that. Nobody wants a Jesus like that.

But we know we're imperfect people. We still sin. We want the Holy Spirit to reign and give us victory over our sins, but we despair.

Do not let Satan overcome you with counsels of despair because I have not said, the New Testament has not said, and God has not said, you must earn your justification by works. Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by the hearing of faith? And if it was by the hearing of faith, and if you began with the Spirit, don't try to be completed by the flesh, by your own unaided efforts. Remember this.

The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets us free from the law of sin and death, not by works of the law. But by faith, by daily relying on the promises of the gospel.

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