

Sermon 66: Romans 8:12-13: The Mortification of Sin

OUTLINE

Not debtors to the flesh

Putting to death the deeds of the body

INTRODUCTION

Christians are like housewives, the work of cleaning house is never done it keeps getting undone and needing redoing. A housewife will do a load of washing just for it to be worn and dirtied and put back in the dirty wash basket, if you're lucky, otherwise it is left on the floor for you to pick up. Christianity is a life of perpetually warring against sin and trying to keep a clean house. We will be dealing with sin until the day we die, all the work that we do one day, if we let down our guard will be quickly undone and we will be back to where we started or worse. In our message we are going to deal with the topic of mortification or putting sin to death. As Paul continues looking at the benefits of having the Spirit in our lives we see that those who have the Spirit are characterised not by living in debt to the flesh but rather by putting to death the deeds of the body. In fact it is because we have the Spirit and are no longer in the flesh and because we have such a wonderful future guaranteed for us, Paul reminds us to live for God and not according to the flesh. To live in the truth of the new power that we have by the Spirit to be free from the power of the flesh and put to death/mortify the deeds of the body.

Not debtors to the flesh

Paul begins in v12, 'So then, Brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.' The words, 'so then' indicate that Paul is taking these present statements as implications of what has gone before. In other words, what has come before will answer the question 'why are we no longer debtors to the flesh?' If we scan v1-11 we will see that the 'Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death.' The Spirit has set us free from sins bondage. Paul told in Romans 6 that the Spirit has done this by causing us to participate in the resurrection of Christ so that our old self was crucified with Christ that sin might no longer have power over us.

Paul is reminding us of something he has already said, that we are not hopeless in our fight against sin, that we are no longer slaves to sin, that the flesh which once had power over us to cause us to be those who lived according to its every whim, we have been set free for righteousness. We have a debt to pay but it is not to the flesh but to God in gratitude for what He has done. If you are a Christian you have been set free by the Spirit from sins control that took you captive from God and have been set free to pursue the righteousness that God intended us for. We are like people who have been kidnapped who have been rescued and set free, we no longer have to remain in bondage to our sins and it is a fool who returns to their sins and the bondage that they bring.

Putting to death the deeds of the body

V13 is one of the most important verses in the bible on the topic of sanctification because it describes the nature of our fight against sin. '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.' Paul describes to types of life what they are characterised by and the results they yield. The unbeliever lives according to the flesh, he gives in to the flesh fulfilling its desires and the final result is death. The Christian however is in the Spirit and by the power of the Spirit puts to death the deeds of the body, the final result of this path is life. Life does not result from our efforts in holiness, but life is the end of the path that began with faith and produced good fruit in holiness. Paul said the same thing in Romans 6:22-23, notice that salvation is not earned by sanctification but is a free gift, 'But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

What we want to spend our time on though is this description of the Christian's life, by the Spirit putting to death the deeds of the body. Let me say that the many practical applications that I will be giving you this morning are harvested from John Owen's book, The Mortification of Sin.

The first observation that we need to make before we get into the 'how' of mortifying sin is the distinction that Paul makes when he uses the words flesh and body. As Christians we have fallen into the trap of using these words interchangeably and as a result rob ourselves of a careful distinction that Paul has been making since chapter 6. Firstly, we need to understand that Paul uses the word flesh to mean power or dominion. Think of it as a country that we were once members of and being in that country we were subject to its conditions and rules. We were in Adam, and being in Adam our lives were characterised not by the Spirit but by the fallen nature of the flesh. We were dead in our sins, captive to our sins, manipulated by our sins and condemned by our sins. We were in the flesh and dead and captive there. But the Christian is someone who has defected and changed countries. We are no longer in Adam but Christ, and the power that rules us is no longer the sin affected flesh but the power of the Spirit. We are now free from sins guilt and power to control us, we experience liberty not bondage, life not death, power to do good not impotence. The flesh is not something that you put to death but that you die out of. The flesh is a set of conditions that we leave like a country. What we do have though is a body, a body that is programmed by the things that the flesh dictated, think of it as the propaganda and culture of the old country that you used to live in that now needs to be undone. Your old country has no legal power over you any more or military power but its old ideas and ways are well known to you and you need to be transformed into a citizen of the new country that you are in. Our fight against sin is not removing ourselves from the power of the flesh, Christ did that for us when we were resurrected with Him in rebirth, no our fight against sin is not one of salvation but one of putting death the old culture and ways, thoughts and habits of the old country and adopting the ways of the new. It is not

the fight to become a citizen of Christ's kingdom, that is something that you already are, but it now merely to be what you are.

The body is the launch pad for the flesh's ways. The body is like a fortress that harbours insurgents after the old president has been toppled. The flesh will never be boss again, Christ rules in us now, but there are still some insurgents who need to be put to death, this is the fight that we are engaged in when we mortify the deeds of the flesh we are not fighting for our lives but for peace and to enforce the new reign of Christ.

Let's begin by talking about the necessity of mortifying sin. What will happen if we do not work at mortifying sin?

If we do not actively and perpetually wage war against sin it will flourish and wreak havoc with our lives. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:17, 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.' The flesh is an army that is always fighting if we do nothing it will advance and get the advantage. My fear is that many Christians are not perpetually waging war and mercilessly putting sin to death and so they are defeated in many ways.

To fail to mortify sin, to harbour like a criminal in your life will result in instability in all your life. James 1:8 tells us that the double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Do you find yourself affected in every area, that you are failing as a parent, as a spouse, performing poorly as an employee, a useless neighbour, a non-contributing member of the church, as you look at every area of your life you see that there is a lack of discipline and damaged relationships all around. This is because you are harbouring sin in your life, instead of putting the abomination to death you give him food and lodging, and this is affecting all that you do.

To fail in mortifying sin gives sin the liberty to get full grown and bring about maximum damage. Sin is never full and always hungry for more. As a drug addict will deliberately ruin their health in pursuit of their pleasures sin grows and grows in self-destructive ways. It never remains a little puppy that beckons to our call but ultimately seeks to rule.

If we do not mortify sin in our lives we will not be able to grow the fruits of the Spirit. How can we nurture love when harbouring hatred? How can we be self-controlled when we refuse to stop being indulgent and excessive in what we watch, eat, buy and covet?

If we do not deal with sin there are other serious spiritual consequences. We will rob ourselves of assurance as we grieve the Spirit, those who are keeping sin as a pet are driving a needle into their hands and can have no peace. God is not glorified by our good works for we drag His name through the mud. We make Him appear to be unworthy of obedience, that He provides no power to help us in our war against sin, and that He is not holy to command holiness in us. God also chastens His children we refuse to give up their sins and their reward is a hard heart and an increase of sin in their lives. If we refuse His

convictions, He hands us over to hardness which is a terrible punishment indeed, Isaiah 63:17, 'O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not. Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage.'

Sin does not die a natural death but has to be put down. Sin does not arise in us through the various circumstances and disappear when we change our circumstances. If a man was greedy when he was poor he will still be greedy when he is rich unless he mortifies that sin. Poor people even though they are in humble conditions still have pride which needs to be killed. Old people still have lust and unfaithfulness in them unless mortified. Sin does not die naturally but must be killed

Let's say a little more about sin, for if we are to kill it we need to know its habit and tricks. We need to be familiar with the deceitfulness of sin in order that we kill it correctly.

Sin is like a possum it plays dead when it is not. You need to know that overcoming a sin once is not killing it merely curbing it temporarily. Sin will put out new shoots all your life from the stumps of the place that you cut off the sins before it. As long as there is life in you your sin will always have sap to grow. We fight sin until Christ returns. Sin at best can be weakened and contained but never turn your back on it as dead.

Secondly, don't mistake temperament for growth in holiness. We all have different personality types, some of us have naturally high tolerance levels and are patient, some of us have high levels of compassion. Some are naturally self-deprecating and don't like to promote themselves. These traits must not be mistaken for holiness the naturally humble person will still have to kill pride, then naturally patient person will still need to kill impatience, natural inclinations towards a certain virtue does not mean you don't have to work hard against sin in that area.

Thirdly, when we battle sin we can gain a false victory by replacing one sin with another. I had one friend who replaced lust with the study of philosophy. He had not defeated lust but found that feeding his pride through intellectual accomplishment suited him well enough to forego former opportunities for pleasure. He had not defeated and overcome a sin he had simply swapped one idol for another. This is what happens to those who try and give up addictions who do not commit their lives to God. They may give up alcohol, but they replace it with idolizing their bodies and committing themselves to health regimes that boost their egos. Sin has merely taken another form but has not been mortified.

Fourthly, sin can be quiet for a while when we are distracted and busy. Many of us get caught up in the business of life and find in the midst of our activities that we are not serving certain appetites like we once did. We may wrongly think to ourselves that we have grown and have put that problem behind us, but when things settle down and you have some down time to kill those old sins that were quiet but not mortified stir and we sin again.

Fifthly, we need to make sure that we are battling our own sins and not the sins that we see dominant in others. We all have different temperaments and sin seeks to rule us through our strengths. If we are naturally reflecting, self-pity will be the sin we struggle with. If we

are strong leaders, wilfulness, unteachableness and pride will be our temptations. If we are passionate people, losing our tempers and being governed by passions will be our problem. If we are naturally analytical then coldness and distant is what we need to overcome. You may see sin in others and think I don't have those sins so I am ok. You have your own set of sins to deal with, don't mistake not having your neighbours sin for being more holy.

So we are to put sin to death but how? Paul specifically tells us that we need to put the deeds of the body to death by the Spirit. It is the Spirit who makes all the differences between the believer being holy and the unbeliever trying to do the same acts. Holiness which is a spiritual transformation into Christ's character is not a work of the flesh, the flesh cannot create a new character it must necessarily be the work of the Spirit. So we need to stress as we being looking at the Spirit that conversion is necessary to holiness. No one who is not born again can put sin to death in themselves. The best they can do is change patterns of behaviour or exchange one sin for another but they can never truly weaken sin and experience transformation into Christ's holiness. It is for this reason that the many Roman Catholic abuses of the flesh are totally powerless to kill sin. Living in a monastery, being celibate, depriving yourself of foods, drinks, anything sweet, all forms of entertainment, not speaking to people, these are not the things that the Spirit promises to bless in the work of sanctifying us. These things may be able to create an outward life of strict discipline as the athlete can accomplish but sin is in no way weakened and the character of Christ is in no way cultivated. Apart from the Spirit this rigour is nothing more than the paint on a dead body.

The Spirit is essential to our mortifying our sins. The Spirit is naturally at war with sin and is the one who drives us in our war against sin. If you want to kill the mice in your barn you put a cat or an owl or a snake in the barn in order to take care of your sin problem. It is the Spirit alone who is the natural enemy of sin. Those who do not have the Spirit cannot truly hate sin and have the blood earnest desire to uproot it and kill it, those without the Spirit will soon be finding ways to keep their sins and exchanging one for another. However, we who have the Spirit have the natural enemy of sin who is stronger than sin at work within us. It is the Spirit who communicates Christ and all of His benefits to us. It is the Spirit who uses the bible and uses it to sanctify us and wash us. It is the Spirit who renews our inner man day by day causing us to go from glory to glory as we behold the face of Christ in understanding and in prayer. It is the Spirit alone who has the power of the new creation to work the fruits of the new creation in our characters. It is the Spirit who works in our hearts both to will and to do for God's good pleasure. It is the Spirit who convicts us of sin and draws to God again for cleansing and renewal.

We need the Spirit for the law and the flesh cannot do what He can. The law is useful as a restraining power but has no power to transform. This is most important as we seek to instruct our children in the ways of the Lord. We can teach them the law and the law will instruct them what not to do. The law will be a natural dampener on their ways and act to hinder sins development. However, law does not produce Christ in us, nor does the law have any power to kill and weaken sin. I urge you as you parent point your children to the Spirit not the law for transformation. Do not be content to have them outwardly conform to

the requirements of the law and be good in action. Seek to point them to Christ in truth as He transforms us in the means of grace in bible study and prayer. Punishment in the form of hidings will cause them to fear sinning, but being changed by the Spirit will cause them to hate sin and have the power to overcome it.

Dependence upon the Spirit is nothing passive but an active whole souled action on our part while putting all our confidence in God for the positive results. Although it is finally the Spirit who is the force for change within us that does not mean that we do nothing while the Spirit does everything, quite the opposite. We need to move against sin within ourselves and here are some ways how.

Kill sin upon its first appearance. Do not toy with sin, do not allow it a corner where it can lurk undisturbed, at the first sight of sin rise up in fury to kill it. The goal in any situation against sin is always total extermination. You must not war against your sins with any mercy but go against them for all that you are worth with violence. You will need to be merciless as you kill the sins you hate and the ones that you love, that ones that harm you and the ones that you feel are beneficial. Show no mercy.

In order to aid us in our killing of sin there are certain thoughts we need to think.

Firstly, agree with God about your sin. Agree with God about how serious it is and about how horrific it is. Do not see it as a little thing nor as a light thing. Make no excuses or defences as God rebukes you, be like David who justified God in His judgements. Sin always seeks to defend itself by making itself smaller and more harmless than it actually is. You will find yourself rationalizing that once will not hurt, that once is not serious. Remind yourself that sin is worthy of hell, sin is a violation of infinite proportions as we sin against the infinite majesty and worth of God. Sin is the greatest act of insurrection, rebellion and treason in the universe.

Think deeply upon the danger of sin. Remind yourself that keeping sin as a pet will harden you, it will make you sermon hardened and sickness hardened. Sin will lead you to neglect your duties, for prayer keeps you from sin but sin keeps you from prayer. Sin taken lightly causes us to view God's grace towards us as a small thing. Sin steals our joy, and the delight we find in obeying God. Sin robs us of our assurance as we grieve the Spirit.

Load your conscience with the guilt of your sin. Study the law and allow its purity to show up the sin without measure within us. Look at the cross and behold who has to die to lift the weight of your guilt. Think about the fact that you are breaking, and wounding and dirtying all that God has given Christ to fix, heal and cleanse.

Think upon God's patience with you. How many times has He not punished you for your sins? How many have been sent to hell for less sin than you have done? How many blessings have you received from God's hands which you have scorned and demanded sin to satisfy you as well?

And when you pray for forgiveness do not heal yourself too quickly. Forgiveness is ours in Christ, but if we rush to be forgiven we will rush again to our sins. Only be content to receive mercy when you hate your sins, when you mourn over the sins you have done for Christ had to suffer death for them. If we accept mercy but will not allow the terribleness of sin fill our minds we will end up going back to our vomit.

Renew your war against sin, act with no mercy against it and know that the Spirit will weaken the sins you wound.

But wage the war positively as well. Seek not only to remove vices but plant virtues. Fight pride by deliberately praying for and cultivating humility. Fight hatred and anger by cultivating love and pity. Fight lust and excessive indulgence by cultivating discipline and self-control. Fight self-absorption with compassion for others.