



We have a guest speaker this week, so this means a stand-alone lesson. It will be a little different than we typically do in this situation - we are providing a "lesson" portion to read and then questions based upon it.

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:1

I am a huge fan of courtroom dramas, which probably means I could pass the bar exam. At least you'd think so by how confidently I talk about criminal law and courtroom rules. If you could hear me watching one, you'd think I was watching football. "Aw, come on! Did you look at the evidence!?! That was clearly hearsay!"

But here's a cool thing mentioned in a recent episode: being declared not guilty is not the same thing (even legally) as being declared innocent. In the episode, a criminal defense lawyer was dealing with the fallout in a defendant's life from having to stand trial for a heinous, violent crime. He won the case, was declared not guilty by a jury, and was sent home. He had his moment of utter relief, the cuffs were removed, and he hugged and thanked his lawyers. The crowd cheered. But the next thing he knew, he had no job to go back to and no prospects of getting one. He had no friends. He was probably removed from his HOA board and the PTA. The point was, prison or no, conviction or no, he was still dealing with the accusation as if he may have still been guilty. All the verdict proved to everyone was that he'd hired good lawyers, and the District Attorney didn't have a strong case.

It is not the same, however, if your defense strategy is to find the person who actually committed the crime. Legal dramas like to make this all happen in the courtroom, which is silly but compelling. "It was you, wasn't it, Mrs. Random Witness? You were the one who killed him!!" and everyone gasps. She confesses immediately while on the stand and the gavel bangs ineffectually as the gallery goes wild with frenzy. The charges are dropped, the witness (now looking suddenly very evil) gets hauled away. It's as if the original accusation against the defendant was never made.

When we read the Bible, however, we find a harsh truth: we are guilty. Our sin was our own. The sentence for the crime was inescapable and entirely deserved. There was and is plenty of evidence to convict us and the District Attorney's case is SOLID. The judge is fair. The Law is just. And yet somehow there is still NO condemnation.

Why? Because of the cross of Christ. Because by faith we are in Christ Jesus.

So why was the Law important? Why is no condemnation such a big deal? The Law was given to the Hebrews through Moses, long after the covenant was made with Abraham. These people were chosen and loved, and having just escaped Egypt, they were being formally established and set apart by a law directly from heaven. These laws were for their good in every way – God knows what is best for us, after all, and He chose to tell them the way to live that would allow them to flourish. Not keeping the law carried heavy consequences, which the Hebrews tested again and again.

In time, the Law became deeply significant to them. God told them it was to set them apart, and it did. It governed how they ate and dressed. How they did business and punished crime and cared for slaves. It codified all of their behaviors, effectively formulating their culture. And so it went for centuries.

Imagine, then, when Jesus arrived to speak on behalf of that same God with a message that seemed to set aside that law. The outrage of the teachers of the law, effectively their heritage, has to be at least a little bit understandable. But as our passage continues in verse 2, what Jesus brought sets us free from the “law of sin and death.”

Galatians 3 says, “Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised... Before the way of faith in Christ was available to us, we were placed under guard by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until the way of faith was revealed. Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith. And now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian.” (Gal. 3:19, 23-25 NLT)

Despite the fact that the purpose of the law was to show people how to live, what it does most effectively is show us our weakness and our inability to keep it the law. While the law points to the holiness of God, it also magnifies the failing of our flesh. And that failing ultimately leads only to sin and death.

Romans 8:3 says, “The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son...” (NLT). That is, the law couldn’t save us, it could only serve to highlight the truth of our sinfulness which would ultimately result in our condemnation. So, a stand-in came whose flesh could take on that condemnation in our stead. Jesus, who was the only person to ever live who kept the law perfectly – the only perfect man – received our guilty verdict.

We aren’t, therefore, declared “not guilty.” Instead, the charges are dropped. We are acquitted. The law is satisfied in finding a guilty party, and we walk free. We are made TRULY innocent in the eyes of God.

Getting Started

1. Why do you think it’s so important that we have God’s law? How is it helpful to us?

2. What is the difference between walking “in the flesh” and walking “in the spirit?” Why does that differentiation matter as it applies to following God’s law?

Going Deeper

1. Read Romans 7:7-8:8 to give full context to our passage for this week. How would you summarize this passage in your own words (1-2 sentences)?

2. The Law given to Moses is summarized in Exodus 20-23. It is some heavy reading to do straight through, but worth having an awareness of. Have each person in your group read a portion of this long passage ahead of time and give a 2-3 sentence summary of what it says.

Write your summary here:

3. What does it mean to you that God's law is so detailed and specific about the minutiae of the daily lives of His people?

4. Read Hebrews 12:6-8. What is the difference between "condemnation" and "discipline?" Why is the distinction important for us today?

5. Read Hebrews 7:23-28. How does it make you feel knowing the innocent, perfect Jesus took the punishment you deserved?

Applying the Message

1. Imagine being declared innocent after a long court battle. Walking out into the world as a free person, how would you live your second chance?

2. If we've been saved by God, what standard do we use in order to live for God?