

Galatians 5.16-25

No Pain, No Gain

Sermon #3 in a Series on Biblical Change and the Fruit of the Spirit

Preached by Pastor Glenn Durham at Dominion Covenant Church, Omaha, Nebraska, on May 15, 2005.

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Main Idea: *Those who belong to Christ gain much from mortifying the sinful nature.*

Introduction

[Walgreen's illustration, ending with, "That's *un-American.*"]

The topic of mortification of self may be un-American, but one of the underlying ideas is not. You may remember it if you played a varsity sport in High School or participated in college athletics: "Two-a-days." Those couple of weeks of fall football training where you practiced twice each day in the sweltering sun. Running the bleachers, lining up for endless wind sprints, pushing yourself into you literally puked. And coach would say, "No pain, no gain."

Two-a-days were not fun. No one endures that physical training for the fun of the training. For what gain do athletes push through the pain of great physical disciplines? Is not the gain being *in the game*?

We saw an example in this year's Duke basketball team. When the season began, no one expected Coach K to pull off another miracle and end up at the Big Dance. Too much of his talent had graduated or elected to turn pro—this would be a "rebuilding" year. But Coach K had something else in mind. He was not interested in watching the tournament on television; he wanted to be in the game. So he went to his boys and said, "We are not the most talented team this year. But we can go to the NCAAs if we are the most disciplined and in the best shape." So they doubled the already demanding physical training which is part of Duke Basketball in order to be able to play in the game. They did not win it all, but they finished about 100 places higher than anyone expected, they added another Sweet 16 appearance to their run, and those played in the NCAA tournament.

Galatians 5.24 describes those who are Christ's as having crucified the flesh [that is the old sinful nature] with its passions and desires. The crucifying part is not fun; but it is also *not* the end we seek. The end (or goal) is glorifying and pleasing God by becoming like Jesus. That is the "game" for which crucifying our sinful nature is "two-a-day" practice.

Is this not exactly what Paul says in **2 Timothy 2.19b-21**: "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.... Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from dishonor, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work"?

My hope today is that God would give us grace to put to death our sinful natures and be prepared for good work, that the fruit of His Holy Spirit will blossom and bear bountifully in our lives. To receive such benefit, please notice, first...

1. Only Those Who Belong to Christ GET TO Crucify the Flesh (Galatians 5.24; Romans 6.1-14)

Many Christians believe that their greatest enemy is the devil. (Although at our church, we might suspect that title to belong to the state—Washington, DC or even the judiciary branch.)

But if we read the Bible, we will find God disagreeing with our ideas. Yes, Satan is a powerful and dangerous foe; yes, the temptations of the world and its governments often promote ungodliness. But our worst enemy is the flesh.

Augustine was said frequently to pray, “Lord, deliver me from that evil man, myself.”

Charles Spurgeon preached: “All the fire which the devil can bring from hell could do us little harm if we had not so much fuel in our nature. It is the powder in the magazine of the old man which is our perpetual danger. When we are guarding against foes without, we must not forget to be continually on our watchtower against the foe of foes within.”

The old Puritans called the process of dying to self and living for Christ, “mortification,” from the Latin word, *mortis*, meaning “death.” Crucifying or mortifying the flesh simply means to put to death the old sin nature so that it no longer controls us; instead, the Holy Spirit does. It is the process of sanctification, the means of being made holy, the change which accompanies becoming like Jesus.

You know why we need this, do you not?

Remember the nine year old girl in Chicago who sat through the entire church service, arms crossed, laser beams of death shooting from her eyes, and hatred bubbling up in her heart, all because her uncle picked up a copy of the children’s sermon notes, rather than allowing her to get her own. “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.”

Helen and I saw this in one of our precious children when they were about three. We kept the dog food on the kitchen floor and one kid liked to play with it. At first we wondered if they understood, but one time we actually saw them checking to make sure we watched as they reached in a grabbed the food. It was not a childish game; it was open rebellion. “The flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh.”

You see the need in the teenager who, though his sinful nature might have been controlled by his parents when he was young and small, is now boiling in rebellion as his passions and desires rage out of control. “The flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh.”

I saw it in myself a few weeks ago when Helen had to bless me by pointing out my harshness and shortness with the children. Fortunately, I had this sermon coming so I was forced to think through the process of enslavement with which sin was taking me prisoner. *First*, I felt very sorry for myself. My sin nature suggested thoughts like these: “People sure do find it easy to criticize me, don’t they? I bet no one else has a wife who demands perfection from her husband.” Then, *second*, I rationalized my behavior: “I may have been a bit short with the kids, but who would not be during a move?” Or, “I would not be that way if I had enough sleep.” Then *third*, my flesh began to assert its innocence: “I did not do anything wrong. Children need a firm hand. A father must discipline his kids.” Then, *fourth*, I blamed others: “Helen sure is critical, is she not? I wonder if she would like the list of her sins which I have been keeping (all 358 pages). If my kids acted better, we would not have this problem.” “The flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh.”

Do you know this fight? Have you felt it within yourself? If you know it, then two things are necessary for victory.

1.1. Thinking is necessary

In Romans 6.11, Paul tells us to “reckon ourselves to be dead indeed to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The word for “reckon” is λογίζομαι and means, “to count, or to consider, or to think.”

Some suppose Christianity to be an unthinking way of life. Nothing could be further from a Biblical world view. God demands that we think all the time. That we think about who we are in Christ; that we think about the effects of sin; that we think about what we are doing.

We beg our children: “Think before you act.”

Is it not true that one of the greatest enticements to sin is our refusal to think? We react instead of pausing. We feel instead of pondering. We jump instead of considering the principles and effects of our behaviors. In order to get in the game, one must think about the game. Thinking is necessary.

1.2. Thinking differently is necessary

Imagine your 3 year-old daughter or granddaughter playing near the barn. You see her pick up a rattlesnake, supposing it to be a toy, and she begins to play with it like a rope. Would any loving parent would ignore her actions, letting her alone while she handles a rattlesnake? The loving father screams, “Drop that now and run!”

The problem is that your baby thinks she is losing a toy. But she is losing a snake.

God is not taking a toy when His Spirit kills our sinful desires. He is protecting us from that which destroys! Sin is a snake, or a spider the size of Shelob.

That is why this first point is that only those who belong to Christ GET TO crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. Do you believe that? Do you believe God when he says that the law is perfect, his requirement of holiness is great gain and a delight? Do you believe the Bible when it says that the commandments of God are not burdensome? Do you believe that the flesh is your great enemy and holiness your greatest happiness? Do you know your sin to be a snake?

Those who belong to Christ GET TO crucify the flesh.

2. Only Those Who Belong to Christ WANT TO Crucify the Flesh (Galatians 5.16-17; Romans 7.18-8.4)

Once God begins to change our thinking, it is easy to see how a true Christian would want holiness. And if God would just zap us with a dose of quick and easy godliness, we would be fine. But the process is called, crucifixion, the first sign that it will not be pleasant. So why does he call it that, and how could we possibly want such?

First you need to know that becoming like Christ is called crucifixion because it is only by Jesus’ death that we can put to death our sin nature. We have not the power within us to be holy. The cross is the power for becoming like Christ. Thus sanctification is a “dying” of **our** nature and a “resurrection” of **His** in our life!

There is a second reason for calling it “crucifixion.” Becoming like Jesus is a similar experience for us as crucifixion was for Him. *Like the death of Jesus which empowers our becoming holy, so is the death of self which is the process of becoming holy.* Specifically, this process is 1) painful, 2) pervasive, 3) protracted and 4) pitiful.

2.1. Crucifying our sinful natures is a painful work

Crucifixion was the most horrible form of death ever invented. Theologian Alister McGrath calls it “legalized sadism,” the most depraved execution imaginable.

Similarly, dying to my sin nature involves much pain. It costs many tears and exacts from us pleading prayers, groans and strong cries. If it were easy, Jesus would not have told us to pluck out an eye or cut off a hand, rather than lose salvation.

How is it painful? Consider this men: think of the last time you and your wife had a disagreement. She was 90% wrong and your were 90% right. But did your pride rejoice at the privilege of leading your wife in experiencing the grace of Jesus through your humble repentance for the 10% you were wrong? Or did your sin nature demand that she apologize first, though the Spirit promises more grace to the humble?

Could you not feel your insides welling up in anger and self-righteousness and revenge and hurt feelings? It is painful to kill those feelings.

2.2. Crucifying our sinful natures must be a pervasive work

In crucifixion, every fragment of the body, every sense, every sinew, every nerve is tormented and tortured with pain.

So for us. The Holy Spirit does not pick and choose which sins to eradicate. He takes on the whole of our sin nature. He is in conflict with every nook and cranny of the unholy in our hearts and souls. He does not rest until and unless He presents you “perfect in Christ Jesus, without stain or wrinkle or any blemish, holy and blameless.” Those who belong to Christ do not simply desire to have some areas of their life straightened up, they want a thorough cleaning. They long for holiness in thought, in desire, in action, in every area of life. We cannot hold out even one area; it is all or nothing on the cross!

It is painful and pervasive.

2.3. Crucifying our sinful natures is a protracted work

We believe in quick execution, not cruel and unusual punishment. But in Rome, they prided themselves on having devised the most slow, tortuous death imaginable.

Likewise, there is nothing speedy about dying to sin. It is a protracted death, one in which we often see only incremental, gradual improvements. For this reason, many grow discouraged. Biblical Christianity is rejected in our day and age, because it promises neither quick nor easy sanctification. Americans want their religion simple, painless and fast. But such a schedule does not fit the Spirit.

We commit a great disservice to people seeking God when we sugar-coat this reality. Many become confused and discouraged, and some reject Christ, because they were told that following Jesus would solve all their problems. Is Jesus the answer? Yes. Is He the life? Yes. But those in whom His Spirit lives must die to self. And that is a slow process.

The Bible calls growth in holiness, “crucifixion,” because it is 1) painful, 2) pervasive, 3) protracted, and fourth...

2.4. Crucifying our sinful natures is a pitiful work

For the crucified criminal, there is no place to hide from the shame. Naked and exposed to a gaping public, death by crucifixion meant open mocking and ridicule. Passersby shook their heads and clucked their tongues: “Its pitiful,” they snarled.

Sin also dies a pitiful death. Ezra prayed: “O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to heaven.”

Do you know there is only one way to stand before God unashamed? Genesis 2 describes it: “Adam and Eve were both naked and were not ashamed.” Why not? Because they were sinless. And when they sinned, what did they do? They hid from God. We have been hiding sin from God ever since.

Are some of you, like me, a little embarrassed to undress before a doctor? There is shame in being seen naked. But the doctor must expose the body and see the disease in order to heal. The Holy Spirit is the faithful surgeon who cleanses and purifies even the most horrible sin in your soul. But in so doing, He brings it to the light, and that is shameful or pitiful.

Given these characteristics, why would anyone WANT to become like Christ? Because the presence of the Holy Spirit, uniting you to the resurrected Jesus, causes you to think differently about sin and holiness. Holiness is such a freeing life, that you delight to die to self and to see Christ resurrected in you. Is that your desire this morning? If it is, will you not renew the hard work of sanctification for the happiness of holiness?

3. Only Those Who Belong to Christ ARE ABLE TO Crucify the Flesh (Romans 8.5-9)

If you know children, you can relate to the little boy who resisted his parents' command to sit down in his highchair. When mom grabbed his arm and forced him to sit, he said, "I'm sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside."

Let's face it—we dislike being told what to do. So who will make us be holy, make us crucify the flesh? Fortunately for us, all three persons of the Triune God are involved in this great work. We have already seen that is Christ's work in dying and rising for us and in our union with him. It is also...

3.1. *Such is the work of a loving Father*

John 15.2 tells us that "every branch that bears fruit the Father prunes, that it may bear more fruit." The Father plans and orders opportunities for us to die to self that we might glorify him and enjoy fruitfulness in His Kingdom. In every circumstance, God desires us to ask, "Where are the pruning shears of God's love clipping away at my sin?"

But this is especially...

3.2. *Such is the work of the indwelling Spirit*

Let me show you four ways in which the Spirit leads us to crucify the flesh with its sinful desires and passions.

3.2.1. The Holy Spirit delights in God's Laws

Before a man or woman is born again, we hate God's laws *whenever they cross our preferences*. But praise God that is no longer true once the Holy Spirit dwells within us. He loves to obey His laws—after all, He wrote them! He loves for us to rest in Christ on the Sabbath, for us to be generous in financial support of the Kingdom, for us to remain sexually purity. He loves sacrificing personal pleasure to serve others and enabling us to honor our parents and submit to the government of the land. The Spirit in us breaks the reign of our sin nature by delighting in having us obey God.

3.2.2. The Holy Spirit takes away the joy of sinning

Romans 7.15 is amazing. The great apostle Paul admits: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Do you hear the battle raging? Yes he still sinned, but he **hated** it. That hatred is the work of the Holy Spirit. Have you not experienced guilt when you sin? Have you felt the change in your heart whereby the thoughts and desires and actions that once seemed fun now bring grief, guilt and even hatred of your doing it? The Spirit takes from us the joy of sinning.

3.2.3. The Holy Spirit changes our minds about sin

We sin because we really believe doing so will make us happy. And it does, for a moment, does it not?

But when the Spirit is working in our lives, we find that our thinking about sin changes. No longer does the passing moment of pleasure control us, but we enjoy the benefit of a longer-term analysis of our lives and our happiness.

This is why the Scriptures are so critical. It is only through them that we see the truth about sin and rebellion, that we find out of the destructiveness of our natural passions.

You know this from arguments with your spouse. He says something cruel and uncaring, and you feel welling up inside of you the almost overwhelming desire to lash back, to cut and hurt in return. Your sin nature pleads with you on the basis of the good feeling you will get by getting even.

But the Spirit changes your thinking. No longer will be enslaved by the requirement of revenge. You will leave that to God, knowing that you deserve worse and that He rewards better. And instead, you give grace undeserved, that God might be glorified and that Christ's power might be evident in you. The Spirit has changed the way you think.

3.2.4. The Holy Spirit gives grace in time of need

Though it is complex and can be confusing to try and explain how it happens, the simple truth is that for those who know Jesus, the Holy Spirit gives grace to resist sin and follow Christ in the very midst of our temptations.

One of the most important lessons to learn as a disciple of Christ is that the more you walk with Him, the more you learn dependency. Maturity in Christ is not needing Him less, it is depending upon Him more. The Spirit gives that grace for those who humbly seek His help.

4. Conclusion

What shall we do with this knowledge?

First, think and then think differently about the passions and desires which seek to control you.

Second, be encouraged that your struggles against sin are not unusual, but the way of sanctification. Meditate frequently on Christ's crucifixion both as the power for and the pattern of holiness in your life.

Third, realize this is a spiritual work. It is a work of God's grace through union with Christ, by the will of the Father and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. Seek God for the freedom from enslaving sin—a freedom for which your soul desperately longs.

Because the topic is so vast and broad, yet so foreign and repulsive to our natural selves, I have only just begun though I have talked for too long. We will get more next week and more and more as we look at specific traits.

But let me remind you as you leave, your acceptance with God is not dependent on your level of holiness. Please do not allow the slowness of sanctification nor the continued pervasiveness of the presence of sin be a cause for despair. Don't give up on holiness, for the death of Christ is not a cloak to cover our sin but an auger to dig it out.

And this week, dear loved one, when Satan would throw into your face the failures which you are sure to have, I want you to remember this poem: "Well may the accuser roar of sins that I have done. I know them all and thousands more, Jehovah knoweth none."

He “knoweth none” because the death of Christ frees his own from the penalty of sin; and because he knows none, his love is freeing us from the power of sin. Those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.