

No Condemnation

An article by Hendrik Hart

Why do we so often fear embracing the grace of Jesus?

God's grace is too vast. We lack the courage to believe in such radical grace, much less to be its agents in the world. What stands in our way? Not the life of Jesus, which incarnated and revealed this grace. Nor the Bible, which continually declares God's grace available to all who will receive it. More often than not, what holds us from grace is that old "fiddler on the roof." Tradition – customs, ecclesiastical decisions, church order, theology, and creeds – builds walls between us and what God so graciously offers. It's an old problem. Consider Jesus' encounters with the religious leaders of his day. The conflicts between him and the Pharisees consistently center on their differing understandings of the law of Moses. The Pharisees often accuse Jesus of breaking the law. On the other hand, Jesus said the Pharisees could not see God because they had hidden God behind the law. By building a tradition that used the law as an instrument of condemnation, the Pharisees had lost God's word.

Jesus taught that God gave the law as a path to life. God was not after adherence to the law as an end in itself. The law was an instrument to provide life. In fact, it was originally written, says Exodus 31:18, "with the finger of God."

Unfortunately, people did not find God in the law. They sinned not just by failing to keep the law but by turning their backs on the God the law pointed to. In refusing to find the God of life, who is in the law, Paul tells us, we render it an instrument of death (Romans 8:2).

In Jesus, our life-giving God provides a new way of life for those who have been disobedient, those for whom the law means death. Jesus, the Gospel of John tells us, is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6), the key to what Moses, the law, the prophets, and the Bible really mean. The law the Pharisees knew, the law of the Hebrew Scriptures, was the law written by Moses. Moses angrily dashed the original version, written by God, into pieces on the ground. But in Jesus, the Jew, God’s finger begins writing again.

In John 8:1-11, we find the familiar story of Jesus’ encounter with a woman who was having an adulterous affair. While this account is now accepted as canon, it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts of John’s Gospel. Centuries after the Gospel of John was originally written, an unknown monk transcribing the text, recognizing John’s tendency to make his point through a story of Jesus in action, as Word incarnate, must have inserted these verses. John – and in this case, a Spirit-led editor – used the events of Jesus’ life to illustrate what God intended the ancient Hebrew law to be – a way of walking in the light, a road to life.

In the chapter of John’s Gospel immediately preceding this story, an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees ended in an unsuccessful attempt by the Pharisees to have Jesus arrested. Jesus takes a night to retreat and cool off. But the next day, while he is out teaching, the Pharisees again try to trap him. They bring before him a woman caught in the act of adultery. The law says kill her, they tell Jesus. What do *you* say?

Jesus *says* nothing. Instead he writes with his finger in the dirt. Remember the finger of God, signals Jesus. Remember the original author’s intent. Thereby the Word of God incarnate gives God the floor again. Then Jesus rises and says: Folks, let us *live* what the law requires. If the law kills, and one of you is clean enough to execute this woman, then go ahead.

Jesus, and Jesus alone, was clean enough. If he had come to fulfill the law in that way, he could have cast the first stone. But he does not. Later when the defenders of the law have gone, Jesus – who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life – shows the woman what the writing of God’s finger really means. I don’t condemn you, he says. God is after life, yours too. I’m giving you space. Go live in that space. Live! Don’t turn against the God of life. Sin no more. Rather, trust the life God gives you if you follow me. Then you will know no condemnation.

Jesus then turns to the crowd surrounding him. His act was his interpretation of the law, which he now sums up: “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you will not walk in darkness” (John 8:12).

Experts on the law, whether Jew or Christian, live in condemnation and spread it far and wide. Jesus, on the other hand, calls Christians and Jews alike to make room for sinners to provide them a space free of condemnation. If you follow me, he says, you will have the light of life. If you do not use rules, orders, commandments and laws to burden and judge people – even when they have clearly transgressed – then you will see the light and walk toward life. And you will be a light that shows life to others.

Unfortunately, many Christians read Jesus words and focus on “sin no more” until it becomes a fence around “neither do I condemn you.” We understand Jesus’ words to mean, “This time, I’ll let you go, but never do it again – or else! Sin again and the handwriting is on the wall.”

Tragically, just when many of us begin to consider the fact that Jesus does not condemn sinners, just when we’re beginning to realize that he calls us to do likewise, we are stopped in our tracks. “Yes, but he also says, ‘Sin no more.’ ”

With such words, we take a step forward and then a step back. We never fully accept that God in Christ does not condemn *us*. And what we have not accepted for ourselves, we can seldom pass on to others. (If we do pass it on, we do so begrudgingly, because deep inside, we are unable to accept it for ourselves.)

When we look at the story in John 8 against the context of the entire biblical drama, we see a pattern. From Genesis to Revelation, we find a God who does not condemn and creates space for a different life. When we reflect on that pattern, we realize that Jesus does not say, “*But sin no more!*” His words are not a threat or warning. Rather he says, in effect, I don’t condemn – go live in that space. Go and make your life, as well, a life that refuses to condemn, a life that forgives and redeems. There is not a veiled curse in Jesus’ words. There is blessing and benediction.

Throughout the Bible, we see that God, who alone knows the difference between good and evil, always acts for our good.

Consider the fall of humanity in Genesis 3. Here, some might say, God seems utterly judgmental: Adam, Eve, the ground, and the Serpent are all cursed. But look at Genesis 3:21. Adam and Eve are naked and ashamed. In this newly evil world, they have become not nude, but vulnerable. God knows it will take time to robe them in the garments of angels. What can be done in the meantime for these vulnerable people?

“The Lord made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” God provides cover for Adam and Eve. It’s not a lot, and it’s provisional, but it begins to show God’s intent – to serve as their protector. In the previous chapter, once the reality of evil was revealed, God was concerned to provide a helper (Genesis 2:18). In Genesis 3, God’s resolve to help remains firm.

Move on to Genesis 8, the story of the great flood. Sin has grown and covered the earth, and God acts. But is the flood a drowning - or a purging? Is it a curse - or a cleansing?

Noah, whose family survives, brings an offering. Genesis 8:21 reads, “The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said, ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of humanity, *for every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.*’ ” The story makes it clear that God sees sin written all over us - with indelible ink. Such sin won’t wash out with water poured from a vessel of wrath. A flood of condemnation would drown all the incurably evil people, but also gone would be the pleasing aroma.

God, we’re told, loves the scent of us, the scent of our offering and the scent of all humanity as it turns to worship and praise the God of love, the God of grace, the God of life. No more, declares God, will there be such a curse.

The covenant is renewed in Genesis 9. Preservation is at the heart of it. But the human nakedness is not gone. “For your life blood, I will surely demand an accounting” (Genesis 9:5).

For generations, God’s people, Jew and Christian alike, have struggled with the ambiguities they find in these words. What, we wonder, is God’s intent? To justify death and retaliation? Or to affirm and celebrate life?

Israel’s struggle with the ambiguities of the covenant are dramatically described in the abuse and ultimate tragedy of Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom. At the heart of the story lies an apparent demand for an accounting, as found in Genesis 9:5.

Earlier, the elders of Israel demand a king (1 Samuel 8:5). God warns that they do not need a king but gives in to their wishes. And from that point, God begins to be revealed to Israel through its rulers.

King David is Israel's representative of God. But earthly kings are concerned with power struggles – and with the demands of law and order. How well, then, does David actually represent God?

David's son Amnon rapes his sister Tamar and then is killed by his brother Absalom (2 Samuel 13-14). The covenant demands that the dead brother's blood be avenged. To escape death, Absalom goes into exile. As king, David is committed to uphold the law; as father, he loves his son Absalom. "The Spirit of the king longed to go to Absalom" (2 Samuel 13:39), but as the keeper of order in the kingdom, he could not. The king subdues the father.

God intervenes by leading a widow and mother to speak wisdom to the king. In 2 Samuel 14:14 she says, "Like water spilled on the ground which cannot be recovered, so we must die." She knows death is part of the human condition. But she also knows God's deepest intent. So she reminds David that God does not take away life; instead God devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from God.

This woman, unlike King David, sees the deeper intent in the covenant with Noah: God's love for our lives. So she dares to relativize God's rule. And she challenges David to "invoke the Lord God to prevent the avenger of blood from adding to the destruction" (2 Samuel 14:11).

Superficially, the avenger represents God's rule; but the widow knows *the God behind the rule*, the God who seeks life at any cost. She persuades the king to listen to the father in his heart. Absalom eventually returns to Jerusalem and then to his home, where he is greeted with his father's kiss (2 Samuel 14:33).

What the rule seemingly calls for is not what God finally wants. From the beginning, the rule was meant to point us in a certain direction. The word *Torah* ("Law") in Israel meant a rule intended to point beyond itself. If

we lose the direction we are pointed in, our inability to keep the rule will threaten us. We fear chaos will overtake us.

In our own world, trusting a father's compassion seems to work against us. The rest of the story of David and Absalom bears that out. The son who was spared turns against the merciful father, gathering horses, chariots, and an army to help him seize the kingship.

And that's exactly what scares us about refusing to condemn. Rather than turning around and sinning no more, Absalom seizes his father's grace as an opportunity to sin some more. "If David's love had been tough love," we think, "he would have executed Absalom and saved his kingdom."

David and Absalom are thus not a good picture of God and the Son of God. Unlike Jesus, *this* son of David did not "count equality with his father as something to forgo" (Philippians 2:6) but something to go for. We have to wait for another father-son relation to see the triumph of life over condemnation, to see the direction in which the rule points, a direction never made fully manifest back in David's day.

In Jesus, says John, we finally see the grace and truth that were always in the law but remained obscured for so many of us (John 1:17). Even when the Word became visible in the flesh, the people of God did not always recognize it (John 1:10). But in John 3:17, God's ultimate intent is made unambiguously clear: "God did not send God's Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

No wonder it is also in John's Gospel that we find Jesus' assurance of grace to us and to the woman who was to be stoned for adultery according to the law: "I do not condemn you" (John 8:11). We should let these words ring through our hearts, for they are addressed not just to the woman but to all of us whose ways are evil – and to all those evildoers who, in our lives, we will encounter: "I do not condemn you."

Paul picks up on John's themes with the declaration that, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Paul invites us to trust not only that in Christ we are not condemned but also that we do not need to condemn others: "It is God who justifies (makes righteous). Who then will lay charges, who will condemn?" (Romans 8:33-34).

Instead of participating in condemnation, we are invited to become children of God, to call God "Abba," as Jesus does, to accept God as our own beloved parent. We are invited to become like Jesus, the first child, who does not condemn but loves and redeems.

In the New Testament, the parent-child relation is the preferred metaphor for God's relationship with us, a metaphor which sets the tone even for the ruler-subject relation.

Jesus, the "Son of David," comes to offer salvation to us, the disobedient subjects of David, allowing us to become children of God, Jesus' own sisters and brothers.

But if we are to claim that child-parent relation, we need to share in the sufferings of Christ. That is, we must share Christ's empathy and compassion for others, feeling deeply the hurts and dreams of those who are burdened and condemned. "The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:16-17).

Avoiding condemnation is possible only if we, like Christ, the suffering servant, take sin upon ourselves. We make visible that Christ does not condemn when we, in the way of Christ, occupy the burden-bearing space God created in Christ. That's a space in which we share in the suffering

of Christ by sharing in the suffering of others, by knowing and not denying the pain of their lives.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us we are called to bear one another's troubles as *our* burden. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2). The law of Christ is a law of love, not condemnation. With joy, it calls us to give our lives for the sake of one another, uniting us all in the pursuit of life and hope.

In Christ, God's covenant to Noah – if you take a life, yours will also be taken – becomes: If you have become lost in abusing life, I will give you my life. My burden is light, because I bear with you and for you.

Never will Jesus nail us – or anyone we may encounter - to a cross of shame and disgrace: he knows the futility of that life-denying road. His refraining from condemnation is not a matter of indifference. The TOLERation of Jesus is the space of *qui TOLLE peccata mundi*, the one "who bears the sins of the world."

If we insist on haunting people "with sin no more," we have missed the point of Jesus' words. When people - gay and straight – male and female, rich and poor – experience in the church the "no condemnation" of Christ, they are thereby experiencing God's way of dealing with sin. In that experience, they will discover that sin has no more power. God staked Jesus' life on that. We are invited to place our trust in God's way of no condemnation – and through our every action to show the world that way.

The line we have been following through Scripture holds true even to the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:23-24: "The city does not need the sun nor the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the rulers of the earth will bring their splendor to it."

The light of the glory of God is the light of the Lamb that was slain, the one whose own cruel condemnation still illuminates the awful horror of our ways. His own refraining from condemnation – and his persistence in love – is a light unto our path and a guide unto our feet.

There is only one rule we know: the rule of the Lamb. There is only one power that has the slightest chance of changing the world, liberating captives, and proclaiming the acceptable way of the Lord. That power is the power of bearing the burdens of others in the never-condemning, ever-glorious, life-affirming name of the Lamb who was slain.

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