AN EXEGETICAL PAPER ON ROMANS 8:1-8
LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

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INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans contains some of the most satisfying, encouraging, and reassuring words in the entirety of Scripture. Chapter eight has been called the “inner sanctuary within the cathedral of the Christian faith,” as it unveils the benefits that believers receive as they live “in Christ.” Among these blessings, Paul includes the freedom from the condemnation of God, the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit, and freedom in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. It is the purpose of this exegetical paper to investigate Romans 8:1-8, to highlight the Greek text, key words, themes, and semantic structure and to utilize these processes to determine Paul’s original meaning.

CONTEXT

Historical-Cultural Context

The Epistle to the Romans was written by the Apostle Paul, a fact that is generally accepted by scholars, around the year A. D. 57. Scholars also agree that most likely Tertius, who is identified in 16:22, served as Paul amanuenses or scribe; a common occurrence during this time. The origins of the Roman church are unknown, however, it is obvious that the Apostle Paul did not plant the church, as the letter reveals that he had never been to the city before (Ch. 16). By the end of the first century, Jews constituted a large portion of the population of Rome and Paul found fertile territory for planting Gospel seeds, exacerbated by the fact that many had returned from Pentecost to first expose Roman citizens to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Carson believes that Jews were in Rome as early as A. D. 49, which is tied to the Roman

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1Douglas J. Moo, Romans: The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 247.
3 Ibid., 393.
5 Carson and Moo, 395.
Emperor Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews for rioting at the “instigation of Chrestus,” a name believed to be derived from a corruption of the Greek Χριστός (Christos, “Christ”).

While the Jews were exiled, the Gentile population of the church grew exponentially in individual homes and spread widely. Following the expiration of Claudius’ decree upon his death, the Jews gradually returned to Rome. Considering the lack of devotion given to the law by the Gentiles, obvious conflicts with the Jewish population was inevitable. Therefore, while Paul was writing to the Jews in Rome, he was also writing to the “God-fearers,” Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism and even attended synagogue without becoming Jews. Moo concludes then that Paul wrote to the Christian community in Rome which consisted of both Jews and Gentiles.

Literary Context

The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Rome to reveal to them the plan of God’s salvation, and the entire epistle can be divided into small sections that build one upon another. Paul discusses humanity’s universal sinfulness (1:18-3:20), to their justification by faith in Christ (3:21-5:21), and then to their sanctification by the Holy Spirit and their future glorification (6-8). Blomberg lists various key ethical topics throughout the remainder of the letter; including the “transformation of body and mind (12:1-2), faithful use of spiritual gifts (12:3-8), Christian love and submission (12:9-13:14), and exercising or restraining one’s freedom (14:1-15:13).

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul relays to his readers the means by which the power of sin is broken; a solution that lies only in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s argumentation is tied to chapters five through seven, which affirms that

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6 Ibid., 395.
7 Schreiner, 13.
10 Ibid.
the condemnation that believers once lived under has been removed, because they have died with Christ, and the curse of the first Adam has been removed by the Second Adam. He affirms Christ’s work on the cross as the basis for the Christian’s liberation from the condemnation of sin through justification by faith, and reveals the sin-conquering ability given by the Holy Spirit so that the law can then be kept.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

The First Pericope: Romans 8:1-4

Romans 8:1

*Oúðên āra νῦν κατάκριμα τοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ·*

The Apostle Paul’s usage of the combination of ἄρα νῦν (“now therefore”) emphatically shows a significant conclusion, drawing from, restating, and elaborating on what has already been discussed in chapters five through seven; but especially 5:12-21. Paul proclaims to the believers in Rome that for those “in Christ Jesus” (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) there is no condemnation (κατάκριμα, katakríma). Moo believes that this katakríma is the curse that came to mankind through Adam’s sin, and he notes that this forensic word is only used in three instances in the New Testament (5:16; 18; 8:1); while the corresponding verb κατάκρινω is found sixteen times. Paul maintains that it is the believer’s union with Christ gives them freedom from both the guilt of sin as well as its power to enslave.

Hendriksen purports that “no condemnation” refers to those who are not only “forensically in Christ Jesus—the guilt of their sins having been removed by his death—but also

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11 Schreiner, 399.
12 Ibid., 395.
spiritually—the sanctifying influences of his Spirit dominating their lives.”\(^\text{15}\) He sees the acts of justification and sanctification as inseparable in this instance, rendering the expression “no condemnation” as implying both legal pardon and personal purification.\(^\text{16}\) The legal, judicial aspects of “no condemnation” are expressed in a functional manner in the Contemporary English Version (CEV), as it says “If you belong to Christ Jesus, you won’t be punished.”\(^\text{17}\)

Romans 8:2

ο γάρ νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος τῆς ζωῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ· ἡ λευθερωσέν αὐτῷ ἀμαρτίας και τοῦ θανάτου

In verse two, readers are introduced to the first argument supporting Paul’s thesis concerning the end of the “legacy of doom” and “develops the idea of Christ granting freedom from ‘the law of sin and death.’”\(^\text{18}\) Paul’s usage of γάρ (gar, for) in verse two explains the reason why the condemnation for those in Christ no longer exists. Schreiner believes the argument of the text “is that condemnation is no longer a reality ‘because’ (γάρ) believers are freed from the power of sin.”\(^\text{19}\) This coordinating conjunction γάρ functions in an explanatory way; there is no condemnation because of the work of Christ to liberate believers.

In describing this freedom that is now available to believers, Paul utilizes the word νόμος (nomos, law) to describe the diametrically opposing forces in the situation. In this, the “nomos of the Spirit of life” that one receives from Christ offers freedom from the “nomos of sin and death.”\(^\text{20}\) Abernathy reveals that νόμος is translated as “...‘law’ [AB, BAGD, BECNT, HNTC, ICC2, LN (33.333), NICNT, NTC, WBC; all versions except GW, NLT], ‘religion’ [HCNT],

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{17}\) Romans 8:1, CEV.
\(^\text{19}\) Schreiner, 399.
\(^\text{20}\) Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*,473.
‘standards’ [GW], ‘power’ [NLT].”\textsuperscript{21} Moo believes that the first instance of νόμος cannot refer to the Mosaic Law, as the “immediate context stresses the incapacity of the law to do what v. 2 describes. It was God acting through his Son who accomplished ‘what the law could not do’ (v. 3).”\textsuperscript{22} In order to correlate the Mosaic Law as the liberating agent from sin as described in verse two, there would have to be an immediate contradiction with verse three.

Throughout Paul’s writings, he often depicted the Mosaic Law as an opposing force to “the Spirit, righteousness, and life. God’s righteousness has come ‘apart from the law’ (3:21; cf. Gal. 2:15-3:14).”\textsuperscript{23} In two other places in Romans, Paul opposes one law (nomos) to another law (3:27 and 7:22-23). Moo reveals that scholars are divided over whether Paul “intends to oppose one function of the Mosaic law to another function of that same law or whether one or both occurrences of ‘law’ might refer to something besides the Mosaic law;” Moo argues the latter.\textsuperscript{24}

Πνέματος (“Spirit”) occurs twenty-two times in this chapter, and all but two of these occurrences are best translated as referring to the Spirit of God; verse 10 and verse 16 refer to the human spirit.\textsuperscript{25} Abernathy concludes that “law of the Spirit of life” can be best described as the “power of the Spirit of God that liberates from the old age and confers life...the power of the life-giving Spirit...It is the Gospel...brought by Christ.”\textsuperscript{26}

Romans 8:3

τὸ γὰρ ἀδύνατον τοῦ νόμου ἐν ὑμῖν ἰδέει διὰ τῆς σαρκὸς, ὁ Θεὸς τὸν ἐνυτὸς ὕπον πέμψας ἐν ὑμοίωματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας ἐν καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτίας κατέκρινεν τὴν ἁμαρτίας ἐν τῇ σαρκί

Again, γὰρ is used in an explanatory manner, linking verses one and two to verses three and four. Schreiner’s interpretation of the syntax of verse three reveals the difficulties contained

\textsuperscript{21} Abernathy, 502.
\textsuperscript{22} Moo, \textit{The Epistle to the Romans}, 474.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Moo, \textit{The NIV Application Commentary}, 248.
\textsuperscript{25} Deibler, 176.
\textsuperscript{26} Abernathy, 504.
within, believing that the clause “for that which the law could not do, because it was weak through the flesh” fails to relate clearly to the remainder of the sentence.\textsuperscript{27} He believes this phrase is an anacoluthon, relating to the contents of the entirety of verses three and four, and summing up the burden described in chapter seven.\textsuperscript{28} Dunn believes that Paul is denigrating the Jewish view of the Torah, which is viewed as “sufficient for righteousness” alone.\textsuperscript{29}

Moo concludes that \textit{nomos} in verse three is clearly the Mosaic Law, and that “the clause succinctly states the most important point Paul makes about this law in the epistle—that it has proved incapable of rescuing people from the domain of sin and death.”\textsuperscript{30} Paul reminds readers that the law has failed, not inherent in the law itself, but rather because it was “weakened by the flesh,” and readers should not think of the flesh as inhibiting the function of the law, as the law “was never given to secure righteousness.”\textsuperscript{31} This “weakness” on account of flesh is a “unique phrase to the New Testament that recapitulates the argument of the preceding chapter about human arrogance and the quest for honor, which corrupt the law and destroy its ability to achieve the good.”\textsuperscript{32}

God has done then what the law could never do, by sending “his own Son” as a sacrifice. The sacrificial focus of the sending of the Son indicates “full participation” of Christ in the human condition, “in the likeness of sinful flesh.”\textsuperscript{33} Paul’s writings reveal the fact that the Son “possesses the necessary requirement to act as our substitute,” much like he does in Galatians 4:4 when describing the Incarnation, “born of a woman, born under the law.”\textsuperscript{34} Coming in the “\textit{homoiooma} (\textit{homoio\-\omega\-\mu\-\alpha\-\tau\-\i\-\i}) of sinful flesh (\textit{\sigma\-\alpha\-\rho\-\kappa\-\delta\-\z\-\i\-\z\-\z\-\z\-\z\-\z\-\z}, \textit{\alpha\-\mu\-\alpha\-\rho\-\tau\-\i\-\z\-\z\-\z})” according to Moo, “probably has the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Schreiner, 401.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{29} J. D. G. Dunn, \textit{Romans 1-8: World Biblical Commentary}, (Dallas, TX: Word Press, 1988), 419-420.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Moo, \textit{The Epistle to the Romans}, 478.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 478.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Jewett, 483.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Moo, \textit{The Epistle to the Romans}, 478.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 479.
\end{itemize}
nuance of ‘form’ rather that ‘likeness’ or ‘copy’...in other words, the word does not express superficial or outward similarity, but inward and real participation or ‘expression.’”

The New Testament doctrine of the flesh is primarily Pauline; and is used to describe the principle of sinfulness (Gal. 5:17; Jude 23), the unregenerate “sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3), and those who live “after the flesh” (Rom. 8:5). The word σάρξ (sarx) in verse three means “body” or “human nature,” however, Deibler points out that it is “modified by the genitive ‘of sin,’ not indicating that Christ’s nature was sinful, but that ours is, and that the body or nature he assumed, though different from ours in that it was not sinful, resembled it.”

Paul’s use of sarx, according to Moo, is “one of the most debated points in his theology;” declaring that sometimes it was used to refer to the physical body as a whole (1 Cor. 6:16; 2 Cor. 7:1, 12:7; Gal. 5:13, 16; Eph. 5:31); while other times, it described the person generally (Rom. 3:20). While the Greeks generally used sarx in this way, Moo believes that the influence of the Old Testament word basar “humankind in general” (Gen. 6:12b “all flesh has corrupted their ways”) shaped Paul’s usage of sarx. With this understanding, the dichotomy between the flesh and the Spirit is obvious; as “flesh” describes individuals who live outside of a relationship with Christ.

The semantic range of the word sarx is one that emphasizes the truth that the range of an English word will rarely capture the specific meaning of the Greek. Mounce points out that while σάρξ can be translated in a variety of ways, it has no exact Greek counterpart. Among the various translations are “flesh,” “human effort,” “illness,” “man,” “no one,” “ordinary way,”

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35 Ibid.
37 Ellis W. Deibler, Jr., A Semantic and Structural Analysis of Romans, (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998), 177.
38 Moo, The NIV Application Commentary, 253.
39 Ibid.
“outwardly,” “sinful nature,” and “that nature;” and while all of these words partially overlap the meaning, none are exact equivalents.  

Romans 8:4

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Verse four begins with the typical ἵνα (“in order that”) clause, revealing the purpose of the redemptive action of verse three. The τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου refers to a “fixed form of righteousness, in this case the requirement of the Mosaic Law conceived in its unity.”41 Jewett reveals that “in the LXX, δικαίωματα is employed to refer to statutes and requirements, but no commandments (cf. Gen. 26:5).”42 The usage of the singular word δικαίωμα (dikaiomata) is rightly interpreted in the majority of major translations as “righteous requirement,” including the ESV, NASB, NKJV, and HCSB translations. The KJV renders the dikaiomata as “righteousness” and the ASV translates it as “ordinance to the law.” Moo believes that the NIV translations of dikaiomata as a plural is misleading, “Paul does not claim that the ‘righteous requirements of the law’ are fulfilled in us.”43 Moo finds the necessity for the singularity of the word, along with the passive form of “fulfill” as suggesting a separate idea: “God in Christ has fulfilled the entirety of the law’s demand on our behalf.”44

Second Pericope: Romans 8:5-8

Throughout this second pericope, Paul presents the contrasts between the Spirit and the flesh. Moo believes that Paul clearly states his intention, “to show that sarx (flesh) brings death

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41 Jewett, 485.
42 Ibid.
43 Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 249.
44 Ibid., 250.
while the Spirit brings life (v.6).”  
Schreiner believes that verses five through eight give further explanation as to how Christians are enabled to fulfill the law; “they are no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit.”

In these verses, those who see the law as righteousness are offered great refutation from Paul, and he reminds them that regardless of their familiarity with the commandments of the law, they can never keep them. The only hope for keeping the commandments “is to be united with the new Adam (Rom. 8:1-4), Jesus Christ. Those who are in Christ have received his Spirit and thereby are enabled to keep the law.”

Romans 8:5

{o`i ga`r kata` s`arka` o`nntes t`a t`h s`ar`koj f`ro`no`sojv, o`i de` k`a`t`a `p`ne`jma t`a t`o`u `p`ne`jma`t`o`j}

The participle o`nntes “being,” which occurs in the relative clause here, substitutes for “walk” from verse four. Abernathy says, “The phrase o`i ga`r kata` s`arka` o`nntes ‘those being according to’ is translated ‘those whose lives are determined by’ [HNTC, ICC2], ‘people who are ruled by’ [CEV], ‘those who are dominated by’ [NLT], ‘who live as (their human nature) tells them to’ [TEV].

The main verb is f`ro`no`sojv (phronema, “mind”) and describes the basic direction of the human will, a noun only used in Romans 8 in the New Testament (vv. 6, 7, 27); however, there is extensive usage of the cognate verb in Phil. 1:7; 2:2, 5; 3:15, 19; and 4:5. To “set one’s mind” on either the thing “of the flesh” or “of the Spirit” means to set one’s will to “adopt an entire way of thinking and living based upon the essential nature of a person, whether unregenerate or

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45 Ibid.
46 Schreiner, 395.
47 Ibid., 413.
48 Deibler, 180.
49 Abernathy, 512.
50 Moo, The NIV Application Commentary, 250.
This dichotomy describes the universal condition of every human being, either saved or lost; an overwhelming conviction to act according to their sinful or sanctified minds.

Deibler reveals that the phrase τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος “the things of the Spirit,” could refer to spiritual things, however, in light of Paul’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit in chapter eight, this reflects a “grammatical parallelism expressing conflict between two opposing forces, it is more natural to take “the things of the Spirit” the same way, as subjective genitives, with ‘desires’ being supplied as in 4b.”52 In this, Paul is speaking in ontological terminology, revealing that believers will act according to the way of the Spirit that controls their thoughts and actions, focusing their lives on what God wants instead of fleshly, worldly desires.53

Romans 8:6

τὸ γὰρ φρονήμα τῆς σαρκὸς θάνατος, τὸ δὲ φρονήμα τοῦ πνεύματος ζωὴ καὶ εἰρήνη·

Moo concludes that γὰρ (“for”) is “neither causal nor explanatory, but continuative.”54 Again the tension between flesh and Spirit is continued, along with the substantially equivalent consequences of both. A mind which is set “on the flesh” will lead the individual to “death” (θάνατος, thanatos), while the mind set “on the Spirit” will lead to “life and peace” (ζωὴ καὶ εἰρήνη, zoe kai eirene)55.

This “life and peace” is both an objective relationship with God, as well as a subjective experience.56 The objective reality of salvation that a believer has entered into a friendship with God, and has ascertained a future eschatological blessing, while the subjective inner peace is the joyful, inward feeling of tranquility that comes from being reconciled to God.57 Jesus describes

51 Abernathy, 513.
52 Deibler, 180.
53 Abernathy, 514.
54 Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 487.
55 Schreiner, 412.
56 Abernathy, 515.
57 Ibid.
this two-fold “life and peace” in the Gospel of John, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” 58 Seen throughout 5-8, both death and life are referred to in the fullest of eschatological contexts, and for the individual who is in flesh or Spirit, there is no triviality involved in either status, as each has tremendous, eternal ramifications.

Romans 8:7

διότι τὸ φρύνημα τῆς σαρκὸς ἔχθρα εἰς θεόν, τῷ γὰρ νόκω τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ὑποτάσσεται, οὐδὲ γὰρ δύναται.

Schreiner says that the διότι (diotι, because) in verse seven is the “ground for the assertions made about ‘those who are according to the flesh’ in verses five and six. 59 The reason that those whose minds are “set on the flesh are hostile to God” is because the flesh thinks and acts according to the selfish nature. Moo reveals that “As shorthand for the principle and power of the godless world, ‘flesh’ and the mind-set characteristic of it are necessarily hostile to God and all His purposes.” 60 Those individuals who fail to treasure the infinite worth and value of the glory of God, because they are His enemies, will be punished with “eschatological judgment.” 61

The failure to “submit to God’s law” is a natural byproduct of a fleshly world view. Moo says that “in light of vv. 3-4 (and chap. 7), we might expect ‘law of God’ to refer to the Mosaic Law. On the other hand this may be one of those verses in which Paul uses nomos to depict the demand of God generally rather than any particular expression of that demand.” 62 Schreiner disagrees with the latter assessment, saying “Moo’s suggestion that the ‘law’ may refer to God’s

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58 John 10:10, ESV.
59 Schreiner, 412.
60 Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 488.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
demand rather than the Mosaic law is unlikely, for it is the inability to keep the Mosaic law that has center stage in Romans 7, and the Jew’s failure to keep the same was argued in Rom.2.”

Romans 8:8

οὐ δύνανται

The phrase οὐ δύνανται ‘and the ones being the (the) flesh’ is translated “If we follow our desires’ [CEV], ‘those controlled by the sinful nature’ [NIV], ‘those who obey their human nature’ [TEV].” In this instance, being “in the flesh” refers to the unregenerate state; a condition that is dominated by the indwelling of sin, and therefore unable to please God.

Paul goes further in verse eight in describing the plight of those who are at enmity with God, not only do they refuse to submit to the law of God, they “cannot” keep the law (οὐδὲ γὰρ δύνανται, οὐδὲ γὰρ δύναται). Schreiner concludes that Paul is not speaking here of a “physical inability to keep God’s law but of a moral inability to do so. He does not conclude that those of the flesh are not responsible for their sins because of their inability...he holds them responsible for their sins even though they cannot keep God’s law.”

APPLICATION

The Apostle Paul beautifully describes the new life that is available for the believer in Christ Jesus; a life that is free from condemnation, free from the oppression of sin and death, the ability through Christ to achieve righteousness, a reconciled relationship with the Father, and a Spirit-led mind that leads to both life and peace. Through the atonement of Christ Jesus, the power of sin and death has been defeated, and for the believer there is no longer any condemnation, as they are hidden in Christ. This position of being “in Christ Jesus” empowers

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63 Schreiner, 412.
64 Abernathy, 517.
65 Ibid.
66 Schreiner, 412.
67 Ibid.
believers to live “according to the Spirit,” as the Holy Spirit’s ministry enables believers to experience victory over the power of sin and death, and live lives that both honor and please God. Christ’s victory over sin and death offers believers liberation from each of these enemies, and offers both abundant and eternal life immediately for the Christian.

The believer must be careful to guard the mind against the wiles of the devil, and in modern society, this necessity must be intentionally addressed. With the advent of the internet, smart phones, tablets and high-speed computers, information (both bad and good) is available immediately. It is imperative that believers watch what they “feed their minds” continually, through movies watched and music listened to. It is imperative that Christians develop a “mind-set of the Spirit,” focusing on the things of God and not fleshly desires. It is this kind of thinking and lifestyle that is pleasing to God, and leads to life and peace. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul encourages the believers in Philippi to develop the “mind of Christ,” one that exemplifies the Savior’s humble Incarnation and obedient, sacrificial death on the cross (Phil. 2:1-11).

CONCLUSION

Without question, Romans 8 is perhaps the most liberating and life-giving passages in the entirety of Scripture. The freedom offered to those “in Christ” enables believers to serve and honor God fully and without hesitation or reservation. The truths offered through these verses breathe encouragement into the lives of followers of Jesus.

The progression of the Christian life, the sanctification process, is one that is both secure in Christ, and requires serious spiritual disciplining. Moo agrees with this assessment, and says “If we are serious about progressing in the Christian life, we must seek every day to feed our
Prayer, quiet time with the Lord, and Bible study are all spiritual muscles that believers should exercise daily to develop a strong “mind-set” of the Spirit of God.

Moo makes two conclusions through these verses. First, even though the “law of God” is still a standard by which the “conduct of unbelievers can be measured and condemned, believers are no longer ‘under the law’ (Rom. 6:14, 15), subject to its binding authority (7:4); but unbelievers are subject still to this power of the ‘old age.’” Secondly, he determines that Paul’s assessment of the unregenerate may be “summed up in the theological categories of ‘total depravity’ and ‘total inability.’” There is nothing that an unregenerate person (“in the flesh”) can do to save themselves, nor do they desire salvation without the intercession of the Holy Spirit.

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68 Moo, The NIV Application Commentary, 257.
69 Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 488.
70 Ibid.


Romans 8:1-8 (ESV)

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

3 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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

5 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.

6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death,

but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.