

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,<sup>2</sup> because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.<sup>3</sup> For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man,<sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.<sup>6</sup> The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;<sup>7</sup> the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.<sup>8</sup> Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.<sup>9</sup> You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.<sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. (Romans 8:1-10)*

### **The Gospel is the Power of God**

Have you ever wasted your breath? Maybe you're somebody's supervisor and you sat down with that person and explained to them what they were doing wrong, but they didn't listen and eventually they paid the price. Or maybe you had a relative or a friend who was making bad choices and you tried to get them to see that, but you might as well have kept your mouth shut for all the good it did. Have you had an experience like that? It's frustrating, isn't it? And because that's true, we can come to the conclusion that talking to people is a waste of time. What good does it ever do? Talking doesn't change anything. It's just so much hot air. That makes the way God set up his Church boggle the mind. Because talking is at the heart of all that we do. In so many different situations, my job is to talk to people. And, quite frankly, it may seem like either I'm not doing a very good job or the method itself is flawed. I've been here for almost five years now, and what has changed? We still aren't filling the pews to overflowing. We still can't pay for everything we'd like to. What good does all this talking do? The miracle of God's Word is that he takes something that anybody can do, something that so often is weak and worthless, and he makes it the most powerful force on earth. My friends, **the gospel is the power of God.**

#### **I.**

At its heart, the gospel is words. It's a message that God sends us to proclaim. It's the story of how God reached down from heaven and saved us from what our own sins deserve. This morning in our epistle lesson, St. Paul meditates on the impact that message has on us. **The gospel is the power of God to save us.**

When I was in the army, I got arrested once. Now, don't be too shocked, it was no where near as terrible as that sounds. I borrowed somebody's motor scooter and got stopped because the brake lights weren't working. The cop gave me a ticket that required the repair to be made within x number of days. The owner never did it. After a couple of months, an arrest warrant showed up on the first sergeant's desk and I had to go to court to deal with it. Now, it was no big deal. But I was 19 and I was pretty scared. When I – and the owner of the vehicle – explained the situation to the judge and he assessed a small fine and sent me on my way, I had an incredible feeling of relief. Imagine how much greater that feeling would've been if I had been charged with a serious crime. Imagine if I were actually guilty of that crime and I was looking at serious time, and then the judge ruled that I was not guilty. That's what St. Paul is talking about this morning. He says, "**...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**" No guilty verdict exists for believers in Jesus.

In the chapter before this statement, Paul says that the good that he wants to do, he doesn't do. But the evil that he wants to turn away from, he keeps on doing and doing and doing. Does that sound familiar? Have you ever struggled with some sin that plagued your conscience, something that you desperately wanted to be free from, and you just kept falling into that sin over and over again? St. Paul cried out, "**Who will rescue me from this body of death?**" How many times don't we wish to be rescued from our own sin and weakness? But then he gives thanks to God for victory through Jesus. He says, "**...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**" Even though we keep committing the same sins over and over again and God should just send us to hell, he finds us not guilty in his court because of Jesus.

Paul says that through Jesus Christ the law of the Spirit has set us free from the law of sin and death. In this verse, the law of the Spirit and the law of sin and death do not mean the Ten Commandments. They mean rather the general way that those things work. The law of sin and death condemns us. We're all guilty. But the law of the Spirit, the way the Holy Spirit works, sets us free, because he takes what Jesus did and applies it to us. To explain what he means, Paul says that the law – this time he does mean those things that God commands all people to obey – the law was weakened by our sinful nature. The Greek word means simply “flesh.” God’s law is perfect. No better law could ever be written. If a person kept God’s law perfectly, for every second of his life on this earth, he would reach heaven. But of course, we can’t be perfect. In the eyes of our society, you’re all good people. But according to God’s law, we’re all sinners. God’s law was weakened by sin – our sin keeps that law from getting us to heaven. That sin inside us is why we have those sins that we just can’t beat. No matter how good you get, no matter how hard you try to follow God, no matter how fast you flee from temptation, you are still a sinner. You will prove, every single day, that you cannot be perfect. And so will I.

God knew that. So Paul says, **“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.”** Our weakness ruined God’s perfect law. We were too weak and sinful to ever live the perfect life God calls us to live. So what did he do? He sent his own Son to become a real human being and live a perfect life in our place. Jesus came and did that and then he went to the cross. He offered that perfect life as the payment for all of our sin. So when God says that there is now no condemnation he doesn’t mean that God just looks the other way. He doesn’t mean that God lets us off with a warning, like a traffic cop might choose to do. God’s justice demands that we go to hell. And God the Son suffered that punishment for us on the cross. Now, our punishment is over.

## II.

The gospel is nothing more or less than proclaiming that truth. Speaking those words is using the very power of God. Through those words, God saves us from the hell that we so richly deserve. But he doesn’t stop there. God’s power revolutionizes the life we live here. **The gospel is God’s power to change us.**

When I was a missionary in Colombia, I had another traffic incident. Bogota is a large city. It had more than six million inhabitants then. Traffic was difficult. Behind my office, there was this little one way street that led to the road I had to take home. Unfortunately, it ran the wrong way, but so many people used it as a shortcut by going the wrong way, that I got into the habit of cheating on it, too. Well, one day, I got pulled over. When the police officer saw that I was an American living in his country breaking his traffic laws, he got upset. He demanded my identification, my *cedula*. That little ID card stated my occupation – a missionary for a Christian church. He read that out loud, slowly, two or three times. Then he handed the card back to me and said, *“Te perdono.”* “I forgive you.” And he walked away.

You know what? I never cheated on that little street again. Being forgiven has power in our lives. St. Paul draws a sharp contrast today between people who live according to the sinful nature – again the flesh – and those who live according to the Spirit. If you live according the flesh, that is, if you are an unbeliever, you set your mind on the things of the flesh. You care about money and pleasure. You put yourself first. Even in your relationships, you love people who love you or who are attractive to you or who fulfill your needs and desires. But if you live according to the Spirit, if faith is in control of your heart, then you set your mind on the things that the Spirit cares about. You want to come to church. You want to hear about Jesus. And you want to dedicate your life to something more than just your lusts and desires.

Paul says **“The mind of sinful man”** – literally, the mind of flesh – **“is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.”** Our sinful flesh can only lead us to hell. But in Christ, we already begin to live a new life here on this earth and eternal life waiting for us. In Christ, we have peace that no unbeliever can have: the battle to make ourselves the most important person on earth is over. We live for Christ. Paul says, **“The sinful mind”** – the mind of the flesh – **“is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”** We were all born God’s enemies. No unbeliever can truly obey God. No unbeliever can truly please God. Even if that unbeliever is the nicest person you know, even if you’d trust him or her to watch your children, they cannot obey or please God because even their best works flow from pride and sin.

The really scary thing about all this is that we’re supposed to be different. Yet, how often isn’t it true that we do care about money and pleasure and what people think of us? How often don’t we have to admit that

we do care about ourselves first of all? How often aren't we working overtime for ourselves, drowning in a sea of pride and sin? Maybe Paul wasn't talking about us when he talked about the mind controlled by the Spirit?

Well, he says, **"You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you."** Do you trust that Jesus is your Savior? If so, the Spirit of God does live in you. If the Holy Spirit is living in your heart, then you are not controlled by the flesh. You belong to God. That's true no matter how hard it is for us to see past our own sin. It's true no matter how many times we have to cry with St. Paul, **"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"** When God brought the gospel to you, the Holy Spirit moved into your heart and God applied all that Jesus did to you personally. He forgave you. And he recreated you. He put a believer in your heart. On Judgment Day, that believer is all God is going to leave in us.

And that believer is in charge, even though you are a sinner and you will never be perfect in this life. Paul says, **"If Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness."** We are dead and we are alive at the same time. We are sinners and we are saints. We are guilty and we are innocent – the New Man that God put in your heart on the day he gave you faith is holy. But as long as he lives here, he has the Old Man, the flesh, clinging to him like glue. So, day in and day out, we wrestle with sin. We fail, over and over again and we cry out in anguish. And yet, the Holy Spirit keeps on working and changing us. That message of Jesus dying and rising changes us. When we hear it here, the Holy Spirit works. When we take communion, when we remember our baptism, when we confess our sins privately to our pastor and hear God's forgiveness, when we confess our sins to God in prayer and cling to Christ as our Savior, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. He and Christ live in us and they change us.

And so, day by day, we live for Christ. Not perfectly. We will always have to fight against that flesh that clings to us. We have to wage bitter war against our weaknesses – those areas where our flesh is strongest. We may cry out like Paul did. But don't you see? The fact that it hurts shows that we *are* fighting. The fact that we want to live for Christ is a fruit of faith. It's a miracle God is doing in our hearts. And we will continue to grow through his gospel power. We are alive, even while we are dead. The living part of us is more powerful than the dead part. The new creation is our true self. And by the power of God it will change our lives here.

All that happens through words. When it comes to the good news about Jesus, there is no wasted breath. Even when we can't see the changes in ourselves, God is working. Even when we can't feel what good coming to church did for me today, God is working. When we get to heaven, we will see it clearly. While we are here, trust the power he has hidden in the gospel. Amen.