

## **Cross Culture**

God's Story in a Guilt-Based Culture

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June 10, 2007



### **God's Story in a Guilt-Based Culture Romans 8:1**

If you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, let me invite you to turn with me to Romans 8. Right after you have the Gospels, then Acts, then the book of Romans. This is week three in a six week course. If you have missed one of the last two weeks, let me encourage you to go back and get caught up. Many of you have continued to turn in your stories. Last week, we began thinking that maybe God is at work already around us. Maybe we have the opportunity to be a part of what He is doing. So, you need to be available, alert, and looking for opportunities.

I want to share with you some of the stories you have sent in. I hope it will give you a picture of just the simplicity of this as well as just the awesome opportunities that God opens up every day that we have opportunities to be involved with Him in. Listen to the first story. One person writes:

I ride with a coworker of mine everyday from one place to another, all day, every day. I never have to force it. He knows me. He sees me just trying to live my life. Over the past three weeks, God has opened up doors and torn down walls in our conversation. Take today, for example, a simple conversation about a trial I recently experienced, led him to share about one of the darkest hours of his life. When he shared his resolution, based on that event, Christ was nowhere in it. By God's grace, there was an open door for me to share how Christ is the foundation of my joy and satisfaction, whether in times of happiness or in times of pain. Because of the hope that Christ is giving me, I'm looking forward to the conversations we will have tomorrow. Just very simple, nothing earth shattering, but here's an opportunity to join in what God is doing in somebody's life right around me.

Next story:

This week, at a very inconvenient time, my car battery died. After calling roadside assistance, I sat waiting for the wrecker to arrive. The wrecker driver called because he was having trouble finding my location. He told me he had only been in Birmingham for two weeks. I felt myself becoming very irritated. Then, I realized I needed to adjust my attitude. When the wrecker finally arrived, the young man told me he had just moved here to be near his mother, who had told him Birmingham was a wonderful place to live. He then revealed that he had come home after his first day at work, two weeks earlier, to find his mother dead. After getting my car started, I was able to talk to him about building a new life here, after the death of his mom. I invited him to church, assuring him that he could meet many people who would care about him. Then, I got the opportunity to tell him that he could also face the question about where he would spend eternity. That he could find peace and joy, even in the face of his loss. He seemed overwhelmed but

very interested and indicated that he really needed something in his life right now. I have been praying for him ever since and hope that he will visit soon. Needless to say, God showed me that my dead car battery was actually an appointment with this young man, to reach out to him and to share Jesus' love. What a blessing!

What happens when God starts to turn inconvenient circumstances all across this room, into very convenient circumstances for people's lives in Birmingham?

Next story from a husband and wife:

Your sermon rang bells in our heads this morning. Bells that needed to be rung. We both left the service with our antennae up and receiving. About an hour and a half later at the end of our meal at Logan's, our server, a middle aged male, invited us to come to his first stand up comedy routine at the comedy club. We thanked him for the invitation but declined, stating that we would be out of the country that day. He asked where we were going, and we told him we were going to Venezuela on a mission trip. Well, this was like opening a dam, and what followed was a history of his spiritual life over the past few years, concluding with conviction that God had told him this is his last chance to get it right. He had been praying fervently for the past several days that God would bring someone his way who would open up to him and show him a way.

It appears we were chosen, praise God, and it gave me a chance to invite him to attend a men's group on Wednesday morning with me. You are right! It's truly amazing that just being awake and alert gave us a chance to be a part of this person's spiritual life.

Fast forward later in the week...just a quick follow up.

You were right! God really is working in those around us. Unbeknownst to us, the fellow from Logan's came to our Wednesday morning men's group, and we spent an hour or more over a biscuit and coffee afterwards. He's got a lot in his history. Work in the church, divorce in his marriage and a wide variety of jobs. God is doing a work in him which I believe I am to be a part of, an instrument in His hands. Thanks for waking me up and reminding me to keep the antenna up and receiving, and available to join in to what He is doing, rather than sweating my agenda.

All right, two more stories. We could go on and on, but just two more.

Just wanted to share with you an event that took place this last Monday morning with a friend of mine. The opportunity came, and I was available and sensitive to the Holy Spirit. I was pretty obviously aware that God was at work and wanted me to join Him. My friend is actually 95 years old. It's my habit to meet with friends for breakfast, share some tales and be on my way. This morning though, my other friends were not there, and I was left alone with my friend and his present caretaker Mary, who incidentally has been praying for his salvation. I had the opportunity to share the gospel with him. He humbled his heart and asked the Lord to come in and save him and forgive him of his sins. Now, my friend is ready to meet the Lord of Glory. All praise to the Lord who has allowed me to be a part and participant in His

plan. Remember, God involves us in His picture, not because He needs us, but because He loves us.

Last story.

This week I have been teaching Vacation Bible School. Throughout the time you have been here, God has been working on my heart about how I need to share my faith. I'm ashamed to admit that I've lived so long and have shared my faith with so few people. Wednesday the lesson plan for VBS was simply to present the plan of salvation to the class of 20 girls. Simple enough, right? Kimberly, the Children's Minister, has so eloquently given an example that I told the Lord that my presentation would not be half as good. Then, I remembered what you said about God working in their lives last week. How He doesn't need my eloquence, just my obedience. I prayed over the room and over the lives of the girls that would be attending that day. So, with a sharpie in hand and a piece of poster board, I began my session. With the first group, I was afraid I would leave something out. With the second, I got a little more comfortable. By the third, I knew God had it handled. Four girls wrote that they would like to trust Christ that day. All I know is that there is another member in God's family today, and all it required on my part was my feeble attempt, a piece of poster board and a sharpie. His awesome power did the rest.

What happens when a faith family is equipped, empowered, and enabled to make the gospel known in each of our individual lives? So, continue to share what God is doing. What I want us to do this morning is to begin to bridge the whole picture in this series entitled "Cross Culture." How do we share the gospel across cultures? Whether that's inner-city Birmingham or whether that is going to Honduras or Venezuela, like a thousand of our people are doing this summer, how do we share the gospel in different cultures?

What we saw two weeks ago in Genesis 3 was that there were three primary effects of sin. Anybody remember what they were? The first one was we are guilty before God. The second one was we have shame before God. The third is that we are afraid of God. So, we've got guilt, shame and fear. Three primary consequences...these are effects of sin in our lives.

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that a while back I was reading a book when I was traveling to train some underground house church leaders in Asia. I was reading a book as I was going to train them in how to share the gospel. I was equipped with a couple different ways to share the gospel: The Roman Road and The Four Spiritual Laws. However, as I was reading this book, the author contended that, basically, guilt, shame and fear are all consequential results of sin. They pervade all cultures in the world. However, in some cultures, one is more predominant than others. Sometimes you've got an emphasis on guilt, whereas, in another culture, you might have more of an emphasis on shame. Not that they're not all there in some way, but some rise to the top in different cultures.

I started thinking about it. I got to the underground house church training, and I began to walk them through how to share the gospel. I shared the Roman Road, and I shared The Four Spiritual Laws. They were listening. They were intent, and then I started, "Okay, let's talk about how the gospel shows the power of God over sin. How it delivers us from our fears." All of a sudden, it was like light bulbs going up all across the room. They said, "That's exactly what our culture is like. When you go throughout our villages, you see people with all kinds of idols and all kinds of superstitions that are surrounding their houses

to keep them protected. They are afraid of the supernatural.” They started to talk about how the gospel hits on that. I began to realize, right in front of my eyes, that maybe there is more of a holistic picture of the gospel than just our guilt being made innocent. Maybe fears, the power and peace of God, or maybe shame and honor that God brings us, is also a part of the gospel.

This particular writer maintains that Western cultures are predominantly guilt-based. He also says that some of the basic foundations upon which Western culture is built are an obsession with being right or wrong, guilty or innocent. We all talk about our rights, what is right for me. We cling to our rights; we hold on to our rights. Those are privileges. We have debates; we spend countless hours, and countless money on debating whether or not homosexuality is right or wrong. Is abortion right or wrong? Is this particular war right or wrong? Is spending this much money on our military right or wrong? All of it defined in the essence of right and wrong. That is the unspoken goal of our culture. “I want to be right. I want to be okay and you to be okay.” That is the most comfortable position we can find ourselves in. If we’re both sitting where we want to be sitting, we’re okay. We even have seen how we try to redefine morals in order to classify ourselves as right. We redefine what is right and wrong in order to make ourselves feel okay. So, maybe you and I are used to thinking along those lines, and maybe everybody else in the world doesn’t think exactly like us.

Now, that’s not to say that talking about the gospel in terms of right and wrong, guilty or innocent, is wrong. Some of you are thinking, “Well, is that wrong that we do that?” If that’s what you are thinking, I want you to see how you are proving my point with what you are thinking. What I want us to see over the next few weeks is that, throughout Scripture, there is almost pictured, a threefold thread of God, just like we saw in Genesis 3, seeking after the guilty, covering the shameful and protecting the fearful. They all come together and give us a holistic picture of the gospel.

So, what we are going to do over the next three weeks is see how the gospel relates to guilt, how the gospel relates to shame and how the gospel relates to fear. We are going to see, for example, this morning, one overarching truth, and I want to show you a few different stories that illustrate that truth so that we can be equipped, not just with knowing our story, but with knowing how God’s story addresses guilt. How God’s story addresses fear. How God’s story addresses shame, and be able to share God’s story with other people. It’s going to involve us doing things a little differently. I hope it will be worth it.

We are going to start by thinking about God’s story in a guilt-based culture. Guilt is a universal experience. We all know that feeling in our gut when we know we’ve done something wrong. We go through the red light or you roll through the stop sign. We get that feeling that the blue lights in the rearview mirror only confirm; you know that you have done something wrong. When you say something to your wife, as soon as the words come out of your mouth, and you see her face, you realize that you should not have said that. You know you automatically feel that guilt. Even at a young age, seeing Caleb, he’ll crawl over to the fireplace where he knows that he is not supposed to go. He’ll touch it and look back just to see what will happen. There is this sense in which we know right and wrong.

There are a lot of people in our culture that would try to say that we don’t have an absolute sense of right and wrong in us. However, even those people who want to make ethics relative and morals arbitrary still find themselves caught in the trap, because they want you to agree that they are right and you would be wrong if you didn’t agree with them. So, we really can’t escape this trap. Guilt is a reality. We all know right and wrong, and we have

this law written on our hearts, the Bible teaches, that causes us to know when we've done right or wrong.

There are all kinds of ways we can try to overcome our guilt. There are intellectual ways: We can try to convince ourselves. "Well, I'm just human. I don't need to feel guilty for this. This is what everybody would do." Maybe we intellectually try to redefine our morals. We just redefine right and wrong to make ourselves feel better for what we find ourselves doing. Then, there are physical ways, when people turn to alcohol, or all kinds of different drugs to try to cover up guilt, or to deal with guilt. Or maybe, it's not that extreme. Maybe the busyness of our lives is an attempt to cover up guilt. As long as we can stay busy enough, we won't have to come face to face with what we are not doing with our lives, or with the reality of what we are doing. Maybe, we trivialize guilt by engrossing ourselves in sports and hobbies, by becoming a fan of this team or that team. So, we can look at life as fun and not have to deal with the seriousness of life.

Intellectual ways, physical ways...there are religious ways to deal with guilt, maybe the most deceptive of all. "Maybe, if I do this or that, if my routine was this or that, if I lead my family in this way, then it makes up for this or that over here." There are all kinds of ways the world would say to deal with guilt. Psychologist offices are filled week by week with people struggling from guilt complexes. Guilty for what they have done, guilty for what they haven't done. Guilty for what others have done, guilty for anything.

What I want to submit to you this morning is that God's answer to the problem of guilt far surpasses anything this world could offer to overcome it. If guilt is a universal thing across this room, and we all have things that we'd like to hide, all have some kind of baggage that we carry around when it comes to guilt, then, I think it would be good for us to see what the gospel says about our guilt. I think we'll realize that when we see what good news we have to share with the people around us.

## One Verse

What I want us to see is one verse and three different stories that illustrate this. The **one verse** is Romans 8:1. We are going to memorize this verse together this morning, okay? Ready? Here we go. "*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" Pretty easy, right? Try it without looking.

The key words, "no condemnation." What does that mean? I'm convinced that it is the essence of Christianity, the central foundational message of the gospel. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. I want us to think about some pictures of Jesus, His stories in the Gospels that help enlighten us on what this concept of no condemnation means. They are going to lead us back to Romans 8.

## Three Stories

### See the power of Christ.

I want us to look at a few different passages. Turn back to the left and go with me to Mark 2. We are going to read three different texts. My goal here is that you would be able to land on one of these stories. That you would be able to take one of these stories and put it in

your own words and, in a small picture, be able to share with somebody who struggles with guilt how Jesus addresses our guilt. In a guilt-based culture, how do you share the story of God? That's what we're going for. I want you to think about these three stories. Think about these stories with the perspective that says, "We're not just learning what these stories teach, but we're learning what they teach, so that we can share it with others." This is intended not to stop with us but to spread through us.

Mark 2:1-12 is an incredible picture. The context here in Mark 1 is that we've got Jesus all over the place, healing all kinds of people. Mark 1:33 says that people were lined up all over town at His door wanting to be healed of their diseases or delivered from demons. It's been a pretty intense picture in Mark 1. We get to see what Jesus' ministry is all about when we get to Mark 2. Follow along.

*A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*

*Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

*Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"*

I want you to see in this picture the power of Christ. I want you to see it on two different levels. You've got to see it on both levels in order to understand Mark 2. Level one: Jesus has authority to remove sins. These four guys bring this paralyzed man on a mat. They rather unconventionally bring him before Jesus. They lay him before Him. Now, we just mentioned in Mark 1 that we see Jesus healing all kinds of different people. So, people would expect Jesus to heal this man and him to get up and walk. That's not what Jesus does. Verse 5, the first words He says are, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now, let's get a little backdrop here, remember that in this day, especially in the Jewish mindset, for somebody to have this kind of disease, this kind of paralysis, it would be attributed to either this man's sin or his parents' sin or his grandparents' sin. We see this in John 9, "Somebody sinned that caused this. This is judgment of God on this particular guy's life. The reason he is paralyzed is because God is judging him." This guy, for however long he has been paralyzed, has been living with the stigma of being under the judgment of God for his sins.

So, what we see Jesus doing is going right to the root of the issue here. Jesus is not saying this guy is under judgment for his sin or this person's sin by the fact that he is sick. Instead,

the biblical truth all across Scripture is the fact that sickness, disease, and, ultimately, death are all a result of sin in the world. We know that because sin entered the world in Genesis 3, that is why we have suffering, it is why we have sickness, which is why we have death, which is why creation is longing for a new creation, to be redeemed, to be made new. What we've got is disease, sickness, death as the result of sin in the world.

So, Jesus goes right to the heart of this man's problem, and He says, "*Son, your sins are forgiven.*" That was a bold claim. For Jesus to claim to be able to forgive sin meant that He was, basically, equating Himself with God. You read *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, one time atheist turned Christian professor, and you see him talking about this particular passage and how big it was for him to realize that, for Jesus to claim to forgive sins, for Him to claim that He was the one offended, in other words, by this person's sin was a monstrous, a huge, C.S. Lewis even says, "a silly claim" if He is not God. These religious leaders are not buying it. They are wondering, "Who does this guy think He is?"

So Jesus comes to them and knows exactly what they are thinking, which is further evidence on the fact that He is God. He looks at them and says, "You guys are thinking this, but what do you think is easier: For me to deal with the symptom of paralysis or the root in this guy's life, his sin?" So, He says, "In order for you to believe that I have authority to forgive sins..." He looks at the guy and says, "Get up, take your mat and walk." That's exactly what the guy does. Jesus has authority to remove our sins.

Now, second, Jesus has authority to heal our suffering. Now, they go together in this picture with the power of Christ, the authority to remove our sin and the authority to heal our suffering. Now, I want us to bring that into play on what that looks like with our universal experience of guilt in this room, in each of our lives. The core issue is not problems we have as a result of guilt. The core issue is not the struggles we may have with this or that in this world because of the feeling of guilt that we have.

The core issue is that, at the heart, all of us in this room have sinned against a holy God. Our guilt is not due to the fact that we have failed others. Our guilt is due, primarily at the core, to the fact that we have failed God. The biblical truth is this: Every single one of us without exception will stand before God one day as an individual to give an account for our lives. All of us. That is a scary thought if we are trying to cover up our guilt with intellectual ways, physical ways, or even religious ways. Jesus comes right to the core of the issue. He says, "*Son, your sins are forgiven.*" In other words, this picture of no condemnation is illustrating the fact that Jesus comes to us and says, "I forgive you." Your deepest need, right at the heart, at the core of all of our lives, He says, "I forgive you."

Then, the way that relates to our suffering. "What about suffering then, Dave? There are a lot of us suffering." I know that across this faith family there are a lot of folks who are struggling with physical pain. Many are walking through cancer diagnoses. I know that there are many people in our faith family that are walking through some things that the doctors just can't figure out. There are some leaders in our faith family walking through that. There are people all across this room who have had something show up on the Cat-scan, and you're wondering, "What is this going to look like?"

The thing is, in our pain, in our suffering, the Adversary will come to us, and he will say, "This is a picture of condemnation. You've done something wrong! God is punishing you." He will begin to bring those thoughts into our minds. What do you do in those circumstances? Here's what you do: You look back at the Adversary, and you say, "On the contrary, there is no condemnation in my life. I have been forgiven at the core of my deepest need. I am forgiven all my sins and, as a result, no matter what suffering, no

matter what hurt, no matter what disease I face in this life, and no matter how long it lasts, even if it ends my life, I know that He has the power to heal my suffering for all of eternity, because He has shown His power and His glory most clearly in the forgiveness of my sins."

He has the authority, yes, to heal our suffering, but His power and His glory are shown most clearly...He shows us here in Mark 2...in removing our sins. May we never, never, underestimate that. May we never take the value away from that by saying, "I know He can forgive our sin, but I really would like see..." No, He forgives our sins! He removes our sins from us. He looks at us, not all the symptoms of our lives. He looks at the core of our being, and He says, "Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven. There is no condemnation, I forgive you!" It says in Isaiah 43:25, "*I remember your sins no more.*" Same thing in Jeremiah 31:34, "I remember your sins no more; I forgive you." That's the picture of Mark 2:1-12. There is no condemnation. You are forgiven!

### **See the purpose of Christ.**

Now, let's go to the second story. Go over to John 3. We are going to read through it. It's a passage that may be familiar to you. It's got probably the most famous verse in all of Scripture right in the middle of it; the verse that even those who've never been in church and never have had anything to do with Christ have at least seen at a football game on a sign. We've got John 3:16 at the core. What does it mean though? What is the context? I want us to see it in the context of this story. I want us to think about no condemnation in John 3:1-21. Follow along with me.

*"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.' In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'"*

*"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*

*"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's*



*one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."*

Here's the recap of that story. Nicodemus was a sharp guy, a leader of the supreme court, so to speak. He knew all the laws and his job was to guard the laws. He was born a Jew and part of the covenant people of God. He is a major teacher of the law on the scene in the first century. He comes to Jesus and starts a conversation with Him where they get to talking about the kingdom of God. Jesus looks at him and says, "You can't even see the kingdom of God unless you are born again." Well, that perplexes Nicodemus.

You put yourself in his shoes, you're thinking, "I was born a Jew. I am a part of the people of God. I'm actually a leader in the people of God. What do you mean I need to be born again?" Jesus begins to talk about how Nicodemus had given his life to every religious rule and law and regulation that he saw. The Pharisees even created more to follow. He had done all of that to try to earn favor, standing with God, to be right before God. Then, Jesus comes on the scene and says, "You did all of that but none of it counts."

Then, He goes back to Numbers 21. There is a story back there in Numbers where people are wandering through the desert, and they are rebelling against God. So, God sends snakes among the people of God. They begin biting people and people are dying. This is not a very happy time amongst the people of God in Numbers 21. So, Moses prays to God, "God save us." So, God says to Moses, "Take a serpent put it up on a pole, raise the pole high and everybody amongst my people who look at the serpent will be saved from dying as a result of these snakes. All you have to do is look."

Why does Jesus use that particular example? Because He's trying to communicate to Nicodemus that it's not about what you can do. It's almost like He is saying that Nicodemus is in a room where all the door handles are too high for him to reach and he cannot get out on his own. "It is impossible, Nicodemus, no matter how many rules and regulations or laws you follow. You cannot do it. All you have to do is look." Look where? "Look at me. God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever just believes in me. It's not about what you can do. It's about what I have done. It's not about how you can remove your guilt by following your religion."

This is a huge truth for us across this room. In a Southern culture where it is the common practice of our lives to go to church Sunday-in and Sunday-out, we can do all of that and try to appease the guilt in our lives. However, if we try to do it on our own, we will fall short. We need our guilt removed for us.

So, at this point, I want you to see the purpose of Christ in the story of Nicodemus. The purpose of Christ is also twofold. First of all, the purpose of Christ: He came to stop us from trying to remove guilt on our own and to stop us from our intellectual, physical, religious endeavors to try to get freedom in our hearts. He said, "Stop trying Nicodemus. You know why? Because God sent me. He sent me into the world, not to condemn the world." It's not like Jesus comes into the world and says, "I'm going to condemn these people and save these people." No! He says, "Nicodemus, what you don't realize is that the world is already condemned, including you. You are already condemned in your sin. What you need is somebody to come in and not confirm your condemnation, you need somebody to come in

and save you from the condemnation you already find yourself in." He says, "You need to stop trying and trust me."

He came to stop us from trying and to teach us to trust Him. He says, "Just look to me. Come out of the darkness of your sin, hiding in it, trying to cover it up. Come out of it into the light. See who I am; let your guilt be exposed." Here is the beauty of it, "I will remove the guilt for you." So, He says to Nicodemus, who finds himself embroiled in effort after effort after effort to try to get to God, He says, "Nicodemus, not only are you forgiven," but, He says in John 3, "you can have a fresh start. You can be born again. You can start all over. You don't have to constantly make up for all the things in your past, all the guilt that is back there. I have come to give you a fresh start. You can be born again by the Spirit of God, and it won't be dependent upon those outward observances that you give yourself to. This is an inner life that I bring to you. I remove your guilt, and I give you a fresh start, all simply by believing and trusting in me." That's the story of John 3. You can have a fresh start.

### **See the paradox of Christ.**

One more story: Flip over to John 8. This story may or may not be familiar to you. However, you may notice that many of your translations will have a bracket that describes this story. A lot of biblical scholars would say that this text does not actually belong in the Bible. Many of our earliest manuscripts of the New Testament have everything but this right here. Some people believe it actually belongs in a different part of the Bible if it belongs at all. However, even across the board, whether or not it was actually originally a part of the Bible, we know, most scholars agree that this represents a true picture of Jesus. So, it's probably a factual story. So, we have some things to learn from the story even amidst some of the questions that surround the text. So, let's read it together, and I want us to picture this emotionally charged scene in light of this idea, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Beginning with verse 1:

*But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

*But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.*

*At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

*"No one, sir," she said.*

*"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."*

We've seen the power of Jesus in Mark 2. We've seen the purpose of Christ in John 3. Now, I want you to see the paradox of Christ in John 8. A paradox is two statements or two words that, when you put them together, seem to contradict, but they don't necessarily contradict. An example would be "jumbo shrimp"; that's a paradox. You've got these different things that come together, and you wonder if they contradict each other. What I want you to see is one of the ultimate paradoxes in all of Scripture is in the person of Christ, when His humanity and divinity come together. This picture here is incredible.

Here's the paradox. First of all, Jesus is passionately committed to upholding the justice of God. You see these guys come to Jesus, the teachers of the law, and they are trying to trap Him and basically put Him in a "no win" situation. They say to Him that this woman has been caught in adultery. You go back to Deuteronomy 22:22 and Leviticus 20:10, and you will see the Mosaic Law. The Law of Moses said that she should be stoned. So, they wonder, "Are you going to go against the Law of Moses and not stone her?" So, if He says that, then He's going against the Law of Moses. However, if He says, "Okay, let's keep the Law of Moses and stone her," then He will not be very popular. He will be breaking Roman law at that point which deliberately prohibited any kind of public execution like that for adultery in addition to undermining and undercutting the whole picture of compassion we see in Jesus' life and ministry.

So, what's He to do? They think they've got Him trapped by putting the law in front of Him. Now, it's at this point that many people, when we read this passage and talk about this passage, that sometimes we have a tendency to walk away and almost see that Jesus is going light on the law. Jesus came to leave the law behind. We have grace now. No more law.

That's not what this passage is teaching though. Jesus is passionately committed to upholding the law, the justice of God. He is not light on sin at all in this passage. In fact, He's heavier on sin than these guys are ready to be on sin. Don't miss the picture here. Nowhere in John 8 does Jesus say that she should not be stoned. He didn't say, "No, no, no, that's not what the law says." It's almost like He takes that as a given. It's almost like He's saying, "Okay, you guys are right. The law says there is a very serious penalty for adultery and that sin leads to death, even stoning, as it says in Deuteronomy. So let's take the law to the next step."

Go to Deuteronomy 17:7. You go to other places in the law where it talks about how an accusation like this would have to be brought by more than one witness and the witnesses who are testifying against that person would be the first to throw the stones. The law says that those people have to be guiltless in the crime. So, Jesus is not minimizing the law. Instead, He says, "Let's take the law to the furthest extent. Those of you who have kept the law then, who are so passionate about the law, you be the first one to pick up the stone and throw it, because you have kept the law." Now, all of a sudden, these guys start backing away, the oldest down to the youngest. The picture is intense! Jesus has said, "Let him who is without sin throw the first stone." All of a sudden these guys start backing away.

We know that later in John 8:46, Jesus reiterates the fact that He is without sin. So, all of a sudden this woman finds herself face to face with the only one who has the authority to condemn her. He has said, "Let him who is without sin throw the first stone." That is Jesus and Jesus alone. There they are face to face, and you've got Jesus upholding the justice of God. This woman can't feel too encouraged yet because she hasn't heard Jesus say this is not what should happen. Now, she finds herself face to face with the person who can actually make it happen. What does Jesus do? He looks through the tears in her eyes, and He says, "Where are they? Who's here to condemn you?" She says, "No one is here." Then

the one who alone has the authority to condemn her looks at her and says, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more." What an amazing picture! The only one who had the authority to condemn her in that particular circumstance is saying, "I don't condemn you."

So, where is the justice of God there? The justice of God will be seen weeks from that point when Jesus walks the road to a cross and takes the condemnation of this particular woman upon Himself instead of putting it upon her. He radically upholds the justice of God while, at the same time, extending the mercy of God. What an amazing picture of Jesus who says, "I am passionate about the law, and I'm passionate about God's justice. Condemnation will be given! However, I will take that condemnation upon myself instead of you, ma'am. Go and sin no more."

This is exactly the lead-up in Romans to get to chapter 8. You remember the first part of Romans? Romans 1:18 all the way to 3:20 is a horrible picture of our condemnation. The wrath of God is being revealed in heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men. It's not a pretty picture. Paul spends all the way to the middle of Romans 2 explaining how sinful the Gentiles are. You can almost hear the Jewish teachers of the law, "Amen-ing." "Yeah! They are horrible people! They deserve the wrath of God!" So, then Paul turns the table on them and, about midway through Romans 2, he says, "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew, if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God..." Then he starts to lay into them, and he says, "You guys are blaspheming the name of God among the Gentiles" and he gets to the end, and he says in Romans 3:9,

*There is no one righteous, not even one, no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they together have become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Our throats are open graves, our tongues practice deceit, the poison of vipers is on our lips, and our mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Ruin and misery mark our way. The way of peace we do not know. There is no fear of God before our eyes...whatever the law says it says to all of those who are under the law so that every one of our mouths will be silenced and the whole world accountable to God. Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin.*

In other words, the law only makes us more guilty. It gets to verse 20, and whether he's writing and puts the pen down, or whether he's paused for a second, you can see the tears in Paul's eyes as he is overwhelmed with the guilt of man before God. This is heavy! Thankfully Paul picks the pen back up, and he says to the person...this is one of the greatest transitions in all of Scripture...Romans 3:21, *"But now a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*

That's a good verse to know too. Not that we all fall short, but we are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. This paradox comes back in. How can God be just and also justify us in all of our sin? How can that be so? Romans 3:21-26, *"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished - he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."*

He is just, His condemnation is poured out. He justifies those who have faith in Jesus Christ

because His condemnation is poured out on His one and only Son, so that He could say, just like he said to that woman, "Neither do I condemn you; you are forgiven; you have a fresh start, and you are free." He says, "Amidst the emotional weight of our sin, you are free, ladies and gentlemen." I don't know what your past has been like, and I don't know what things there are there that weigh heavily on you at different times in your life. I don't know the guilt you have felt from falling short in the area as a husband or a wife, as a teenager, or in this relationship or that relationship, or this thing or that thing that nobody else knows about. I don't know all about those things in your life. However, I do know this. He says that, through Christ Jesus, you are free. You're free! You're free!

That's why when you get to Romans 8, it's such a glorious celebration. That's why it's the most triumphant chapter, Martin Luther would say, in the entire Bible. Because Jesus has justified us. It's all through faith in Him, Romans 4 and 5 teaches us. We still struggle with our sin, though, don't we? We still struggle with the guilt, and the fact that we don't find ourselves measuring up. Enter schizophrenic Paul in Romans 7. *"I don't understand what I do for what I want to do I don't do. What I hate I do. If I do what I do not want to do, I agree that's it's no longer I that does it, it is sin living in me that does it."* He's giving us a headache and our minds are spinning around. He gets to the end and he says, *"What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

That's what precedes Romans 8:4. Is the struggle still real? No question! All throughout Romans 8, we see a picture of suffering, but we see the Bible teaching that we should consider our present sufferings not worth comparing to the glory that will one day be revealed in us. When Satan comes to each of our lives, to each of our minds, and he says, "You can't overcome what you did there; you can't hide that. You don't measure up, you shouldn't even be in worship. Who do you think you are? How can you make a difference for the kingdom of God when you've got this and that in your life and you struggle with this and that?" He bombards us; he barrages us with those thoughts. I challenge you to look him back in the eye and say,

*If God is for me, who can be against me. He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of the God and is also interceding for me. Who shall separate me from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger of sword, guilt, sin, anything? No, in all those things I am more than a conqueror through Him who loves me. I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, in the present or the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

There is no condemnation! No condemnation!

So, regardless of whether you are struggling with the guilt of what you did on the internet last night at 2:00 in the morning or what you did this last week in your business, or what you've been struggling with over the last six months, the last six, ten, twenty, thirty years ago that you just can't seem to get rid of. Regardless, I remind you that upon the authority of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! You have a fresh start! You are free! There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! His promises fill the Scriptures as He speaks to us, and He says, "You are spotless." You and I, with all the filth in our lives are

called spotless by the Almighty God. Blameless, holy, you are righteous; you are dressed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ Himself. You are faultless, you are whole. You are clean. You are pure. You are pardoned. Praise be to God! You are not guilty anymore! By the blood of Jesus Christ, you are not guilty anymore!

The purpose of our time together is to equip, empower, and enable us to share the gospel in a guilt-based culture. However, I can't help but think that maybe the gospel needs to take root in our hearts before we can really begin to share it. Maybe for some, it's letting the gospel cover and remove our guilt.

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