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SUCH A COOL CLOAKING DEVICE Romans 8:1-3

In their book, *Freedom From Fear*, Neil Andersen and Rich Miller wrote that “fear is based on perception.” My son-in-law, Michael, illustrates this. Michael is an impressive man. He was a Marine fighter pilot. He did a tour of duty on the ground in Afghanistan. He went through all that being a Marine means. He is strong, determined, courageous, and kind of uneasy with heights. Wait, he doesn’t like heights and he’s now an airline pilot? How does that work if you don’t like heights? His job entails flying 757 and 767 airliners every week at 35,000 feet! He is 7 miles up in the air and it doesn’t bother him in the least. Put him and Carissa on the top of a cliff about 200 feet high and he will nervously keep Carissa from getting near the edge.

What makes the difference? He doesn’t see being in an airplane at 35,000 feet, or any altitude for that matter, as being a threat. He doesn’t perceive there to be a threat of falling because he knows the aircraft will fly just fine. Plus he is a consummate pilot, and he feels confident in his ability to control the situation when he is in the cockpit of an aircraft. But on top of that cliff there is the possibility of a misstep or the cliff edge giving way. Fear is all about perception.

This is a crucial truth for us to grasp. Fear is something that exists in our minds. Often there may be no real threat to us, but the fear exists anyway, and unfortunately the fear itself can have very real impacts on our quality of life and our behavior. Today I want you to think with me about a fear that every one of you has dealt with at some point, and you probably still wrestle with it at times. Do you ever feel like God is disappointed with you, and even looks on you with disapproval? Let’s look at Romans 8:1-3 and see what it says about that.

MOST OF US FEAR THAT CONDEMNATION IS A THREAT

I encounter Christians who struggle with the fear that God will condemn them. Even if they know it isn’t necessary, somehow they find themselves still hounded by it. They feel unworthy and have a sense that God is frowning at them. I find that when I have quiet moments and think about how I am doing spiritually, I think that God is probably kind of disappointed and frustrated with me. Why is this fear so prevalent and persistent? In part it is because I am disappointed and frustrated with

myself. I feel like I ought to be better than I am. And if I think that surely God must be really disappointed in me. But there are some other factors as well.

Notice that in these verses Paul talks about the law of sin and death. In chapter 7 he wrote about the Law of Moses, which many insisted was a crucial part of God's plan to save people. In that chapter he noted the curious fact that while that Law is from God and is a good thing, it has an unfortunate effect. It can't change people's hearts. Paul noted that it said he shouldn't covet, but he couldn't stop. He said no matter how hard he tried he didn't do the good things he wanted to do and couldn't seem to stop himself from doing some of the things he didn't want to do. He felt the guilt and the weight of his failings. At one point he wailed, "Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

So the Law produced guilt and distance from God. In his terms it became a law of sin and death. Everybody has a law of some kind. Everyone has some standard in their minds that they must live up to in order to be a good person. People have lots of different standards, but everyone has some standard. All of us, every single one, is striving to prove that we are good, acceptable people, that in the end we are worthy of acceptance. Though we don't always know it, what we are trying to prove is that God should give us his stamp of approval and that he should welcome us into his kingdom. We think we do that by measuring up to the standard.

That method, gaining approval and acceptance by earning it through living up to the standard, is the principle of law in theological terms. Ultimately that method is the "law of sin and death." We sense that we don't measure up. We know the truth about ourselves, and every one of us is aware of the fact that there is a gap between what we want to be, what we ought to be, and what we actually are. This is why guilt is a huge problem. Knowing that we fall short of what we ought to be we also suspect that we are worthy not of approval and acceptance, but of condemnation.

The more we know about God and his real standard, which is perfect, flawless goodness, the more we fear that what we are earning is condemnation. This is a persistent feeling even for many people who know the gospel of Christ. They struggle with believing that God really accepts them and loves them. That's because they operate by the principle of law.

There are a couple of reasons why we do that. One is it is simply a part of human nature. It is how we think in our current fallen condition. Laurie and I have had lots of opportunity to watch toddlers recently. I have noticed that if a toddler does something that elicits laughter or cheers and applause from the grown-ups who are

watching, you can be sure that behavior will be repeated. They know it when they receive approval, and because they crave the approval they repeat the behavior. We want the approval and we understand that we gain it by something we do, so we do whatever seems to garner that approval. That is built in to humans.

The second reason is that everything in this world operates by that principle of law. We gain approval and acceptance by earning it. How do young people get acceptance to the college of their choice? They have to earn it. There is no other system. Well, with the possible exception of extremely wealthy mommy and daddy making a huge donation to the school with a string attached. How does one gain the prestigious job one desires? You have to earn it. Do you remember when you went on that first date with that person you had a huge crush on? What did you do? You made sure that you looked your absolute best. A flare up of a skin blemish would have been utter mortification. You had to have just the right clothes, make sure your hair looked great, and that you smelled terrific. You approached the date with a strange mixture of excitement and stomach churning anxiety, fearing that you would commit some terrible faux pas, or be dull and boring. What is that about? You believe that approval and acceptance from this deeply desired person has to be won. It has to be earned by looking your best and by seeming to be better and more interesting and suave than you actually are. That's the principle of law at work in relationships.

This principle is involved in everything you do. It is so pervasive and so all-encompassing that we find it nearly impossible to think any other way about anything. Any other system is completely alien to us. It would be as awkward for us as trying to think in Bulgarian when we have never learned it.

FEAR OF CONDEMNATION HAS NEGATIVE EFFECTS

So let's review. We have this inescapable penchant for thinking in everything that the principle of law rules. Unfortunately, we also have an inescapable awareness that we cannot measure up to the demands of the law. No matter what law we operate by, we know we fall short. If you must gain acceptance and approval by meeting the law's demands, and we don't meet them, what happens? We fear that we don't deserve acceptance. Quite the contrary, we carry around this unfortunate sense that we deserve rejection or condemnation because we know we don't quite meet the standard we need to meet. Actually we don't get close.

We try hard to convince ourselves and others that we are worthy, even though we know we aren't. There are many people who insist that God won't condemn

anyone, that he is a squishy jello like being who only loves and accepts everyone and never condemns. But this leaves us in an uncomfortable place because that means there will never be justice. There are people who do horrible, cruel, inhumane things. Is God really just going to say, “Oh, well, that’s all right, I love you anyway”?

We all need justice to exist. We long for the wrongs to be righted. Does anyone really think people who create child pornography should face no consequence from God? Should those who kidnap young girls and sell them to the sex trade just be accepted by God? Well, sure, monsters should be condemned by God and have to pay for their crimes. But most of us aren’t anything like that. Surely God will see that we are basically good at heart. He will see that our good outweighs our bad and will accept us, won’t he?

Oh, so God will grade on the curve. That unfortunately presents some problems. First, where is the dividing line between monster and mostly good with a little bad? The problem with grading on the curve is that God will have to make a cut somewhere, and no matter where he makes it, it’s going to look arbitrary and unfair to someone. Let’s suppose the cut is at, maybe 55% good. What happens to the guy who is 54.9% good? Well he gets rounded up to 55% Then what about the person who is 54.4% good? There is hardly any difference between that person and the one who is 54.6% good. Is this fair to him or her?

The other problem with this is that if God accepts, say, a person who is 70% good, he is accepting 30% evil. The big concern here is that even 1 millionth of a percent evil is enough to create more pain and suffering than we can even imagine.

One other dilemma for us is that there is something wrong at the core of all humans, and that thing taints everything we do. What this means is that the percentage of people who have more good than evil is exactly zero. Our score on the good and evil scale for every single one of us is a big fat 0, because that twisted thing in us touches every thought we have and everything we do.

Given these realities, the knee jerk human reaction to this situation is to go to the Avis approach. One brilliant ad campaign was for Avis Car Rental when they grabbed on to the fact that they were the second largest car rental company to Hertz. Rather than hide this they said, “We’re number 2, so we try harder.” So do most of us when we think we’re not meeting the standard to avoid condemnation. But this has some unfortunate effects. Inevitably one of those effects will be

hypocrisy. We can't change ourselves so we are truly good from the inside out, so we focus on stuff on the outside we can control, so that maybe we just look good. It's an act, and somewhere inside we know it. The worst hypocrites are the ones who don't know it.

Knowing we are not truly good we feel guilty before God. We know for sure he is pretty unhappy with us, and the last thing you want to do is be around someone who is unhappy with you. So you don't really want to be around God. The most depressing problem of all is that you're going to fail. You cannot make yourself pure good by just trying harder. We've all tried, and maybe we got a little better, but in the end we never got to perfection. Romans 3:20 says it this way, "No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law (by the Avis approach); rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." Yes, it does make us conscious of it, and that's the problem. We feel guilty and condemned.

WE ARE FREE FROM CONDEMNATION IN CHRIST

Romans 8:1 is some of the most profound, joyful news we will ever hear. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. What does it mean to be "in Christ"? It means to believe that he was in fact God in the flesh, that he came into this world to receive the punishment we have earned. So all of our evil was punished when he died on that cross. Being in Christ means we trust in what Jesus did, and nothing else. We believe that there is no more penalty for what we've done, because Jesus paid for all of it. There is no debt left to pay.

There are a number of classic supposed technologies that often show up in Sci Fi movies, like transporters, phasers, ion engines, laser blasters and so on. One of them was the "cloaking device" that would cloak a spaceship with invisibility so it seemed to disappear. When you put your faith in Jesus, you become "in Christ." It is sort of like a spiritual cloaking device. The cloak you put on is Jesus Christ and his pure goodness. So as God looks at you all of your stuff, all the wrong, the failing, the compromise, the evil, disappears and what he sees is the goodness of His Son Jesus. He sees nothing else! Your flaws and evil are totally cloaked.

Listen to verse 1. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. You have on the Jesus cloak, so God sees the righteousness of Jesus as he looks at you. How much does the Father disapprove of or condemn Jesus? That would be absolute zero. So how much condemnation do you face? None. Nothing. Zilch. Zero. Nada. So if you are a believer in Jesus and you fear condemnation, what are you fearing? You are literally fearing nothing! But surely God can't totally approve

of me. I see so many ways that I'm not what I should be, things I'm even ashamed of. How can God approve of that? You are in Christ. You have the Jesus cloaking device. When God looks at you he sees the goodness of Jesus Christ his Son. How do you think the Father feels about his Son? Do you remember what he said about him when Jesus was transformed on that mountain? Matthew 17:5 says the Father announced, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." If you are in Christ he looks at you and says, "This is my child whom I love. With him (or her) I am well pleased."

We have trouble believing that. One big objection we have is that this is too easy. We think if that's all there is to it then people will run wild. Hey, I'm in Christ, so I can do whatever I want, no matter how selfish or disobedient to God and it won't matter, because he sees me as being in Christ. We are sure this will produce a religion with people living horrible lives.

Let's suppose a teacher gives out an assignment. She assigns everyone in the class to write an essay. It's English Literature class and she tells the class the essay must be on the book *A Tale Of Two Cities*. Then she says, however, this will have no effect on your grade. Whether you do the essay or not, or how well you do the essay does not matter. I'm going to give you all A's no matter what. How many of those students are going to write that essay? Maybe there's one who loves to write and loves that book, but that would be about it.

We think the only way you can control people's behavior is with the threat of condemnation and punishment. What keeps people from driving 90 miles per hour on Interstate 5? Uh, maybe the incessant stop and go traffic? Well, yes, but what if it's 11 PM and there is no traffic? Is it their inner goodness, their great desire to stay at or below the speed limit? No, it's the threat that there might be a CHP officer lurking around hidden somewhere. I noticed a sign on a rural road recently that warned that my speed was being checked by radar. I think that's a lie. It was put there to say, "Someone is watching and if you go over the speed limit you will be caught and punished." Now that's how you keep people from running wild.

There is some truth to that idea. But that is a truth with limits. You can control people that way, but you cannot change them! Notice that in verse 3 Paul said, "what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh." The Law couldn't do something because we have that fallen thing in our hearts that messes up everything and rules can't change that. What law could not do was make us truly good from the inside out.

With rules and condemnation you can put up a fence to keep people from going too far off the reservation, but you can't change their hearts. In other words, you can't make them truly good, you only limit the amount of evil that they do. Now limiting evil is a good thing, but it's not the best thing. God wants to change people so they become truly good.

Laws and rules don't change our hearts. I submit to you as exhibit A, our homeowner's association. It has lots of rules. Some of them irk me. For instance, the greedy developer who built our homes figured out that with the plot of land he had he could put more homes on it and make more money if he built streets that were too narrow. So one of our HOA rules is that you cannot park on the streets. You can only park in designated guest spots or on a driveway. I have thought of some suggestions that would ease that, but no, the rule is no parking on the streets. Our HOA had rule that you cannot leave a portable basketball hoop up in front of your house. You can put it there temporarily, during the day but have to move it back into your backyard at the end of the day. It says if you put up a lamppost in your front yard there are only a few select ones you can choose from. It ordered all of us at one point to paint our houses, even though ours looked fine, and it gave us the colors we could choose from. Some of these rules have really bugged me and even cost me. One night years ago Toby got home at 2 in the morning and there was no place to park, so he parked his truck on the street in front of our house, figuring it wouldn't bother anyone that time of night. Before we got up in the morning the HOA had his truck towed! We had to pay \$300 to get it back. Painting our house when it didn't need to be painted cost us \$2000.

I live by the rules. I don't always like it, but the towed truck taught me I'd better do it. So I knuckle under, but I don't always like it. And I do not love our HOA. I kind of resent it. Laurie may be worse. She pushes the limits in an effort to tweak their noses. We recently put up a new lamppost and she got one that definitely was not on the approved list. She was daring the HOA to say anything about it.

Yes, threatening condemnation and punishment if we don't keep the rules can at least to some extent keep our actions in check. But they can't change our hearts. They actually tend to foster a sense of rebellion in them and resentment. **They can never cause us to love God. And that is what God wants most of all.**

Paul claimed in these verses that God accomplished something through Christ that the Law could never do. He's going to change us into people who are acceptable in his sight because we have the Jesus cloak on, and as a result we willingly become

good, truly holy people who truly love God and want to be with him. But where is the motivation for us to become that kind of person if there is no threat of condemnation and punishment?

First, there is a profound sense of gratitude. God has gone to lengths we cannot begin to understand to obtain forgiveness and acceptance for us. He has given us the most precious, best gift in all of creation, and it is a gift we absolutely do not deserve. We deserve to get its opposite. We merit condemnation and he gives us grace, unconditional love, approval and hope. The reasonable response is to be thankful to him and want to respond by giving back to him. You might notice that 1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us God's will for us is to give thanks in everything. That's because thanking God is the motive behind the entire life of following Jesus. Our reason for everything we do is gratitude. That is why we would choose to obey him.

The second reason we would choose to obey God when there is no penalty for disobedience is that God loves us. The question we must ask is, if God loves us, is he going to command us to do things for arbitrary reasons to make us jump through hoops just because he can? Or is he going to command us to live in ways that are bad for us? Do you think he wants to spoil our fun just because he's kind of a killjoy? In John 15:11 Jesus explained why he had given his disciples commands. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." In Romans 6:21 Paul asked regarding disobedience to God, "What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of?" Then in verse 23 he said, "the wages of sin is death." So disobeying God produces shame and death, while obeying God produces life. Which would you prefer, shame and death on one hand, or joy and life on the other? I'm going to go with joy and life. This is a compelling reason to obey God.

Sadly there are lots of examples of humans choosing something that they know is bad for them over something that will improve life. For instance, suppose you came to me and said, "Rick, I have two options for you to choose from for a snack tonight. One consists of some carrot and celery sticks, the other is a jelly doughnut from your favorite bakery in Bakersfield." I know for a fact that the carrots and celery are better for me. The doughnut has lots of sugar and fat and is just a bad deal nutritionally. Which do you think I'm going to eat? I am not without good sense and discipline, but that jelly doughnut is going to win every time. It's a good thing for me that bakery is in Bakersfield, not here.

But think of this a different way. Our daughter in law, Anna, is allergic to tomatoes. We were at a restaurant with her once and she ordered pizza, but only after making sure it did not have a tomato based sauce on it. We got our meal and she began to eat, but within minutes she started having problems. Her throat began closing up and she started having trouble breathing. She was having an allergic reaction. It turned out there was a little bit of tomato sauce in the dough. Anna loves things with tomato sauce. But she absolutely avoids them like they are radioactive. She is diligent about not eating them, because for her it is a matter of life and death. And that's how we should think of choosing to either obey or disobey God.

Isn't that all the motivation you need to always do God's will instead of your own or the world's way? It's a choice between life and death. Disobey God and what you get is not the love, joy, peace, meaning and hope that make up the life we long for, but the opposite. We get broken relationships, sorrow, regret, emptiness, guilt and anxiety. Why would anyone choose that?

APPLICATION

BELIEVE THAT IN CHRIST GOD DOES NOT CONDEMN YOU

There is no condemnation...But what if...No, there are no what ifs. No condemnation. None. But you don't know what I've done. I've...NO CONDEMNATION. None. Not almost none. Not no condemnation as long as... No condemnation PERIOD. Okay, I guess. He doesn't condemn me, but I know he must disapprove of me. No. **Disapproval is actually a form of condemning.** He does not condemn you, ever.

Upon what does God base his view of you? Is it on who you are and what you do? If it is, then you're in trouble. But if it is on who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for us, then you're good. And that's what it means to be "in Christ." The cloaking device is working, and in God's eyes you are pure good, with exactly zero to condemn. That's how he sees you. Don't ever forget it, and don't ever think anything else.

GIVE THANKS TO GOD CONTINUALLY

This is a mind boggling gift whose value we can never calculate, and it is beyond our ability to comprehend. But it is not beyond our ability to respond. We should continually thank God for what he has done for us in Jesus. This is crucial for several reasons. First, it is the primary motivation for everything you do as a follower of Jesus. Second, it reminds you that there is no condemnation in Christ,

which is difficult for us to believe. We naturally drift back to thinking that God does disapprove of us, and thanking him reminds us of how he sees us in Christ. Thank him always for such a cool cloaking device. Finally as you are thanking God it will remind you that he has done this so that you might have life. It reminds you that you should choose to obey him with passion because in doing so you are pursuing life with passion, and avoiding death.

DRAW NEAR TO GOD

If you forget this truth and start fearing condemnation, you won't want to be around God. Do you remember what Adam and Eve were doing after the forbidden fruit incident when God came to visit with them? They were hiding. That's what we do when we fear God disapproves of us or condemns us. We don't need to fear that in Christ. What God wants more than anything is that we would want to be with him and that we would live continually in his presence.

Recently Laurie and I were up in San Clemente to help Toby and Anna with their kids, our spectacular granddaughters, Ella and Cara. Toby and Anna's life and schedule is ridiculously demanding as Toby is trying to survive the 90 hour a week pace of residency. So we spent the day with Ella and Cara as Anna did some of the many tasks that fall to her. At the end of the day when we told her we had to leave to go home Ella was disconsolate. She didn't want us to leave. When we said we had to go she said, "I want to go with you. I want to go to Yapaw and Nana's house." We explained that she could come next week, but as we waved goodbye she was crying. Do you have any idea how much it means to Yapaw and Nana that Ella wants to be with us that much? No words can express it. Well God feels that same thing about you only infinitely more. That's why Jesus came into this world so that we would be free of condemnation. God loves you. He sees only the beauty of Christ when he looks at you. He approves of you. And he is thrilled to have you be in his presence. So draw near to him.