

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.³ 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,⁴ 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.

⁵Those 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.⁶ The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;⁷ the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.⁸ Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

⁹You, 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.¹⁰ 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)

God Comes Through When We Can't

When I was a sophomore in high school, I got a surprising request from one of my teachers. I attended synod schools and we always finished the year with a concert. My teacher asked me to play piano along with my class for one of our songs. That was surprising because I'm not much of a pianist. I had never accompanied someone before. I went to the practice – the day before the concert – and I tried. But I was so nervous and so inept that I couldn't even make it through the piece once. The teacher had to find someone else. We don't always have the skills necessary to do the things people would like us to. Sometimes, we know that we don't stand a chance. Sometimes, we think we might be able to pull it off, but we just don't come through. Some people are so afraid of failure that they never even try. But most of us have had experiences of not coming through when we are supposed to. Even if you haven't had that experience, you have had it spiritually. This morning, we're studying a portion of St. Paul's letter to the Romans. In this chapter, Paul highlights the contrasts between our failures and God's successes. **God comes through when we can't.**

I.

I've always wished that I had worked harder at piano lessons when I was a child. My parents paid for years worth of lessons but I hated practicing so much that I never made any significant progress. So I failed the one time I had a chance to accompany my class. St. Paul focuses on our failure to achieve the most important purpose of this life. We are here to get to heaven. But none of us can get the job done. So God had to take care of it for us. **God comes through when we can't. When our works failed, God saved us.**

Paul begins by saying, **"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** We are not found guilty, we are not sent to hell, because we are "in" Christ Jesus. We have faith in our Savior. He goes on to explain why that's true. He says, **"...because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."** What does he mean by that statement? To understand it, you have to realize that the word "law" has different meanings. If I go to the university and study law, I'm studying the rules that govern our society. That's a little different from a law of nature. In some countries, momentum is the only traffic law that matters because it's self-enforcing. The car will go until something slows it down. Laws of nature are different from the laws of government.

When Paul says that the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death, he's not talking about government laws. The law of the Spirit of life is kind of like a law of nature. It's a force that happens. Someone has suggested that we could translate it here as "control." Maybe that helps you understand what Paul is saying: "The control of the Spirit of life set me free from the control of sin and death." Each one of us was born under the control of sin and death. We will all sin. And every single one of us will finally die. There is nothing we can do to change that. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much effort we put into it, the control of sin and death is absolute. Since God knows that we cannot free ourselves, he set us free from the control of sin by placing us under the control of the Holy Spirit.

One of the difficult teachings of the Bible is the fact that we don't really have a free will. We Americans say that we have free will all the time, but it really isn't true. Now, that doesn't mean we're robots

who do what we're programmed to do. Within certain limits, we do have freedom of choice. We can choose to get married or not. We can choose to show up for church on Sunday or not. We can choose to rob a bank or do drugs or talk back to our parents or not. But every human being is under the control of sin. Sin is always going to lead us to sin. No matter what choices we make, they are all sinful because they all come from hearts that are slaves to sin. That's true even when we do things that seem good and right. The only way that God could set us free from sin is by making us his slaves. Being a servant of God means being free from sin and death.

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 ...”** God's law is good and powerful. It is exactly what God designed it to be. It's supposed to guide us in a life that gives glory to God. Ultimately, if we keep it perfectly, it's supposed to give us eternal life. But God's law has a problem: us. We make it weak, so it cannot accomplish its task. Think of it like this: imagine a rocket scientist lives next door to you. He knows everything there is to know about engineering rockets and designing their computer systems. He wants to build a rocket but he can't buy the parts he needs at Meijer or at Wal-Mart. No matter how hard he tries, no matter how good his design is, a rocket made out of tin foil and car parts just won't get the job done. God's law is perfect. But it works with us sinners – and we're not even good tin foil or new car parts. We're rusted, worthless, flimsy materials. So God's law cannot make us be holy. It cannot earn eternal life for us.

So God stepped in. He sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful man. God did not withhold from us the person who means the most to him. I might send one of my children down the hall to give a message to one of the teachers. But there's no way I would ever ask my children to suffer the way God asked Jesus to suffer. There is no one on earth that I would sacrifice them for. But God sacrificed his Son for us. God asked Jesus to let sinful men nail him to a cross for us. God asked Jesus to suffer even more than that: the true penalty for sin is death and hell. When God abandoned his Son on the cross, he made him suffer hell itself. He asked Jesus to come to this earth, knowing he was going to suffer hell, knowing he would have to lay down his life and die. All for us sinners – all for people who would never have asked him to do it. He even did it for the vast majority of people who don't believe it.

So Jesus came in the likeness of sinful man. He looked like a sinner, but he wasn't. Jesus was a real human being. He never stopped being God, but he became a real human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary. But he never sinned. He was not born as a slave to sin. His heart was pure and perfect. So Jesus lived a life of perfection for us. And he died to pay for our sin. Paul says that **“he condemned sin in sinful man.”** Sin condemns us. Every day of my life, my sin cries out and says, “Punish this sinner!” But Jesus condemned sin. Jesus suffered all that sin deserves and now he sends our sin to hell and leaves us in heaven.

The gospel is all about that miracle. It's all people like us who couldn't get the job done. Some of us have struggled all our lives trying to be “good” and we've failed. Some people give it only a half hearted effort. Some people don't try at all. But we are all alike in failing to be perfect, in failing to reach eternal life. Jesus came through where we couldn't. He won eternal life and he gave it to each and every one of us.

II.

To ask the Lutheran question, what does this mean? Of course, it means that we'll live with Jesus forever. But the life God wants us to have begins already now. The Holy Spirit is working to change us. Going back to that opportunity to play the piano, I simply did not have the skills to do what I was asked to. Imagine how much worse it would be if I were asked to play in a concert with a world class orchestra. I can't do that. I can't live a Christian life either. I can't be holy. But God has stepped in and changed the situation. **God comes through when we can't. When our hearts rebelled, God changed them.**

In these verses, St. Paul shows us the difference between the heart of a believer and that of an unbeliever. Understand, he's not talking about why some people believe and others don't. Before we come to faith, we all have the sinful hearts he describes here. Paul is rather looking at believing and unbelieving hearts and showing how they're different. He says, **“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.”** If your sinful nature is in control of your life, then it controls your heart, too. Your mind will be set on what that sinful nature wants. But if the Spirit is in control of your life, then you think about what God wants. That's the life you want to lead. So what do I focus my mind and heart on? What do I care about? What do I dream about? What do I want? Am I consumed by desires for sexual gratification or for

a richer lifestyle or for popularity? The mind controlled by the Spirit is set on what the Holy Spirit desires. What is my mind set on?

Paul says, **“The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.”** When unbelief rules our hearts, the end is death. These bodies will die because we’re sinners. Without faith, all that we do here is just death warmed over. But when the Spirit is in control, our life ends in heaven, not in hell. We triumph over death. And we live now for God. That is the key difference between a believer and an unbeliever. Paul says, **“The sinful mind is hostile to God.”** That means its God’s enemy. **“It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”** No matter how good people seem to be, no unbeliever wants to do what God wants him to. He is God’s enemy. He cannot submit to God’s law. He is unable to please God. All that he does is sin in God’s eyes.

Where do we stand in all of this? We all have to admit that there is still an unbeliever in our hearts who is God’s enemy. He’s bent on death and destruction. But that is not all there is to say about us. Paul says, **“You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.”** Yes, it is true that all too often, we dwell on the thoughts and desires of our sinful flesh. We need to repent of that sin. But the Holy Spirit came into us through the gospel. God did a miracle and taught us to trust in Jesus who came in the likeness of our sinful flesh and won eternal life for us. Now, the Spirit of God is in control. The Spirit of God is ruling our hearts. The new man is there, even when it doesn’t feel like it, even when it feels like we’re losing the battle. He’s there because God lives in us by faith.

Now, that doesn’t mean that we don’t have to do anything. Paul says, **“But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.”** Our body is dead –we still struggle with sin. It will always be there. It won’t stop dragging us down or waging war against our faith until we see Jesus. Yes, in this life, we are going to be guilty of sin. We are going to see each other be guilty of sin. We may even wrestle with our disappointment over the way that fellow Christians fail to live up to what God says. We may beat ourselves up because we fall so short of what God wants from us. But my friends, the Holy Spirit lives in every believer’s heart. Jesus lives in every believer’s heart. Our spirit – your spirit and my spirit – are alive because of Christ and his righteousness. They wage war against the sin in our hearts. We don’t win every battle. But the war is already won. Our lives here are lives of joy and gratitude. Our commitment to following Christ springs from the love he showed when he reached into us and overcame the sinner inside us. That, my friends, will never change.

We belong to Christ. We are alive. It would’ve taken a miracle for me to accompany my class at that concert. It would take an even greater miracle for us to live the lives that God calls his children to live. That miracle has taken place. Trust what God is doing through his gospel. Live for him. Amen.