

Sermon Series: Unshakeable

Building our lives on the promises of God

#8 No condemnation now I dread – Romans 8:1-4

There are many great tourist attractions to visit in New York City, but there's one site not far from Times Square that's **probably not** on your list.

A billboard spanning 8 metres wide, weighing 700kgs, with over 300 light bulbs, constantly, mercilessly, unceasingly, displays the ever-increasing US **national debt**. It's known as the **US National Debt Clock**.

Australia has a national debt clock too.¹ Ours is only a website, but, like the US debt clock, it is constantly ticking over our **ever-increasing shared debt**.²

The creator of the US debt clock, Seymour Durst, claimed his clock was a **warning system**. He said, "**if it bothers** people, then it's working."

Religion's Debt Clock

In New Testament times priests and temple rituals of the Hebrews acted **like a** kind of **spiritual debt clock** for the people. A person's moral and spiritual status was often spoken of using **financial terms**. People raised on Old Testament laws for life readily interchanged "debts" and "sins".

For example, note that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, Lord, "Forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12), [Gk. *opheilēmata*] the Greek word meaning a person's "dues" or "obligations".³

Every ancient Jewish person had a keen sense of **personal duty towards God and towards others**. They knew **how holy** God is, and they knew the **great gap** between God's goodness and their own moral failings. They were in no doubt of their need for much mercy and grace.

This gives us a helpful background to Paul's great promise of God in Romans 8:1 – "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

¹ Australiandebtclock.com.au

² In 2021 the Australian Government debt outstanding was \$843 billion. It will rise to around \$963 billion 45% of GDP.

³ Matthew, formerly a tax collector (Matthew 9:9), made a living by coercing people to pay their dues to Rome but heard Jesus' offer of free pardon from spiritual debts owed to God

In the previous chapter the Apostle has wrestled with frustration, crying out due to his **own conscience** – knowing his own failings and wretchedness and asking: “Who will deliver me from this ‘body of death’?” Paul was a great Christian missionary, yet he struggled in his heart with the knowledge of his debts owed to God. He even calling himself “the chief of sinners”⁴ and deserving of judgement. If Paul, a great leader, needed this promise of God, then **no-one is exempt** from the need for God’s mercy and grace.

The story goes that Dianne Shay, Greg Davies, Chris Appleby and me all died and gathered in heaven’s waiting room. On the walls of the waiting room were many analog clocks, some with hands whirring slowly, others spinning quickly. Dianne asked St Peter about the clocks and Peter said, “Those are **sin-o-meters** - each displays the number of wrongs people commit each day. The speed of the clock’s hands represents the greater number of sins per day.” Looking more closely now, Dianne could see her own clock, the hands spinning slowly. Then she found Greg Davies’ sin-o-meter. It was moving faster than hers (phew!). She keenly looked for the Vicar’s sin-o-meter and there it was - spinning faster than both hers and Greg’s clocks. But try as she might, she could not find Chris Appleby’s sin-o-meter. She asked St Peter who said, “Oh, Chris, well, it gets quite hot in heaven’s gatehouse, so we put his sin-o-meter out there **as a fan** to keep us all cool!”

No-one is **exempt** from the need for God’s mercy and pardon. As Paul wrote in Romans 3:23, “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”⁵

In our own time, it seems to me, there are at least **two kinds of people**:

1. There are those on the one hand who **lower the bar**. These people like to say to God, “**Take a chill pill...** If only You knew how tough it is down here God, you wouldn’t put such **high demands** of love and justice upon my life.” But, of course, as we heard last week, God *does* fully understand our plight. And more’s the point, we know that lowering the standards of love for ourselves can never lead to peace and wholeness in

⁴ 1 Tim. 1:13-15

⁵ The bible doesn’t say we can do no good as sinners, but that there is no one without the need for God’s forgiveness and help (except for Christ)

the world. Worse still, too often we like to **impose higher standards** of love and justice **upon others**.⁶

2. The second group is those who **strive to be perfect**. These are they who say, "If only God would look upon all **my good works**, and value the uprightness of my life compared to others."⁷ The problem here is a **deluded ego**, supposing one's own holiness measures anywhere near God's goodness. And, we know that obedience to rules and moral codes **doesn't change the heart** within can lead to a burdensome **legalism**.

Pause and reflect – Do either of these two types **best describes you** with regard to God's high standards for love and justice? Can you allow God to gently challenge your own views today?

The Apostle Paul was once the **second type** of person. In Philippians ch. 3 Paul lists the many superior moral and spiritual qualifications he used to rely on to be acceptable before God. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in [their own righteous acts]", said Paul, "I have more."⁸ "But," he said, "After coming to know Christ I count **all my former striving** as **loss**."

Despite all **his outward religious trophies and achievements**, Paul's inner life was still found wanting. The knowledge of his failure to love, the guilt of his many transgressions, and the weight of knowing he deserved great judgement left him asking, "**Who will deliver me?** Who can free me from these chains?"

It's the Gospel of Jesus that answered Paul's deep questions. In the great declaration of Romans 8:1 the "**therefore**" refers back to the last verse of chapter 7 where Paul **gives thanks** "to God through **Jesus** Christ our Lord".

And what is it that Christ has done for him? The Greek words point to an **enduring, continuing freedom from condemnation**, even when God's judgment on our words and actions is rightly deserved. Note that Paul says the promise is for all who trust in Christ Jesus.⁹

Do you come today with any **uncertainty** about God's readiness to forgive you when you fail to love or when you act unjustly?

⁶ Canadian singer Bruce Cockburn: "Everybody loves to see justice done... to somebody else"

⁷ E.g. going to church, giving to charities, never convicted of even petty crimes, etc.

⁸ Phil. 3:4

⁹ *ouden ara nyn katakrima* - permanent, present, and complete lack of "condemnation," for a penalty due.

In Romans chapter 8 Paul explains how God's promise works...

² For the law of the Spirit^[a] of life in Christ Jesus has set you^[b] free from the law of sin and of 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 to deal with sin**,¹⁰ he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.^[a]

Laws and commandments **cannot change the heart** and spirit of people – and **legalism** brings no true wholeness or peace. In the same way, **lowering one's standards for love** has no place either. The laws of God have “just” and right requirements. They act as a **warning system** to us of the seriousness of failing to love, and of our inability to clear our own debts and find peace.

But with the Gospel, God offers us, in Christ, true pardon for our debts, and freedom from the condemnation we deserve.¹¹ **How can this be?** Elsewhere, Paul says Jesus was made to “**be sin** who knew no sin”.¹² Theologically speaking, this is Christ our **redeemer**¹³ [or, our **sin-offering** to God – the right payment for a lasting freedom].

Now, when God looks upon us, **God sees us as joined with Christ** – beneficiaries of his righteousness – a goodness that fulfills the requirements of God's holy standards of love.

But more than this, God **not only pardons** and frees us, but **generates in us** the will and the ability to live and love in the ways of God's Spirit.

The great hymn writer of the 18th Century, Charles Wesley, put today's promise of God down in lyrics still loved by congregations world-wide. He asked the question Paul asked: “**And can it be** that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?” In a later stanza he answers his own question boldly, saying, “**No condemnation now I dread** Jesus, and all in Him is mine! Alive in Him, my living Head, And clothed in righteousness divine, Bold I approach th'eternal throne, And claim the crown, through Christ my own.” Amazing Love indeed.

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¹⁰ Or “as a sin-offering”

¹¹ Ephes. 3:8-9

¹² 2 Cor. 5:21

¹³ A term from marketplace practices of granting slaves their freedom through payment on their behalf