

Killing Sin by the Spirit: Romans 8:12-13

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This morning's message is about sanctification. It's about killing sin in your life. The title of the sermon, which comes right out of verse 13 is, "Killing Sin by the Spirit." Sanctification is about killing sin and growing in holiness. And this happens in the lives of those who are born again, those who have the Spirit dwelling in them, those who are true believers. And, as verse 13 says, we are to put to death the deeds of the body (*fleshly* deeds of the body) *by the Spirit*. So we're going to talk this morning about what this means, and how *we* are to do this *by the Spirit*.

Verse 12 begins with the words, "So, then," which points us back to verses 9-11. He's going to make a point based on the reality he was explaining in verses 9-11. I want to make two points this morning, beginning with verses 9-11 and then moving to verses 12-13. First of all, that killing sin happens by the Spirit. And the second point is that we, as believers, are responsible to kill sin.

Killing Sin happens by the Spirit.

If you are a believer, then you are in the Spirit, and the Spirit of God dwells in you. The simple but crucial point for all of us to see is that nobody will be able to kill sin or grow in holiness unless the Spirit is at work in his or her life.

Why is this important? It's important because there are many, many people in the world and in churches who are trying desperately to reform themselves, make themselves better people, moral people, and yet they do not have a saving relationship with Christ. They may know a lot in their head, they may be very religious, and yet there is no real spiritual life. The Holy Spirit is not indwelling them.

John Owen, the great theologian of the 1600s, wrote a book called "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers." [I'm going to quote from this several times this morning, because he has such great insights into this topic] What he means by "mortification of sin" is putting sin to death. Today, we use the word mortified in the sense of being really embarrassed. But that's not how Owen was using the word in the 1600s. He means, how do believers kill sin in their lives? And that book is based on verse 13 in our text: "but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." That's mortification.

Here are a couple things he says about the importance of understanding that regeneration must happen before you can be sanctified. You must be born again, you must be justified, you must be a believer before there's going to be any mortification of sin in your life.

He writes, "this is the usual issue with persons attempting the mortification of sin without an interest in Christ first obtained. It deludes them, hardens them—destroys them. And therefore we see that there are not usually more vile and desperate sinners in the world than such as, having by conviction been put on this course, have found it fruitless and deserted it without a discovery of Christ."¹ Do you see what he's saying? There are so many people in the world who have a conviction that they should live a moral life. They have some sense of right and wrong, and recognize that there are wrong things they should stop doing. But there is no relationship with Christ, so they have no real power to fight sin at its root.

We've all probably seen this, in one way or another, or experienced it ourselves. There are many who try the legalistic means of changing behavior, but there's no power there. People are attempting to change themselves in their own strength, by their own will power. But that is fruitless. It will not last. And so people give up in desperation. Or, if they have some success in reforming certain outward characteristics, they may go in another direction. They may become increasingly hardened in religious pride. Either way, the result is not real mortification of sin, because there is no relationship with Christ. The Spirit is not dwelling in them to motivate them and give them the power to truly fight sin.

Parenting

There's a good application point here for parents. We cannot expect our children to be truly sanctified if they are not yet believers. And so we shouldn't focus merely on behavior modification. We have to go to the heart of the issues. I so appreciate Tedd Tripp's book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, because he encourages parents to go to the heart of the issues, bringing the Gospel to bear when we are interacting with our children and disciplining our children. Our goal is not just to have well-behaved children. Our real goal, as Christians, is that our children will repent of their sin and trust Jesus.

¹ Pg. 83 of the Taylor / Kopic edition.

Elyse Fitzpatrick, in her book, *Give Them Grace*, talks about the importance of stressing the law, not to make our kids good, but to drive them to Christ. She writes, “We won’t get the results we want from the law. We’ll get either shallow self-righteousness or blazing rebellion or both (frequently from the same kid on the same day!). We’ll get moralistic kids who are cold and hypocritical and who look down on others (and could easily become Mormons [one of the things she’s showing in that chapter is the distinct impact of the Gospel on our parenting—other religions, like Mormonism, will promote good morals, but it’s just law, not Gospel]), or you’ll get teens who are rebellious and self-indulgent and who can’t wait to get out of the house.”²

That’s a good warning for us, parents. If we’re just bearing down in our kids with rules—punishing them when they don’t obey the rules, and rewarding them when they do—then they will either get with the program and take great pride in their obedience, or they will feel oppressed and burdened and resentful, and all they will want is to get out from under our tyranny.

We don’t want to produce little legalists, or little rebels. We want to point our kids to the cross. So our focus should not be merely on how to change the way they act, so they don’t embarrass us. Our focus should not be on outward conformity to certain rules. Our focus must be on the heart. Our prayer for our children must be for their salvation, for only then will there really be an inner transformation that produces the fruit of holiness.

Just to clarify, this is not to say that we shouldn’t have rules in our homes. We should have rules, and there should be consequences. But there is a distinctively Christian way to go about this. As we spend time with our children, we should be speaking the truth in love to them, instructing them from God’s Word, modeling before them Christ-like love, caring for them sacrificially, humbly confessing our sin, being honest about our own faults and our need for a Savior. And in times of discipline, pointing out, “You sinned against God, and you need Jesus to forgive you.”

John Owen criticizes Roman Catholics for their focus on outward behavior modification to the neglect of inner transformation. He says their focus is in the wrong place. It puts the cart before the horse. You have to believe. You have to be converted. You have to be in Christ, before there will be any real mortification of sin.

² Pg. 36.

You see, he's making this important point that we must keep first things first. Yes, it is imperative that we kill sin. But to try to kill sin if you are not a Christian is fruitless and dangerous. You must be born again. You must be justified. You must have the Spirit.

Owen uses a couple of good illustrations here. "He that shall call a man from mending a hole in the wall of his house, to quench a fire that is consuming the whole building, is not his enemy." If someone is so concerned to stop gambling or to stop using drugs or to stop yelling at their kids, and you tell that person, "What you really need is Jesus. Your real problem is sin." That's like approaching the person who is fixing a hole in their wall, and saying to them, "Your house is going up in flames! Your problem is far worse than you imagined. You need way more help than you think."

Then Owen says, "Poor soul! It is not your sore finger but your hectic fever that you are to apply yourself to the consideration of. You set yourself against a particular sin and do not consider that you are nothing but sin."³ Conversion is necessary before a real fight against sin will begin to happen in a person's life.

Catholic and Baptist

I had an interesting conversation with a guy this week that illustrated for me the different ways that this can manifest itself. I had just finished a bike ride, and I met this man who had been in cycling years. We talked about bikes and bike races for a while, and then about his family, and then about church and religion. He shared with me that he had grown up Baptist, but then he married a Catholic. And he said, "My wife is a much better Catholic than I am a Protestant." And he mentioned a couple times how her religion is really tough. She teaches CCD classes, and he said, "I went to Sunday School growing up, and we learned about the Bible. But they never made us take a test!" The picture became clearer as we continued to talk. His wife is very committed to her church, very involved. But he no longer attends church, other than going to the Catholic church with his wife on Christmas and Easter and maybe a couple other times during the year. He won't become a Catholic, because it would contradict what he believes. But, on the other hand, it doesn't seem that his beliefs are bearing any real fruit.

I share that with you to say, the need for conversion—the need to emphasize the fundamental necessity of conversion—is

³ Pg. 84.

important in addressing folks from all kinds of backgrounds. The person from a Catholic background may need to hear very clearly, as Owen said, that the externals are not the main thing. And the guy with a Baptist background may need to hear the very same thing. You need to be changed from the inside out by the indwelling Spirit.

Verses 9-11 give assurance to those who are in the Spirit, that the Spirit does, in fact, dwell in us, and that one day our mortal bodies will be raised through the Spirit. Verse 12 builds on that and states an important implication. “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” Since we have been transferred from the domain of the flesh to the domain of the Spirit, we don’t owe anything to our old master. We shouldn’t feel any obligation, any allegiance to that wicked slave master. We belong to Another now. We are not debtors to the flesh, but debtors to the Spirit, to live according to the Spirit. Paul leaves that second part unsaid in verse 12, but it is clearly implied. Our allegiance now is to our new Master, our infinitely kind and merciful Master. We now live according to the Spirit.

Verse 13

And this brings us to verse 13. There is a great warning and a great promise in this verse. “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” And the key phrase there is “by the Spirit.” This is not going to happen apart from the Spirit.

Let me ask you, What does *self*-reformation look like? What does it look like when a person tries to bring about a transformation in his or her life apart from the Spirit? This is happening all the time, right?! We look all around us, in our culture, in advertisements, there are people who desperately want to change themselves. People want to be thinner, and so there are diet fads and weight-loss gimmicks. People want to quit smoking, or they want to quit some other bad habit. People make new year’s resolutions about exercise programs. People who want to be better parents, or have a better marriage, or a better job. All kinds of people want to change themselves in various ways. But the method is usually self-help, and the goal is self-exaltation (how I can make myself look better, get more attention, get more money, get more applause from people, etc.)

Owen writes, “Mortification from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of self-righteousness, is

the soul and substance of all false religion in the world.”⁴ And what does that kind of mortification lead to? Depression, despair, or pride if you manage to stumble upon some measure of success. If you’re trying to change yourself, you’re going to be very disappointed. And the changes you will seek to make will not even be the ones that are most needed. You’ll be heading in exactly the wrong direction. You’ll be heading further into yourself, when you really need to be looking outside of yourself to Jesus Christ.

So, then, what does “by the Spirit” look like? In what ways, practically, does our killing sin happen by the Spirit? Well, a helpful connection is in Eph 6:10-20, where Paul speaks of the armor of God. And do you remember what the one offensive weapon is?

“and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” (Ephesians 6:17–18, ESV)

It seems that one application of how to fight sin by the Spirit is to wield the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, whenever we face temptations of any kind. We hold onto the promises of God’s Word to remind us of the goodness of God and the deception of sin. This very chapter has many great promises that we can cling to and find hope in. And as we look to the great things God has for us, the enticement of sin fades.

When we’re tempted to despair, we can meditate on the fact that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. When we feel that a certain temptation is grabbing ahold of us, we can remind ourselves that the law of the Spirit of life has set us free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. When a certain sinful pleasure is enticing us, we must exhort ourselves that if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. This is how we fight sin, wielding the sword of the Spirit.

When we’re tempted to be afraid or to lose courage, or when we feel like we’re lacking assurance, we cling to the truth of verse 15 that “you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons . . .”

And when our gaze drops to the gutter, and worldliness seems to dazzle and glitter before us, we need to meditate on truths like we find in verses 16-17. *“The Spirit himself bears witness*

⁴ Pg. 47.

with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (Romans 8:16–17, ESV) We have to remember that we have an inheritance waiting for us that this world could never match in a million years.

When we are in the midst of suffering, when trials face us, we hold on to the precious promise of v. 28, that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. And we look to the end of the chapter as well, remembering that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So in these ways we fight sin with the sword of the Spirit. This is an important and practical way that we wage this battle, not in our own strength, but by the Spirit.

Another application of this truth that killing sin happens by the Spirit is that as we do grow in holiness, bit by bit, we must look at that growth and attribute it wholly to the indwelling power of the Spirit in our lives. We can't boast in ourselves. We can't boast in our ability to sanctify ourselves. That would be the worldly, fleshly way of self-reformation, which is totally selfish and prideful. No, God will get all the glory for our sanctification. It happens by the Spirit.

“whoever serves [ought to serve] as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 4:11, ESV)

We have to be looking away from our own strength and looking to the strength of another. And in so doing, as we serve and as we fight sin, God gets the glory He deserves.

We, believers, are responsible to put to death the deeds of the body.

Now, here's the other piece of this that we must also affirm. We know that the Spirit must be indwelling us before we're going to have the ability to truly kill sin and deal with sin at its roots. But we must also see very clearly that we are responsible to fight this battle. We must wage war against sin. We must put to the death the deeds of the body.

When we talk about God's sovereignty and our responsibility, it's not either / or. Instead, it's both / and. We see that here in verse 13 in that the Spirit must enable our battle

against sin, AND we must do it. Can you see that in what verse 13 says? Who is it that puts to death the deeds of the body? Is it the Spirit? No, not directly. Who must do it? You!! And how are you to do that? By the Spirit. You see, it's both / and. You can't do this without the Spirit. But the Spirit is not going to bypass you and put to death your sinful deeds apart from your involvement. You have to exercise your will and do this. And then, when you have done it, you acknowledge that you could not have done it without the power of the Spirit working in you.

John Piper speaks of there being a mean streak in Christianity. Not meanness toward others, but meanness toward that part of ourselves which would make us mean toward others. And so we must wage war on our own sinful flesh. You wage war against your sinful flesh. I must wage war against my own sinful flesh.⁵

Piper also shares the story of his mom giving him a Bible when he was young, and she wrote in it, "This Book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this Book." This Book will keep you from sin—that's putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit. Or sin will keep you from this Book—that's one of the ways the flesh continues to wage war against us.

And that statement is very similar to what John Owen wrote about the necessity of killing sin. He asks us,

"Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it while you live; cease not a day from this work; *be killing sin or it will be killing you.*"⁶ These are great exhortations for us. We must fight against our own sin. And we must never let up in this battle, for sin will continue to fight against us as long as we live in this fallen world. Owen says, "He that is appointed to kill an enemy, if he cease striking before the other ceases living, does but half his work."⁷ You can't stop fighting until this thing is dead. And it's not going to be dead until we are with the Lord.

And listen to this, "Lust is such an inmate as, if it can plead time and some prescription, will not easily be ejected. As it never dies of itself, so if it be not daily killed it will always gather strength."⁸

Do you see the implications of this? You cannot take a vacation from fighting sin. You cannot let up. You cannot take a

⁵ See Piper's sermons on this passage.

⁶ Pg. 50.

⁷ Pg. 51.

⁸ Pg. 91.

day off. You cannot say to yourself, you know I've been fighting sin really hard the last few weeks, I think I can relax for a while. This is not like a boxing match where you get a rest after each round. If you're listening for that bell to ring so you can walk over to your corner and get some water, it's not going to happen until Jesus comes. And if you decide you've had enough and you turn your back to walk to your corner, you're going to get clobbered from behind.

If you're feeling exhausted, as I'm saying this. If you're tempted to despair, thinking about the ongoing nature of this battle, you must remember that it is "by the Spirit." If we were fighting in our own strength, we would surely give up very quickly. But we fight in the power of the Spirit. We fight by clinging to God's amazing promises for us. And thus the battle does not weaken us over time, but draws us closer to our Savior and gives us greater confidence and hope in Him.

We must fight continually. We must also fight passionately and sacrificially. Remember Jesus' shocking words about this? *"And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"* (Mark 9:43–48, ESV)

Of course, Jesus is using hyperbole there. It wouldn't do any good to actually cut off a hand or foot or to gouge out an eye. But the point is that we must be willing to make sacrifices in our fight against sin.

Matthew Henry expounds on this so well. He writes, "Suppose we cannot keep that which is dear to us, but it will be a snare and a stumbling-block; suppose we must part with it, or part with Christ and a good conscience. The duty prescribed in that case; *Pluck out the eye, cut off the hand and foot*, mortify the darling lust, kill it, crucify it, starve it, make no provision for it. Let the idols that have been *delectable* things, be cast away as *detestable* things; keep at a distance from that which is a temptation, though ever so pleasing. It is necessary that the part which is gangrened, should be taken off for the preservation of the whole. We must put ourselves to pain, that we may not bring ourselves to ruin; self must be denied, that it may not be destroyed."

Brothers and sisters, may these words spur us on in the fight for holiness. Remember that we wage this battle in the power of the Spirit. And remember that we are responsible to fight. We cannot sit back passively. We must be active in this fight. And remember that for which we fight. We are fighting to be less constrained by the deceptive bonds of sin. We are fighting to be increasingly free from the shackles of sin so that we can enjoy more of the pleasures of knowing God and following in His good path for us—leading to eternal life. We don't owe the flesh anything. We are not debtors to the flesh. We belong to God now. We are His sons and daughters, and we are led by His Spirit.