

No Condemnation

July 16, 2023, Proper 10 | After Pentecost—Yesterday I left our house to drop off a car at the rental service, and was immediately halted by the sight of a SWAT team at the corner where I turn out of our cul-de-sac. The officers graciously waved me through and I went on my way, stopping briefly to give my son a heads up, as he was following me in our personal car.

Later that day, the news said that the police had been trying to serve an arrest warrant, but the person had barricaded themselves in their home. The final outcome of the day's effort at serving the arrest warrant was that the person was carried out and sent to the hospital, suffering from a self-inflicted wound. This person, who lived a couple blocks from me, was facing a difficult personal struggle, and apparently could not cope with the consequences of something they had done. As I prayed about their situation, for them and for the officers involved, I was reminded of the grace God offers us in Christ, enabling us to face our errors in more hopeful ways.

Our culture today can be very critical of people who do not fit into the “approved” way of living. Our Christian culture is especially guilty of being condemning towards those who do not follow Christ, or who live contrary to biblical teachings. Condemnation is the language of tabloids, which exploit the personal lives of people, sharing for public consumption what may or may not be true. We seem to feed off of condemnation, especially when we have been wounded by someone. We are judgmental—I find myself constantly passing judgment on myself and on those around me without realizing this is what is going on in my head. When I realize it, I am appalled, as I of all people do not want to be judgmental nor condemning.

And as we go through life, we may or may not experience a sense of guilt, shame, or self-condemnation for our own actions and words. This is why it is important to look at condemnation from God's point of view. Our New Testament passage for this Sunday, Romans 8:1–11, reminds us that because of who we are in Christ, God does not condemn us. God knows our frame. He knows the depths of the evil which holds us hostage apart from his intervention. He knows our proclivity to walk away from him and go our own way. So, this is why our Lord came. The redemptive, transformational work of Jesus Christ in his life, death, resurrection and ascension has set us free from sin in our flesh. We no longer are held captive by sin and death, but are able to walk in newness of life. We live free from accusation, condemnation and guilt.

However, we do not experience this newness of life in its fulness as long as we remain focused on self-centered, self-willed, and self-absorbed ways of being. To live focused on self is contrary to who God has made us to be and declared us to be in Jesus Christ, for we are made in the image of our other-centered, self-giving Father, Son, and Spirit, to live as his beloved children in loving relationship with God and others. This is what the apostle Paul means when he says we are to live according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh. There is no need for condemnation—God does not condemn us. But God does call us up into the truth of our being—to be who he created us to be. God's love compels us to live differently now—in ways that love, serve, and bless God and each other—because that is who we are in Christ. Because our identity is in Christ now, we live and walk in the Spirit not in our flesh.

This is what is difficult for us to embrace. We don't want to live according to anyone's direction or instruction—we want to be free to live life on our own terms. When the consequences of living life on our own terms start to hit us, we are unable to deal with them. Condemnation is a human and Satanic response—it is not God's response. Accusation is Satan's response—it is not God's way of doing things. God's response is grace. God's response is a love which calls things as they are—truth-telling—but also offers us room to change and to begin anew in a healthier direction. God does not condemn, but he does invite us into an embrace in which we begin to live in healthier, other-centered ways which are a blessing to those around us.

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What might your life look like if you chose to be guided by God's Spirit and God's Word rather than by your human flesh? What would your response to life be if you knew God does not condemn you, but rather invites you into loving relationship with himself through Jesus in the Spirit? Perhaps a life lived without condemnation and held in the loving embrace of God himself may be an experience you might want to have. God merely asks you to receive what he has already given to you in Christ—forgiveness, acceptance, new life—and to begin to live that out. Why not begin today?

Thank you, Father, for loving and accepting me, and giving me forgiveness through your Son Jesus Christ. Thank you for not condemning me, but setting me free from sin and death, and welcoming home into your loving arms. I receive your gracious gift of grace and ask from this day forward, that you would fix my mind on the things of the Spirit that I might leave behind the things of my flesh, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” Romans 8:1–11 NRSV