

“No Condemnation”

Sermons on Romans # 19

Texts: Romans 8:1-11; Isaiah 53:7-11

In Romans 7:14-25, Paul describes the Christian’s struggle with indwelling sin. But in Romans 8, Paul speaks of the Christian’s victory over sin. Many see this as a pattern of sanctification. Mature Christians supposedly live in Romans 8 and walk in the Spirit, because they have advanced beyond the struggle of Romans 7:14-25 because they no longer walk in the flesh. However, the contrast between the conditions of Romans 7 and Romans 8 is a contrast between Christians, who walk in the Spirit since they have been set free from sin, death and the condemnation of the law, and non-Christians, who walk in the flesh, remaining bound to sin and death while under the condemnation of the law. This means that the struggle with sin of Romans 7 is a reality for every Christian. But so too is the victory Paul describes in Romans 8.

We now move into the first eleven verses of Romans 8. Paul reminds struggling sinners that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, even in the midst of their struggle with sin, before the apostle goes on to contrast those who walk after the flesh (those “in Adam”) with those who walk in the Spirit (those “in Christ”). As we move into Romans 8, “we find ourselves in a different atmosphere from that in chapter 7. There is still the opposition between good and evil, but the dominant note is that of victory.”¹ It is vital to notice that this is not the believer’s victory over the struggle with sin described in chapter 7. Rather, the victory of which Paul speaks is Christ’s victory over sin, death and the condemnation of the law. Because the Christian has been set free they must struggle with sin, since having been justified they are also in the process of sanctification. Only a freed slave struggles with living like the bond-servant they once were. Someone who has never known freedom from bondage to sin knows nothing of the struggle to live as a freedman.

To properly interpret Romans 8:1-11, we need to place this section of Paul’s argument in its context. This section is the “triumphant conclusion of 5:12-21.” For all those who are “in Christ,” “eternal life replaces the condemnation and death that were the lot of everybody in Adam.”² This is why it is so important to keep the overall structure of Romans 5-8 in view as we work our way through this particular section. Even though we are “in Christ,” we remain in the flesh until death or the resurrection. We all struggle to avoid sinning but we sin anyway. We desire to do what is right but we don’t do it. But we are reminded by Paul that there is, *now* no condemnation for those in Christ. Thus the victory of Romans 8 is not our victory over the struggle with sin. Paul is describing Christ’s victory over sin in which we all now participate because of our union with him.

As we have seen, Paul is a writer who makes a critical point, but then digresses at length to explain what he’s just said, only to return to his original point some verses later. The discussion of the Christian life in Romans 8 as “life in the Spirit,” does not logically follow the previous section of Romans (7:7-25), which was Paul’s digression about the effects of the law and the Christian’s struggle with sin both before and after conversion. Rather, in Romans 8:1, Paul returns to the point he made in Romans 7:6 before he

¹ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 300

² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 471.

digressed to talk about the Christian and the law in verses 7-25.³ Recall that in Romans 7:6, Paul stated: “*But now, having died to what once bound us, we have been released from the law, so that we may serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.*” In chapter 8, Paul explains what it means to live in the new way of the Spirit, in contrast to the old way, “according to law.” Romans 8 is not description of the options available to the Christian—“to walk in the flesh” or “to walk in the Spirit.” Rather, Romans 8:1-11 is a description of the principle [law] of “life in the Spirit,” which is as characteristic of Christian life as is the struggle with sin!

Before we go any farther, I need to issue a caveat of sorts. The opening verses of this chapter are among the most difficult in the New Testament, not only to translate, but to correctly interpret. Not only is the grammar difficult, but there is a significant variation among the Greek manuscripts which underlie verse 1. So, rather than rush through this section and merely skim this material, this morning we will cover the first four verses of Romans 8, before we take a detailed look at the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit in verses 5-11, next time, Lord willing.

The first matter with which we need to deal is the textual variant found in Romans 8:1. The main variation is reflected by the way the NKJV renders this verse, “*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, [and adds the following subjunctive clause] who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*”⁴ Notice, the subjunctive clause—“. . . for those who walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh,” is not found in any of best and oldest Greek manuscripts. This clause is almost certainly a scribal addition made centuries later. The NIV is correct to render the verse simply as: “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*” and to omit the subjunctive clause altogether—“who do not walk . . .” This reading solves a host of theological problems associated with the reading used by the King James and New King James Versions, which include the subjunctive clause, which has greatly contributed to the misreading of this text.

In Romans 8:1, Paul returns to the thought broken off in Romans 7:6. What follows is the explanation of what it means to be released from the law so that we might serve God in the Spirit. The “now” (*Therefore, there is now no condemnation*) is placed forward in the sentence for emphasis. Because of Christ’s death for us *in the past*, those who are *presently* in Christ through faith are not under condemnation in the present, even in the midst of the struggle with sin! Condemnation is a forensic [legal] term. The justified sinner faces no such condemnation, now or in the future. We have been declared righteous because the righteousness of Jesus Christ has been imputed to us through the means of faith. Thus the struggling sinner of Romans 7:14-25 is not under condemnation, despite the struggle! In fact, Paul will go on to say later in chapter 8 that all those struggling with sin are also more than conquerors through Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us (cf. Romans 8:37). Paul’s point is that Christ bore on the cross that condemnation which we deserve because of our repeated violations of God’s law. Since we are no longer under the law’s curse, we are now free to live in a new way, “according to the Spirit,” which Paul will now go on to explain in some detail in the balance of the

³ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.372,

⁴ According to Metzger’s Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, the variant reading is found only in the Byzantine family of manuscripts underlying the Received Text and the KJV. But the older and more reliable manuscript families, the Western and Alexandrian texts, all have the shorter reading. The UBS^{3rd} editors rate the shorter variant an “A,” and it is clear that someone’s interpolation eventually made its way into the Byzantine text.

chapter. It is interesting, that there are no imperatives here, only indicative statements describing what believers are in Jesus Christ.

In verse 2, Paul explains why there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, “*because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death,*” a reiteration of Romans 7:6. What follows, then, is the explanation of what was stated previously. There is now no condemnation for those who are presently in Christ, *because* through Jesus Christ, the law of the Spirit of life sets us free from the law of sin and death. “There is no condemnation because of what Christ has done in freeing people from what the law condemns.”⁵

Admittedly, this is a very difficult sentence and a number of exegetical questions are raised here by Paul’s way of speaking. There are three main issues to be dealt with.⁶ First, what does Paul mean by the expression “the law”? Do we take it in its usual sense of the decalogue or in the sense of a “principle” as we saw in Romans 7:21-23. Second, is the phrase “of life” dependent upon “the Spirit,” or upon the law? Does life come from the Spirit, or from the “nomos” principle? Third, is “in Christ” to be taken with “the law,” “being set free,” or with “the Spirit of life?”

Let’s take the third question first. Taking “in Christ,” with the verb, “to be set free,” is the most natural reading.⁷ This would mean that “in Christ, we are set free from the law of sin and death.” To be “in Christ” is the equivalent of possessing “life in the Spirit.”⁸ For Paul it is an “either/or” prospect here. To be in Christ is to possess all of his saving benefits—not just some. We are free from sin, death and the condemnation of the law. To be in Christ is to indwelt by the Holy Spirit and have life—something the law could never give to sinners because we do not obey and therefore come under its curse.

In answering the first question, regarding the meaning of the term “*nomos*,” the term “law” should be probably be used in the sense of a “principle” as it was already used in Romans 7:23, 25, where Paul speaks of “*another law*,” and “*a law of sin*.”⁹ Since Paul tells us in the very next verse that **the** law (clearly a reference to the commandments) cannot set us free, this reinforces the argument that Paul is

⁵ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 300.

⁶ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.374.

⁷ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.374-375.

⁸ Morris notes the difficulties but wisely concludes: “whichever way we take it, the believer was freed (the aorist points to a decisive act) from *the law of sin* (cf. 7:23, 25) and *death* (cf. 7:10-11, 13). The last word is not with sin or with death. While believers are not sinless, they have real liberation in Christ (cf. 6:18, 22).” Cf. Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 301.

⁹ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.375. Thomas Schreiner disagrees, seeing this as indeed referring to the law of Moses, which when viewed from the perspective of Adam leads to sin and death because the law cannot be obeyed. But, in Christ, “the Spirit has been given to enable God’s people to keep the Torah”(Schreiner, Romans, pp. 399 ff). While this is part of what is entailed by Paul’s notion of being “raised with Christ,” and “living in the Spirit,” this does not fit the context here.

speaking of a “principle” here and not the Ten Commandments.¹⁰ Although Paul might be restricting the law of sin to the context of sanctification, in the sense that it is this “principle of sin” which must be controlled for sanctification to occur,¹¹ Paul also speaks here of the law of death, indicating that *nomos* is used in the sense of a principle. To be in Christ is to have “life in the Spirit,” a principle [*nomos*] which stands in direct contrast to the principles [law] of “sin and death,” associated with being in Adam. The key is the contrast between the two Adams, first set out in Romans 5:12-21. Either we are “in Adam” or “in Christ.” If we are in Adam we are subject to the law of sin and the law of death. If we are in Christ, we live according to the principle of life “in the Spirit.”

The second question can be easily answered by linking life to the work of the Spirit, and not to the principle itself [*nomos*]. But *if* we are correct about this, an important question arises which must be answered by those who take Romans 7:14-25 to be referring to the Apostle’s post-conversion experience of a struggle with sin. One writer frames the issue quite clearly: “Verse 2 then, as we understand it, states that God’s gift of His Spirit to believers, by which His [i.e., the Spirit’s] authority and constraint have been brought to bear in their lives, has freed them from the authority and control of sin. But how is this confident affirmation to be understood alongside of 7:14b [I am sold as a slave to sin] 23 [a law of sin at work . . .] 25 [in the flesh a slave to God’s law]?....How then can the same man be at the same time both a ‘prisoner of sin,’ and the one who is freed from ‘the law of sin and death?’”¹²

This is a good question, and in part, the reason why such outstanding commentators such as Moo and Schreiner take Romans 7:14-25 not as autobiographical, but as describing the experience of the non-Christian Jew, seen through Christian eyes.¹³ The answer is simply that both Romans 7:14b [*I am a slave to sin*] and Romans 8:2 [*I am set free from the law of sin*] are simultaneously true. But how can

¹⁰ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 473 ff.

¹¹ Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 276; Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, pp. 156-157.

¹² Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.377.

¹³ Cranfield’s response to this is helpful. “There are several things which must be said. (1) Both 7:14b etc., and 8:2 are indeed true of the Christian life, and neither is watered down or explained away. (2) While the Christian never in this life escapes entirely from the hold of egotism, that is, of sin, so that even the best things he does are always marred by its corruption, and any impression of having attained a perfect freedom is but an illusion, itself the expression of that same egotism, there is a vast difference between the ways in which the believer and the unbeliever are prisoners of the law of sin—a difference which fully warrants, we believe the [“are set free”] of 8:2. The believer is no longer an unresisting, or only ineffectually resisting, slave, nor is he one who fondly imagines that his bondage is emancipation. In him a constraint even stronger than that of sin is already at work, which gives him both an inner freedom [“in my inner being I delight in God’s law”] and also enables to revolt against the usurper sin with a real measure of effectiveness. He has received the gift of the freedom to fight back manfully. (3) The present effectiveness of the authority of the Spirit in those who are in Christ is the pledge of their future complete freedom from the authority of sin. Between the pressure still exerted on their lives by sin, to which 7:14b . . . bear witness, and the pressure exerted by the Holy Spirit, to which 8:1 testifies: The former is destined to pass away, the latter to be fully realized hereafter” (Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.377-378).

this be? The answer is found by placing this assertion in the context of the eschatological categories set out by the apostle in Romans 5:12-21. When viewed from this perspective, Paul's discussion of sanctification in chapters 6-8 is not as difficult. In Adam, we are subject to the law of sin and death. In Christ, we have life and the Spirit and are presently under no condemnation, even though we still struggle with sin. Eschatologically speaking, we are now in Christ and possess all of his saving benefits through faith alone. We have life in the Spirit, because we are no longer bound by sin, the law and death. But this side of our death or the second coming of Jesus Christ, we nevertheless still remain [*sarx*], even though we are no longer under the dominion of Adam. We are continually subject to the pull of indwelling sin, the remnants of what we were in Adam, or what some call the *habitus* [habitual behavior] of what we once were—slaves to sin. But our sanctification entails that we stop thinking and acting like what we were. This is the struggle with sin Paul has just described in the previous verses.

In verse 3, Paul explains the preceding statement," i.e., "*through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*" The use of [γὰρ] "through" to open the sentence clearly indicates the connection between the statement found in verse 2, regarding the law of the Spirit doing what the law of sin and death could not do, and the reason why this is the case, which is now set forth in verses 3-4. According to one writer, "It is what God did in Christ that brings about the liberation of which Paul has just been speaking."¹⁴ This is the critical point. In his grace and mercy, God does the very thing for us that we could not do for ourselves. He freely provides us with the means of delivering us from the law of sin and death through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The principle [law] of "life in the Spirit" sets me free from the principles [law] of sin and death.

The expression translated in the NIV as "*what the law was powerless to do,*" is a very difficult phrase to translate.¹⁵ Paul's point is that the law (i.e., the commandments) cannot set us free from the principle [law] of sin and death. Rather, this act of being set free occurs only through Jesus Christ (the principle of life in the Spirit). The sense is simply this: "what the commandments cannot do—set us from the law of sin and death—God does in Jesus Christ through life in the Spirit." The focus is solely upon God's saving act, since we were powerless to do anything about our situation. There is a compelling case for monergism to be made here though it is easy to overlook it. What we couldn't do, God did!

The reason given for this deplorable situation is seen in the next clause. It was not the failure of the law. The law "*was weakened by the sinful nature,*" or the flesh. The problem does not lie with God, nor with his law which is a revelation of his holy and righteous will. The problem is that human sinfulness prevents us from obeying the law. Hence, the law does not bring life, but only sin and death, since we now fall under the curse as law-breakers. We are subject to death. Notice that Paul does not state that the flesh is evil, but only that the flesh is weakened by sin so that we do not obey the law. We are not under the principle of sin and death because we have bodies which make us sin. Rather, says Paul, because of human sinfulness (the flesh), we cannot obey the law because we are weak. Therefore, we come under the curse, which is the principle or "law" of sin and death. But the story does not end here!

For what the law could not do even though it is holy, righteous and good, and even though the flesh could not obey it because of human sinfulness, Paul says, "*God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of*

¹⁴ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 301-302.

¹⁵ Cranfield argues this can be translated as "what was impossible for the law." Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.378.

sinful man to be a sin offering.” What is lost to us in English translations is the emphatic nature of this declaration in Greek—“God sent His own Son.”¹⁶ As one writer puts it, “he is the Son by nature, as we are sons by grace.”¹⁷ To conquer this principle of sin and death, which the law and the flesh could not do, God sent his own unique Son to do, sending him, “*in the likeness of sinful man,*” a phrase which requires some explanation and qualification, since this appears to stand in conflict with the clear teaching of the New Testament that Jesus was without sin, both original and actual.

There are a couple of things here of which we must take note. First, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul clearly teaches the sinlessness of Christ—“*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” Unless he is contradicting himself here—not an option—whatever Paul means by “*likeness of sinful man*” cannot be taken to mean that Jesus had a sinful nature, or that Jesus actually sinned. Second, we cannot take this to mean that Jesus only appeared “to be a man,” for that is to fall into the heresy of docetism—Jesus appeared as a human. There are several ways to handle this.¹⁸

For one thing, the term *homoioima* [“likeness”] might imply a reservation on Paul’s part about identifying Christ with “sinful” flesh, since to do so would make Jesus subject to the covenant curses and original sin.¹⁹ Jesus voluntarily placed himself under the law and the covenant of works. He was not born with original sin, or guilt for Adam’s sin. Notice that Paul does not say that Jesus *became* sinful flesh, only that he took on the “likeness” of sinful flesh, which, as some have pointed out, certainly should prevent Paul’s reader from letting the adjective “sinful” somehow overshadow the reality of the fact that God sent his Son to become flesh to save us from our sins. Paul states that Jesus truly became human [flesh] and exposed himself to the power of sin, and yet that he never was personally guilty for either original or actual sin—hence “likeness,” not that God sent Jesus “as” sinful flesh.²⁰ It may be as simple as the fact that Paul is not giving us an exhaustive treatment here of the incarnation at all; rather the apostle is

¹⁶ This “was no remote messenger that God sent, but the Son who stood in unique relation to him.” Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 302.

¹⁷ Cited in Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 302.

¹⁸ Cranfield suggests one possible solution—“that the intention behind the use of [*homoioima*] “likeness” here (cf. Its use in Phil 2.7, where there is no specific mention of sin) was to take account of the fact that the Son of God was not, in being sent by His Father, changed into a man, but rather assumed human nature while still remaining Himself. On this view, the word *homoioima* does have its sense of ‘likeness’; but the intention is not in any way to call in question or to water down the reality of Christ’s ‘sinful flesh,’ but to draw attention to the fact that, while the Son of God truly assumed ‘sinful flesh,’ He never became ‘sinful flesh’ and nothing more (as a Christian might be described as being), but always remained himself.” Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.381. While this is certainly possible, it is not fully satisfactory, in that it leaves Jesus open to the charge of original guilt.

¹⁹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 479. Cranfield, with his sympathies to Barth’s view duly noted, is content to leave the paradox stand, simply going on to say, we “understand Paul’s thought to be that the Son of God assumed the selfsame fallen human nature that is ours, but that in His case that fallen human nature was never the whole of him—He never ceased to be the eternal Son of God” (Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.381-382).

²⁰ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 479.

talking about the way in which Christ saved us through his death. Jesus became sinful flesh through the imputation of the guilt of sinners to him, “for sins.” In other words, Jesus being in the “likeness” of sinful flesh, has to do with this sending forth by God “for sin.”²¹ These are both very plausible solutions.

In the next clause of verse 3, Paul goes on to spell out the purpose for God sending Christ in the likeness of sinful flesh, “*to be a sin offering.*” But once again, there are difficulties in translating the phrase.²² The NIV interprets Paul instead of simply translating what Paul says. The NASB puts the phrase in italics. The sense is that “God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, for sins,” so that . . . with the explanation coming in the final clause . . . “*he condemned sin in sinful man.*” According to Leon Morris, “When God sent his Son in this way, Paul says, he ‘condemned sin in the flesh.’ We should take ‘in the flesh’ with ‘condemned’ rather than with ‘sin’; we are not to think that ‘sin in the flesh’ is condemned and other sin is not. It was what Jesus did ‘in the flesh’ that condemned all sin. Paul is now picturing sin as a litigant in a law court; the verdict goes against sin and sin is condemned.”²³ But there are additional ramifications from Paul’s use of a legal term [“condemned”] which should be pointed out. “‘Condemned here means more than that a form of words goes against it. There is the thought that the condemnation is brought into effect (as when a derelict building is ‘condemned’; it is used no more, and demolition follows.’²⁴ The effects of such divine condemnation should not be overlooked.

But there is evidence that Paul may be indeed referring to the sacrificial system here, because of the apparent connection to the LXX translation “concerning sins” in texts such as Isaiah 53:10 as we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning—“*the Lord makes his life a sin offering,*” and Psalm 40:6, “*sin offerings, you did not require.*” Sin was condemned not because God broke the power of sin over us so that the believer is now free to obey. Rather, at the cross, God executed his once for all judgment upon sin. In Romans 3:25, Paul told us that Jesus was a propitiation for sin, turning aside God’s wrath toward his people. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul speaks of Christ dying in the place of sinners.²⁵ It is because

²¹ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 303.

²² According to Morris, the “NIV depends upon the fact that the expression Paul uses here [“concerning sins”] is the regular translation in [the] LXX of the Hebrew expression for ‘sin offering.’ The NIV may well be correct, but we find nothing in the context that prepares us for anything as specific as this, or indeed a reference to the sacrificial system at all” (Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 303). Cranfield agrees with Morris, noting that “the context does not seem to support the sacrificial interpretation. So it is better to take it in a general sense as indicating that with which the mission of the Son had to do” (Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, I.382.)

²³ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 303. As Cranfield states in this regard, this tells us “where God’s ‘condemnation’ of sin took place. It took place in the flesh, i.e., in Christ’s flesh, Christ’s human nature” (Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, I.382.)

²⁴ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 303.

²⁵ According to Moo, “We can conclude that what Paul must mean is a judicial action that was accomplished through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and that had as its object ‘the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled’ in Christians (v 4a). The focus on sacrifice means that Paul is probably not referring to the ‘overpowering’ of sin through Christ’s incarnation [LaGrange], or to the living ‘condemnation of sin’ represented in Christ’s sinless life [Godet]. Also excluded is the popular

Christ was condemned by God on the cross “as a sin offering,” that sin is likewise condemned in all of those united to Jesus Christ through faith. The edifice remains, but its end is guaranteed.

In verse four, Paul continues to explain the statement regarding Christ’s triumph over the principle of sin and death in verse 2. Paul’s use of a *hina* clause (i.e. cause and effect) here explains why sin is condemned in sinful man— “*in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us.*” Again, this the meaning of this is widely interpreted. John Calvin, Charles Hodge and many early Reformed commentators argue that this notion of righteous requirements being met in us must have to do with justification (the imputation of righteousness), not our own personal observance of the law. This, of course, is true, at least in a certain sense. But most contemporary Reformed commentators do not think that this is what Paul is speaking about here. The context, supposedly, is the new obedience and sanctification, not justification.

According to Morris’s summation of the differences among Reformed interpreters regarding this passage, for Calvin and Hodge, “the thought is that only Christ perfectly met the law’s requirements and that accordingly the reference here must be to him and not to anything the believer does. Justification, not sanctification, is in view. Others, however, argue that Paul is here referring to what happens to the person who is in Christ. Bruce puts it this way: ‘God’s commands have now become God’s enablings’ (so Hendricksen, Lloyd-Jones, Denney, and others [Ridderbos, Murray, Cranfield, Thielman and Schreiner]). Reformed theologians have stressed that justification and sanctification are not to be separated, and it seems that this is what Paul is saying here. In the full sense only Christ has fulfilled all the law’s requirements, but when we are in him we in our measure begin to live the kind of life that God would have us to live. Notice that Paul does not say ‘we fulfill the law’s righteous requirement,’ but that ‘the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us,’ surely pointing to the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Before we came to know Christ we were continually defeated by sin. When we came to know him and to receive the indwelling Holy Spirit we were able to attain a standard we could never reach in our own strength.’”²⁶

This may well be the sense of Paul’s argument, but it raises a nagging question. Is the new obedience perfect (Christ’s active obedience), or are the righteous requirements met by less than perfect obedience (the Spirit working obedience in us)? In support of the latter view, Cranfield believes that Paul is referring to sanctification, not justification, and points out that the background here is the prophecy of the

interpretation according to which Paul means that God in Christ ‘broke the power of’ sin [Murray and Cranfield]. While it fits the context, and may be an implication of what Paul is saying, the view illegitimately eliminates the judicial connotations of ‘condemn.’ The interpretation that best meets the criteria above sees the condemnation of sin to consist in God’s executing his judgement on sin in the atoning death of his Son. As our substitute, Christ ‘was made sin for us,’ (2 Cor. 5:21) and suffered the wrath of God, the judgement of God upon that sin (cf. *hilasterion* in Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13). In doing so, of course we may say that sin’s power was broken, in the sense that Paul pictures sin as a power that holds people in its clutches and brings condemnation to them. In executing the full sentence of condemnation against sin, God effectively removed sin’s ability to ‘dictate terms’ for those who are ‘in Christ.’ (V. 2). The condemnation that our sins deserve has been poured out on Christ, our sin-bearer; that is why, ‘*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*’” Cf. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 480-481.

²⁶ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 303-304.

New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:26 ff.²⁷ Morris agrees and argues that Paul is referring to the fact that while believers remain flesh—ruling out any doctrine of Christian perfection—nevertheless there is genuine progress made toward fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law.²⁸ In other words, through the indwelling Spirit, the believer comes alive to the commandments and begins to live in the new way of the Spirit, so that through the Spirit’s enabling, the believer now meets the righteous requirements of the law. But the nagging question remains—“is anything less than perfect obedience, which all agree cannot occur in this life, ‘fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law.’” If Morris *et. al.* are correct, Paul is indeed talking about the believer fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law, through the means of the indwelling Holy Spirit, as a fruit of the new obedience that is ours in Christ.

But I must buck the modern Reformed consensus, though I do so with fear and trembling. Douglas Moo, makes a compelling case for the traditional Reformed understanding—that Paul is speaking of forensic justification and not the new obedience *per se*. Says Moo: “Some think that Christians, participants in the New Covenant, with the ‘law written on their hearts’ and the Spirit empowering within, fulfill the demand of the law by righteous living. However, while it is true that God’s act in Christ has as one of its intents that we produce ‘fruit’ (cf. 6:15-23; 7:4), and that the law cannot be cavalierly dismissed as of no significance to the Christian life, we do not think that is what Paul is saying here.”²⁹

There are two important reasons why this is the case. “First, the passive verb ‘might be fulfilled’ points not to something that we are to do but to something that is done in and for us. Second, the always imperfect obedience of the law by Christians does not satisfy what is demanded by the logic of this text. The fulfilling of the ‘just decree of the law’ must answer to the inability of the law with which Paul began this sentence (v. 3a). As we have seen, ‘what the law could not do’ is free people from ‘the law of sin and death’—to procure righteousness and life. And it could not do this because ‘the flesh’ prevented people from obeying its precepts (see 8:7 and 7:14-25). The removal of this barrier consists not in the actions of believers, for our obedience always falls short of that perfect obedience required by the law....If, then, the inability of the law is to be overcome without any arbitrary cancellation of the law, it can happen only through a perfect obedience of the law’s demands (cf. 2:13). This, of course, is exactly what Jesus Christ has done. As our substitute, he satisfied the righteous requirements of the law, living a life of perfect submission to God.”³⁰ The point is simply that it is only in Christ’s death and perfect

²⁷ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.384.

²⁸ Says Morris: “The fulfillment in question is ‘in us,’ not in all people, and this is further defined as ‘those who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.’ Paul finds the metaphor of walking congenial as a way of bringing out the steady if unspectacular progress that characterizes the Christian way (cf. 6:4; 1 Cor. 7:17; 2 Cor. 5:7, etc.). The believer does not ‘walk according to the flesh.’ There is, of course, a sense in which he is ‘in the flesh’ (cf. 2 Cor. 10:3), and Paul can go so far as to speak of ‘Christ, according to the flesh’ (9:5). But to live within our horizons bounded by the requirements of this fleshly life is quite another thing, and it is this that Paul has in mind here. The person outside of Christ sees nothing beyond there here and now and, however altruistic he may be, in the end is wrapped up in things he wants or even on which he has set his approval. Not so the Christian. The believer walks *according to the Spirit*” (Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 304).

²⁹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 482-483.

³⁰ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 483.

righteousness are God's righteous requirements satisfied. These righteous requirements cannot be met through our own obedience, which is always imperfect.

Thus, the two main interpretations of this are as follows: One, justification is in view, and this requirement for perfect obedience is met in only Jesus Christ's condemnation for us and not even in Spirit empowered personal observance of the commandments. Two, if personal observance is in view, it has to do with the fact that in Christ we are perfectly righteous and that all works wrought by the Spirit are accepted as perfect in Christ [cf. Ephesians 2:8-10]. But fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law through Spirit enabled living does not require perfect obedience, as the consensus view implies. .

The case for understanding Paul as speaking here of forensic justification is the most plausible in my mind, given the stress upon "righteous requirements." There is no doubt that Paul teaches the new obedience of the believer in Spirit empowered-Christian living in which real obedience to God's commandments is manifest. But do we really want to say that "righteous" requirements are met by less than perfect obedience? I think this is very problematic. Calvin was probably right all along!³¹

But in the midst of our discussion about whether or not Paul is referring to the new obedience here, or to our justification in Christ, it is easy to overlook the significance of the final clause of verse 4 as it relates to Paul's overall doctrine of sanctification, namely, the declaration made about those are in Christ through faith and, "*who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.*" This is where so many go wrong in interpreting the apostle's notion of "walking in the flesh" in contrast "to walking in the Spirit." For Paul, those who "*fulfill the righteous requirements of the law*"—whether that is a reference to the new obedience wrought in all believers through the indwelling Holy Spirit, or whether it is a reference to fulfilling the righteous requirements "in Christ,"—do not live "*according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit!*"

When seen in this light, it is clear that for Paul, the contrast lies between those "*in the flesh,*" i.e., non-Christians, and those "*in the Spirit*" that is, to those "in Christ." This is, therefore, a contrast between Christians and non-Christians, not a contrast between defeated or "carnal" Christians of Romans 7 and victorious or "Spirit-filled" Christians of Romans 8. A Christian does not become a Christian, or stay a Christian, or become a second-level "Spirit-filled" Christian by "*walking according to the Spirit,*" so as to be able to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law, as is commonly taught. This makes the sentence conditional—if we do *x*, then God will do *y*. But the sentence is not conditional!

Rather, Paul is very clear that all Christians fulfill the righteous requirements of the law, "in Christ," even if this is a reference to "new obedience" and not justification. The Christian does *x*, because *y* is true about them. Christians fulfill the righteous requirements of the law, because, unlike non-Christians,

³¹ Nygren sums this up well. "When we are `in Christ,' the law's positive purpose, its *dikaioma*, is fulfilled not in us, not by our keeping the law, but through Christ, and by the fact that we `are in Him.' Here we see the consequences of what Paul said in chapter 7, that Christ does not merely give us the power to fulfill the demands of righteousness, but that he is Himself our righteousness. He `is the righteousness from God' which, by faith, becomes our righteousness. They who are `in Christ' are by that very fact righteous, and not by a keeping of the law made possible by that fact. Their righteousness consists in the fact, pure and simple, that they no longer live of themselves but `are in Christ.' *Therein, and not through any keeping of the law is the dikaioma of the law fulfilled*' (Nygren, Commentary on Romans, pp. 319-320).

they are “in Christ” who bore their condemnation. Such people do not walk after the flesh, they walk according to the Spirit because they are “in Christ.” Paul is not saying that *if* we walk in the Spirit we *will* fulfill the righteous requirements of the law. But Paul does say that all Christians do fulfill the righteous requirements of the law because Christ fulfilled those requirements for us and that because we are indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit, we live according to the principle of life, not the principle of death and sin.

And what message does the struggling sinner of Romans 7 need to hear to press on with the struggle? That there is now no condemnation for those in Christ, that we have been set free from the principles of sin and death, that the commandments no longer condemn us, because Christ was condemned for us. Because of our union with Christ, we do indeed walking according to the Spirit and not the old way of servitude to law, sin and death. Thus, even though we must struggle with sin because we are in Christ, he has already ensured through his own obedience and death, that in us, the righteous requirements of the law, have already been fulfilled.