

Romans 8:1-11 (13 July 2014)

What is the world's biggest problem? Survey across EU in 2011: top 9, reverse order: spread of nuclear weapons; war; infectious disease; increasing global population; energy supply; terrorism; TOP 3: economic situation; climate change; poverty and water supply.

Wonder what you think of those: would that be your order? Would that be your top 3? Admirable list, but they're all wrong – at least according to the bible they are. The world's single biggest problem isn't on it. Not only biggest problem, it's our oldest, most original problem too. It's the one that lies behind at least 7 of these 9 other problems, and is a contributing factor to the 8th as well. Have you guessed yet? I want to suggest this morning that **our biggest problem is sin.**

Those of you here last week: talked about what we call original sin – the idea that in every human being is a basic instinct to be selfish, to rebel against God, to say I'm going to run my life, my way and look after no.1. And our conclusion was that we need help. The best rule book in the world can't make us good. Even with good upbringing, good examples, good boundaries, good education, it's still just there in us. And it matters, for two reasons: the first we looked at last week – it stops us being good. No matter how hard we try, it's not a fair fight, the bad side of us wins out too often.

But there's a more fundamental problem, one which Paul dealt with in the first part of Romans: it doesn't just stop us being good, it also separates us from God. He's perfect, and he didn't make us to live this way. He's also just, so he can't ignore sin, he can't say it just doesn't matter. Worst of all, if God is the source of life, and sin cuts us off from God then we face the ultimate penalty: death. Not just physical death, but spiritual death – separation from God forever.

So we need help on two levels: to live right but even more fundamentally, to be right with God. We'll deal with living right later and look at how Jesus helps us to overcome the challenge of Romans 7, that we can't obey God. But first, we need to address the most fundamental issue of all: where we stand with God. How can we set things right with him? Or rather, given that we can't make things right ourselves, how does God fix that? What help does he give us?

Romans 8 is probably the most glorious chapter of the bible, because in one chapter it summarises the whole story of the bible. It tackles head on these fundamental issues which have dogged human beings throughout history, and sets out a manifesto for what a completely new approach to life looks like. It's the climax of everything Paul has been arguing in the previous 7 chapters and sets the course for what he then says in the rest of the book. But it's pretty dense stuff, so we'll take this first paragraph line by line, phrase by phrase so you can see what Paul is arguing here. It's life-changing stuff, and it's the heart of the gospel, so in some ways we can never go over this often enough. And I hope that as we do this morning, it will ring loud and clear for you again, that you will see it with fresh eyes. Perhaps for some of you, it will be the first time you've heard it. And if that's the case, then today you will be hearing the real heart of what Christians believe for the very first time. Which is kind of cool.

So where does Paul start? (Follow in bible page ???) 'Therefore' – whenever we see 'therefore' we need to ask what is it 'there for'? Cue that this is going to be a summary of where we've got to: Paul is moving to his conclusion. No time to reprise everything he's said so far, but next phrase is clue: 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. Glorious phrase, but what does it mean? What condemnation were we under anyway? What does it mean to be in Christ?

Need verse 2 as explanation: READ. We'll work backwards. What condemnation were we under: our slavery to what Paul calls 'the law of sin and death'. This is where we pick up what we looked at last week: the problem of sin. Our instinct to disobey God, which has such a power that Paul says it is like a law, it's a rule, it's just something that's always there and we can't get away from. If you were here 2 weeks ago, you'd have heard that it's a form of slavery, hence our need to be set free from it. And, as we have said, its ultimate effect is death: it separates us from God, the source of life. Hence it is the law of sin and death, and we need to be set free from it.

So back to the first part of the verse: what sets us free from the law of sin and death: READ v2 again. What sets us free is the law of the Spirit of life. There's two opposing forces to our two problems. To the problem of death, Paul says there is life. And to the problem of sin, Paul says there is God's Spirit. So that seems like a good solution: life counteracts death, Spirit counteracts sin. But how does it work? 'Through Christ Jesus'. Somehow Jesus releases this power that brings life from death and a new way of the Spirit instead of the old way of sin. It is through Christ Jesus, for people who are in Christ Jesus. Can you see that in v1 and v2.

OK, are you with me so far? What Paul is saying in the first two verses is that we have until now been prisoners/slaves to our sin, which leads to death - that's the condemnation we are under before God. But Jesus provides a way out, he sets us free from this, bringing us life and a new way of the Spirit, God's Spirit.

But I imagine some of you are now saying: OK Matt, but how does this work? How does Jesus make this happen? Let's follow the argument, and move onto verse 3. Before we do, we need to remember an assumption that we've covered in the previous 2 chapters: why did God give his people the law? So that we could live the sort of life that God intended us to. Ultimately so that we could be good and be right with God. That was the plan: when God made his covenant with Abraham and then with Israel – I will be your God and you will be my people – what were both sides of the deal: God rescued his people and called them his own, just a free act of love and of grace. But our side in return was *to obey him*. That was what was meant to rescue us from the curse of Adam you might say, the law of sin which keeps ruining our lives as human beings.

But as we've discovered, there's a problem. We can't obey it, so the law doesn't make us right with God. Hence Paul says in v3: READ v3a. Our sin undermines the law's power to make us right with God. Nothing wrong with the law, as we've seen, but the problem is *us*.

So *we* can't make us right with God, *the law* can't make us right with God... So how does God sort it out? READ v3 again. So God sorts it out by: (a) sending his own son; (b) in the likeness of sinful man; (c) to be a sin offering. 3 key phrases, which we'll look at in turn. God sends His own son: this is what we call the incarnation, the message of Christmas: Jesus comes to us.

Notice the bigger dimension of why Jesus comes: not just to show us that God loves us, or to show us what God is like, or even to show us how to live – all true, of course. But he has a specific problem to sort out: this fundamental issue of our sin that separates us from God.

His own son 'in the likeness of sinful man.' This is why it's really important that we have a clear idea of who Jesus is. The early church spent 3 ½ centuries thrashing this out, but in the end it came down to this: fully man *and* fully God. But it's all here in Romans: he's God's son 'in the likeness of sinful man'. Not that he's sinful but that he has the same likeness i.e. he is a real human being. Not just a ghost wafting around, and not just a good man with insights into God. Fully God, fully human.

But one with a purpose: 'to be a sin offering.' What does that mean? Again, you need to go back to your OT law to understand this. When people disobeyed the law they needed to be put right with God. Sin offerings were a sacrifice offered at the temple which achieved that purpose. The people deserved punishment: the animal died in their place for their forgiveness. If you want to read in detail, look at the Day of Atonement in Leviticus ch16.

Coming back to Romans ch8: extraordinary phrase: Jesus himself, the son of God, was the sin offering. In other words, Jesus dies for the sins of the people. That's what a sin offering did. Jesus has no sin of his own weighing him down, so he can die on behalf of everyone else. And because he's God's son, and not just a bull or a goat, he can die once for all time, for everyone on the planet. USE BOOK ILLUSTRATION.

So Paul can say: READ v3c. Justice demands punishment, and we all deserve God's judgement and condemnation for our sin: our selfishness and disobedience towards God. It needs to be condemned: and it is condemned, through Jesus on the cross: God condemns sin in sinful man... but for a reason. Yes, for our salvation, but also for our capacity to lead a new kind of life: READ v4.

God still wants us to live righteously. But how? We can't do it in our own strength. Jesus wins our freedom, but we still need help to live righteously. The answer, as Paul says in v4, is to live 'not according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.' God gives us help, his Spirit, a new power in our lives so that we can live as he longs for us to live. It's no longer an unfair fight. The Spirit's power is there to transform us slowly into the people he longs for us to be.

So our rescue is through Christ Jesus, but also in Christ Jesus. In other words, Jesus is not just a means to an end, he is the end. In a deep way, we join him, we are identified with him, we are 'in' Him, just as he is 'in' us by His Spirit. It's the language of covenant, not contract. A promise of love, of being joined together. (PAUSE)

I've chosen to spend most of today going through the first 4 verses line by line. I hope you feel that's been worthwhile, and that you've been able to follow the argument. Most of all, I hope that it's expanded your view of just how great God is, and just what a wonderful thing Jesus has done, rescuing us, and setting us free. Let me read again these verses straight through: hopefully now, more of it will make sense and you can see the argument Paul is making: READ v1-4.

As I close, just to mention the remaining verses briefly. Now that we have the chance of new life, a life lived in the power of the Spirit of God, life looks like a straightforward choice: the old way, largely controlled by our sinful nature, or the new way of God's Spirit: READ v5. And the good news for Christians is right there in v9a: READ. We have God's Spirit, and if we have any cause to doubt that, look at the last part of the passage: READ v11b. Wow.

To finish where I started: the bible is sometimes caricatured as not being interested in the problems of the world: in poverty or terrorism or climate change. Nothing could be further from the truth: these are things that every Christian should engage with, because God is interested in the whole of life. But so often the world is in denial about the deeper problem that lies underneath, which unless it is dealt with will never fix the obvious problems: our sin. Simply creating more laws, more rules, more punishments doesn't work. We need a new power, a completely new way of living. It is a way which God gives by his Spirit, and it is the only way. We are not just earnest do-gooders: we are God-lovers living life in a new dimension with a new purpose. READ v1-2. Amen.