

The Spirit Liberates

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Date: 02 November 2025

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[0 : 00] And let's bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for your word.! And we thank you that your word is truth.

! Amen.

So, as you've probably gathered, we are in the middle of a teaching, well, towards the end of a teaching series, about the ministry, life, and work of the Holy Spirit.

And today, we're talking about something which, as I implied earlier, I think has a very kind of contemporary feel for our culture today.

The Spirit liberates. The Spirit sets us free. And I want, by way of introduction, to make three points in relation to my text, which is just the first two verses.

[1 : 20] I wish there were opportunity to give detailed exposition of this whole chapter, but I appreciate you'd like to get your lunch before five o'clock this afternoon.

But these are the most amazing verses. They're not immediately easy to understand, but they are verses which are dense with kind of gospel truth.

There is, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Because through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit, that's the Holy Spirit, who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

It's by way of introduction, I want to say something very obvious to you. And that is, who this promise in particular relates to.

Let me just remind you again, it says, No condemnation for who? For those who are in Christ Jesus. In other words, those who understand and are committed to Jesus' atoning work on the cross of Calvary, have believed that Jesus has been physically raised from the dead, and ascends into heaven.

[2 : 51] And as we were praying together then, the Bible tells us that our prayers go to Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God, and lives to make intercession for us.

We have that privilege. But for this morning, let's just focus on these words about no condemnation. I imagine that in every church gathering, certainly one of this size, there are people whose lives are lived in the rain shadow of disappointment, of guilt, of regret.

Things we think about where we think, if I had my time over again, I would decide differently. Or even more seriously, some of you who live with shame and guilt, because you've not yet discovered the liberating message of the cross of Calvary.

The thing about this verse is, it's almost the gospel in one sentence. There is now no condemnation. Paul was talking about existential condemnation.

That is, what will happen to us at the end of our lives? Will God condemn us? If you have any doubts about that, then I think you need to come back to the cross.

[4 : 21] A little more about that in a moment. But just know for now, this promise is for those who are in Christ. And the good news is, if you don't feel you're in Christ, you can do something about that today.

The second thing is, why is it important? It's important for what I've already hinted at, that too many people in churches, I spent almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, and time and time again, people who really should understand there is no condemnation, actually live in the rain shadow of it.

Their lives are less than they could be. And when the preacher gets in the pulpit, announces his text from John chapter 10, and says, in quoting Jesus, says, I've come that they may have life, and have it in all its fullness.

They sit in church, and just think to themselves, I wish. This is important. On two fronts.

Like a lot of good theology, it has an extra spin-off. But this truth is good on the basis of theology. It's telling us the truth of the outcome of those who respond to the gospel and give their lives to Jesus.

[5 : 48] There is now no condemnation. It doesn't say, there is now not much condemnation. There is now no condemnation.

But it's not just good on a theological front, it's good on a psychological front. For those of you who live in the light of fear and condemnation, for those of you who live in the light, especially in our culture today, of self-condemnation, this is surely good news.

Why, even today, you could be set free from that dull ache of worrying whether or not you are saved and saved for eternity.

And finally, by way of introduction, I just want to say a little word about how freedom is understood in our culture.

I noted your vigorous conversations about identity cards. I mean, a peripheral thing at one level, but the kind of thing that civil liberties people get very exercised about.

[6 : 59] And some of you get exercised about, I could tell by the look on your faces. But freedom is quite a slippery idea.

In our culture, there is a French philosopher called Jean-Jacques Rousseau who wrote in the 18th century. Rousseau was a kind of classic libertarian.

He believed that there should be no imposition. He believed we were all born free and no imposition whatsoever should be put on that other than one.

And that is, we're free to do whatever we want unless it would harm somebody else. I've told you this before, that is a most fatuous argument.

And the reason it's a fatuous argument is you have no idea what impact your behaviour will have on another person. You can't guarantee that. I know that one area that's big for kind of self-condemnation today is the whole issue of parenting.

[8 : 13] I don't want to go into that, but you know, you quickly learn that your children learn far more by your behaviour than they do from your threats.

So, at this end of one scale, you've got Jean-Jacques Rousseau and then you've got a man called Locke.

And, sorry, I don't mean Locke, I mean Thomas Hobbes. And Thomas Hobbes believed that at the other end of the scale, really, that in order to live in a civilised society, Hobbes would have agreed with Rousseau that we're all born free, but he said in order to live in a civilised society, we have to submit some of those freedoms to the state in order that we can live together civilly.

We can't just make it up as we go along. So, Rousseau thought everything was in, Hobbes had a more qualified understanding of it.

and I guess that most of us sit somewhere between the two. If you are a card-carrying libertarian, you'll be near Rousseau than you will be Hobbes.

[9 : 39] But this stuff doesn't really square with the freedom that God offers in Jesus Christ. Christ. The Bible says, if the Son sets you free, the Son, S-O-N, sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Psychologists and theologians are happy to speak and write about our pathological fear of condemnation. those of you who have been involved in counseling ministry will have been exposed to the teaching of Carl Jung.

And Carl Jung, I mean, said a lot of not very good things. But one of the things he fastened onto is this. He talked about our fear of moral condemnation.

He thought that human beings had what he called a shadow side to our personality, which lived in constant fear of condemnation.

Writing a little later, a psychologist called John Bradshaw, quite an influential psychologist, talks about something he called toxic shame.

[11 : 01] I don't know whether you've ever watched it, and I don't think she's a person of faith. But if you want to learn something about shame, go and Google TED, and then Google on the search site on the TED website, Monica Lewinsky, who talks understandably about shame.

That's what John Bradshaw is on about. he's on about that kind of toxic thing that can really wreck your life. And in a way, I think Monica Lewinsky has moved on a bit.

I don't know how she's managed that, but she's moved on a bit from it. But again, some of you will be living today with toxic shame.

Things you've said or done that you kind of can't get past. lost. I was speaking last week in the family church, and a lady came up to me at the end.

She said, could I have your phone number? I'm like, look. You know, women don't normally react to me like that. Here we go, you know.

[12:17] I said, there's any reason for this? She said, I've done something in my life.

She said, I'm in church every Sunday, but I just can't get past it. And then she said, in response to the thing I did, the church really just ignored me.

I can't get past that either. can I fix up to have a conversation with you? I said, yes, sure you can do that, yeah.

And some of you I know, understandably, are a fan of a well-known international speaker now called Brené Brown. And she talks about all the shame business and fear of condemnation.

She talks about the fear of disconnection and moral exposure. In Romans 8, Paul tells us that in Christ there is no condemnation.

[13:31] I have an anxiety that some people sit or lie on the couches of psychotherapists for decades, trying to work out, how am I going to get rid of this baggage that I'm walking through life in?

I think Jesus can heal you in a moment of condemnation and the fear of condemnation.

But it will take a work of the Holy Spirit to do that. God is God. So the theologian Paul Tillich, he talked about the anxiety of condemnation.

This is what he said, the anxiety of condemnation is the awareness of being unacceptable before what he called the source of our being. I don't find that a particularly helpful way of describing God. But nevertheless, he's referring to God. I wonder if there's anyone in the house this morning who just has this awareness of feeling unacceptable.

[14:47] I mean, a lot of Christians who feel unacceptable. In their head they believe the gospel, but in their hearts, you know, just not quite sure about that.

The wonderful news of the gospel is that today you can start to be free. Not just from condemnation, but from the fear of condemnation.

And there is no more existential fear than the fear of condemnation of God. You imagine, you imagine, you might walk through, I think we blocked that door, that door today, free.

free from the fear and the fact of self-condemnation. Wondering whether you are acceptable or not. Listen, if you want to be really free, you need to listen up, because this is a really profound spiritual truth. There is now no condemnation.

[15:57] I mean, I think the spirit frees us in a lot of ways, and maybe they'll come up in other weeks, maybe it has already, but you can be free of thinking that you have to earn your salvation.

I studied for a brief time when I was studying what they call comparative religion.

It was based on a mad idea, frankly, that all religions are equal, and the fact that we're Christians is kind of random, and yeah, just not good.

And so one of the things that amazed me about the other religions I heard of is that they all contain an element of trying to earn their way into the presence of God.

And of course, that inevitably, because we're human beings, leads to a kind of neurosis, and the neurosis is, have I done enough? Have I done enough good in my life to kind of obliterate the stuff that's not so good?

[17:07] It goes back to Tillich, doesn't it? Worrying about our acceptability. And the great news of the gospel is, you don't have to earn your salvation, it's a gospel of grace. Someone say amen.

It's a gospel of God's love shown to you, even though you don't deserve it. that truth in itself would be enough.

I don't have to earn my salvation. And when it comes to that toxic shame that John Bradshaw writes about, you can be free forever from the acute pain of shame.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews wrote these truly reassuring words. He said, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water.

let us hold unswervingly, he said, to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. God doesn't promise this stuff to you and let you down.

[18:31] We've all had that in our lives, haven't we? People who promise us things and then let us down. I've, you know, a couple of times I really, you know, felt let down.

I remember when Antti and I worked on the Scargill community, which it was there to serve the guests who came on house parties and who came, you know, for conferences and stuff.

And we had a very focused purpose, serve the guests. If you have never heard of Scargill, you've probably heard of Lee Abbey, same kind of deal.

And suddenly, there seemed to be a move in the community. People wanted more time off. They wanted not as much time exposing, you know, themselves and their personalities to guests.

And I smelled a rat here. And I talked to several community members. Guess what? They all agreed with me. We get to the vital meeting of the community with the warden and the chair.

[19 : 53] I spoke up thinking I'm going to be on safe ground here. There were 40 people in the room. Do you know how many more people spoke up? Just one more.

And everybody thought he was weird anyway. Life can be messy.

People will let you down but you've got to get past it. Here's the truth. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But there's a painful truth here which, you know, trigger warning, some of you won't like this.

But the implication is surely that if there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, there might be some condemnation for those who are not.

I say that and I almost feel a lump in my throat about my own sister. who, when she was younger, you know, went to church twice a day, taught in a Sunday school.

[21 : 06] I mean, you could almost see the halo on that girl. I was always the one in trouble. She was always the one getting rewards and goodness knows what. And I have no idea what happened to her.

I think, you know, maybe she married a guy who wasn't a Christian. He may have had more influence. But when I say that, there may be some condemnation for some. I don't like the thought of that.

Will some people be eternally condemned? The concept of judgment is avoided in many pulpits, certainly in the Church of England today.

But it's there in Scripture. This is what Jesus said. Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate, and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

But small is the gate, and narrow the road that leads to life. And only a few find it.

[22 : 16] Here's some great news. You can join the few today with certainty. And you can work tirelessly to seek to help others join the few.

I wouldn't dare to kind of put a thermometer, a thermometer, try and read the temperature of many churches. Maybe not even this church, but a lot of churches.

I spent 30 years in peripatetic ministry. And if you said to me, give a score out of 10, 10 being people are really hot for the gospel and seeing lives transformed, and one is, business as usual, I'd have to say, most churches full of nice people, they don't give squat about unsaved people.

And then they expect people like me to stand up at a funeral and try and say stuff that implies they're going to make it home. I think that, you know, the whole business of judgment is God's business.

and I think there will be some surprises in heaven. But the Bible is very, very clear. The Bible's witness is there is only one way to God, and that is through his grace and through faith in Jesus Christ.

[24 : 01] That's the only way I know. And you say to me, what about devout Muslims? I don't know. But I know one way. And it's working for me and for many of you.

The Spirit liberates us, frees us from condemnation. And it frees us from condemnation because it liberates us from the consequences of our sin.

But the Spirit can also liberate you from something that I imagine worries some of you. The Spirit can liberate you from the desire to sin, providing you allow him.

At the beginning of the service, we quoted from 1 John chapter 1, if we say we have no sin, what are we? We're deceived. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. Amen? And then one more thing. And cleanse us from all unrighteousness. God wants to forgive you, but he wants to cleanse you.

[25 : 23] he wants to cleanse you from the very desire to sin. Oh, you know, Israel had the law, and if people could obey the law, that's Paul's point in the rest of Romans, if people could keep all the law, they probably would look fairly righteous, but they couldn't.

Paul says basically, the law as understood by Israel, the Old Testament, the Old Covenant people of God, is like a school teacher. We learn about our sin when we break the law.

In other words, the law's out there trying to change me from out there by my adherence. Whereas the Holy Spirit is trying to change you from the inside out.

You want to be forgiven, that's a great start, but you want to be cleansed. trouble with sin, honestly, quite a lot of it's enjoyable.

I never watched it, but somebody told me about that film, The Exorcist, which is 40 years old now. Apparently, at one point, the poor little girl who's possessed, her head's whirling around at 360 degrees, vomiting green bile everywhere.

[26 : 43] I mean, if that was sin, would you have a problem avoiding it? No. It's the sinful thoughts, the sinful behaviours.

And in Christ, there will be no condemnation because you will be liberated from the consequences of your sin. So, let me end.

This morning, God doesn't want you just to be free of guilt and shame. He wants you to know in the depth of your soul that you are free in Christ.

There is now no condemnation. This morning, the Spirit wants to help to cleanse you from a desire to sin. Those of you struggling with addiction need to hear this.

Those who are struggling with terrible habits need to hear this. He's calling you to repent of your habit, to repent of your repeated failure to come clean and seek the Spirit's help.

[27 : 58] And he doesn't want you just to know freedom in your head, he wants you to feel freedom in your heart. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine it's possible?

Two verses that could change your life, change your mental health, change your spiritual health.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Because God through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit who gives life, has set you free from the law of sin and death.

The end of this service, there are going to be people who've been trained and released to pray with you. If you want to pray through one of these issues, if you truly want to be free, and I would commend you to do it.

Go and see one of them, pray with them. Why? Because if you don't do something before you leave the house this morning, the likelihood is you will do what?

[29 : 09] Nothing. Just go home and say, poor old Mike was off on one this morning. It's not the point.

I'm trying to declare to you humbly and honestly the truth of Romans chapter 8 verse 1. there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Blessed are those who have ears to hear, and blessed are those who believe and are saved. Let us pray.

Would you like to stand up? spirit can set you free.

I'm just going to suggest that in a few moments of silence, as you stand there, just take a few deep breaths. breaths, not too many, because you get dizzy.

[30 : 22] Breathe in, and in your minds, I believe you're breathing in the spirit who will set you free. Let's just do that, let's see a few moments quiet.

Our gracious Father, we're so grateful that in you, in Jesus, there is now no condemnation.

Thank you, Lord. The Spirit of life, the Holy Spirit, wants to come to us this morning for those who have no faith.

The Spirit wants to ignite a spark in you today. For those of you who would clearly say that I have faith, but I'm dogged by shame, I'm dogged by regret, I'm dogged by self-condemnation and fear that I may not be acceptable to you.

Lord, speak a word of grace into their hearts, would you please? God says, I love you. Even though you don't deserve it.

[31 : 46] And the evidence for that is the cross of Calvary. On which the Prince of Glory died.

My riches gained I count but lost, and poor contempt on all my pride. Lord, please don't let our pride stop us from facing the truth about ourselves and doing something about it.

And Lord, help us, those of us who struggle with addictive behaviors, struggle with personalities that could start a row in an empty house.

Lord, thank you. You forgive us from our sin when we turn to you, but Lord, please cleanse us. That our lives might become more like Jesus.

And our church would be different. And our community would be different. And our county would be different. And our nation would be different.

[33 : 04] And the world would learn the truth that in Jesus, there is now no condemnation. Now, no condemnation.

Lord, hear our prayer, we pray. Because we're desperate. Not just to know that truth in our heads, but in our hearts as well.

Come, Holy Spirit, we pray. The people who agreed, joined together and said in a loud and confident voice, Amen.

Amen.