

“TESTING TIMES: THERE ARE TOO MANY RULES!”

March 4th, 2018

Lent 3

Romans 8:1-10

[Pastor removes stole and walks away from the pulpit.]

Folks, we need to talk. I'll just be honest. I'm worried about you. I'm worried about the way you're living. The way you have some of your thinking messed up. I think that this is something that needs to be pointed out and explained to you, because it's not something that you're going to get coming to a church like this. They aren't going to tell you what you really need to hear—something that you already know. I bet you can even feel it in your gut. And I know why they don't talk about this in church, but we'll get to that. This is something that you really need to hear. It's something that is basic and fundamental to being a human. I know it. You know it. Everyone out there in the world knows it. Do you want to live your whole life completely ignorant of what everyone else knows? So let's just come right out and say it: you aren't trying hard enough to keep God's law.

I know all of this because I'm part of you. I can feel what you feel. I know what you know. I'm that part of you that whispers down in your gut how guilty you are every time you mess up. And, I'm that part of you that whispers how good you are every time you keep God's law and make him happy. I think that I deserve a voice. I know you are already listening to me. You may not even realize just how much you listen to me. But, it's time we talked directly. It's time, face to face, that you hear what I have to say. From my perspective, there are two things that could be true, or are both true, or maybe sometimes are true or sometimes aren't. It doesn't actually matter to me as long as you believe one of them is true. Either the things God tells you to do are good, and you are able to keep his law, or the things God tells you to do are bad, and you can't keep his law.

I don't care which one you choose to believe at this moment. I bet you even bounce back and forth every day. That's fine with me. Believe what you want. It doesn't matter, because we both know you think one of those thoughts is true. Take the first one for instance. God's law is good, and you can keep it. That sounds like a good pious thought. Embrace it. Certainly, God's law is good. Doesn't he want you to try your hardest to keep every single one of his laws? Plus, don't you feel good when you do? It's so much easier to know your place in life when you know that God is happy with you because you please him. It's so much easier to talk to people, especially the ones who struggle, because you can know you're better than them. God's law is good because it let's me feel good about myself. And, you know what, if I focus on keeping God's law enough, I can even forget about Jesus. Most of the time, I keep God's law well enough that I don't even need him.

I know some of you are thinking that's not how you feel at all. You've never reached that exalted feeling you get where you are confident of the place you've earned before God. But that's okay. You'll probably get there some day if you try hard enough. But, I bet you thought the second statement makes sense. God's law is not good, and I can't keep it. That sounds a little contrary to God's Word, but you're just being honest. And we have to be honest. You try to keep God's law, but all you see is that you never do. How could you ever be pleasing to God? His rules just seem so unfair. I know the things that I want to do. I know the things that please me, and some of them are things God says I shouldn't do. How can

that be right? It's just easier if I pretend that part of God's law doesn't apply. Or, if I just do it once in a while. It's so bad then. Because, if we're being honest, who can keep God's law? No one can. And if you try, you just end up despairing. God doesn't want us to be unhappy, right? And, you know what, if I focus on what I want enough, I can even forget about Jesus. Most of the time, what he wants to give me doesn't seem to match up with what I want anyway.

[Pastor returns to pulpit and puts on the stole.]

If you're like me, there's a voice inside of you that whispers all those lies, or ones just like them. The voice tries to tell you some twisted version of the truth about God and what he says in his Word. Theologians might call the voice the *opinio legis* or something like that, but it's something that we all know so intimately that we don't even recognize it all the time. It's there, and most of the time we might even just believe it. We might believe that God is more pleased with us when we are keeping his law. But, that's a lie the voice tells us. Or, we might believe that God makes unfair rules, and we can't possibly keep them, so why try? Or maybe we should just despair? But, that's a lie, too. The two options that voice gives you are both half-truths. It wants you to think either God's law is good and you can keep it, or that God's law is bad, and you can't keep it. But, the truth is neither of those statements. The truth according to the Bible is that God's law *is* good, but you *can't* keep it.

The voice doesn't want you to realize this because when you do, you turn away from yourself. You stop seeing yourself as the source of good and pleasure. You stop thinking that you can earn God's favor. So, we should all turn away from that voice, and instead we should listen to what God wants us to know. The apostle Paul lays it out so clearly for us in this lesson. You cannot keep God's law, but Jesus did. You should be condemned, but instead God condemned Jesus. Listen for those two points: **"What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering"** (Romans 8:3). It's not often that we say God's Word is powerless, but in this case it is true. God's law does not give you the power to keep his law. So Jesus did it for you.

The result is one of the most beautiful statements in all of Scripture: **"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"** (Romans 8:1). There are few passages in the Bible as lovely as this. Just think about it. That voice is going to try and distract you by thinking you can keep God's law perfectly. But, it knows you are going to fail eventually. Then, in your despair at failing, it's going to convince you that you are garbage. That God hates you, that you have earned hell for yourself through your sin. There's just too many rules for us to keep! How does this passage, **"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"** answer that accusation? It says, "You're right, voice. There's too many rules. I have earned hell for myself, but even still God does not condemn me." God doesn't give you what you deserve. Instead, in Jesus, he gives you what Jesus deserves. He gives us every blessing that he would give to his one and only Son. Before God, the judge of all, there is condemnation. All that's left is the smiling face of God, who sees only children that please him.

God wants you to know, then, that you are pleasing to him. You are pleasing because within you is the Spirit of God. There is another nature that you have beside your own sinful one. God wants you to know how different it is. Where the sinful nature sees no way out except by earning God's forgiveness, the Spirit within you from God, knows that forgiveness has already been earned. Where the sinful nature sees despair, the Spirit sees

hope. Where the sinful nature whispers God's wrath, the Spirit proclaims loudly that there is peace through Christ. This is what God says:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. (Romans 8:5-10)

I had a conversation with a teen girl a number of years ago. It was at Camp Phillip, and we were talking because she had some struggles that she was going through. So, we were sitting on a picnic table and talking during some down time. What troubled her were thoughts that she was too involved with things at her school, and not involved enough with her church. She felt troubled by the fact that she didn't help out often, or sometimes didn't even attend church. As we talked, she told me about how she had recently broken up with her boyfriend because of some sins they had committed. All of this was weighing on her heart, and then she said, "One of my friends told me that God is a God of second chances. Is that true?" I think that she wanted me to say, "Yes," that she could try again and maybe this time she could go to church, have another boyfriend, and through all of it, be pleasing to God.

But, I told her, "No, God is not a God of second chances." If God is a God of second chances, we're no better off. Even if he was a God of 1000 chances, we'd still be doomed. The thought that she could try harder and maybe succeed made her feel better, but God is not a God of second chances, and if he were, then we'd all be condemned. Instead I told her, God is a God of grace. He doesn't condemn us, even though that is what we deserve. You cannot try harder and hope to please God. He is already pleased with you. Even in your sin, that has not changed. There are too many rules for us to follow, but they're merely a test. All of the rules remind us to repent and turn to God. There you will find that he makes you alive by giving you himself, and his Son, and his Spirit. There you will find the true freedom that does not come from following God's law, but by trusting in his promises. So, quiet down that voice in your head, and listen instead to the voice of God. He says, to you, "**There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**" Amen.