

## **Killing Sin by the Spirit** **Romans 8:12-14**

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There is a humorous sketch with comedian Bob Newhart where he is playing the role of a psychologist and a patient comes with a phobia of being buried alive in a box. What does he say to this issue and every other neurosis in her life? *Stop it! Just stop it!* Every issue she brings up, he yells at her, *stop it!* She protests and says she needs more than *just stop it!* He says, *Ok, write this down, stop it or I'll bury you in a box!*

That's funny...except when it isn't. It isn't funny when it summarizes how many Christians have been taught how to live the Christian life. All prohibitions. Saved by faith in Jesus, yes. Now what do I do about sin in my life? *Stop it! Just stop it!*

They may not say it that way. It's couched in pious terms like *let go and let God* or *just surrender it brother* or *here are rules we think all good Christians must follow*. I know this well as the kind of churches I grew up in were strong with Jesus as Savior but awful with how to live as a Christian. We might say it this way, good with justification, disaster with sanctification. Good with getting people to heaven but muddled at helping Christians live on earth. How many can relate?

*Stop it. Just stop it.* How is that approach working for you? It either leaves you disillusioned with Christianity or constantly filled with shame. It is simply an unbiblical approach. What do we say to people teaching that stuff? *Stop it!*

Stop it and let's start doing this biblically in our lives. There's no better place than Romans to guide us. We are preaching through Romans and inching our way through the glorious chapter 8. Paul is carefully explaining our new life in Christ:

*"So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 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."* (Romans 8:12-13 ESV)

Next week is 8:15, *"...but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba Father! The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."* Adoption. Assurance. Wonderful truth.

Romans 8:13 is a small but mighty verse in the New Testament telling us how we gain defeat over sin's presence in our lives. Justification by faith removes sin's penalty. Sanctification is the progressive work of the Holy Spirit removing sin's power and presence in our lives.

You may say, *a whole sermon from one verse?* This isn't just any verse. The great theologian John Owen wrote a whole book (*Overcoming Sin and Temptation*) on Romans 8:13. Now I have you scared that this will be a long sermon.

*"So then brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh."* (Romans 8:12) As we have seen, *the flesh* is not skin and bones but our sin nature. Sin was on the throne of our hearts and the Darth Lord of our lives. Before we came to Christ there was only one king in town and we were duty bound to him.

But the power of God in salvation has dethroned sin and enthroned Christ. When a Christian sins, she is bowing the knee to the old deposed lord of her life. She doesn't have to. We are not obligated to sin anymore. We have been set free to worship the true King and to do so through obedience and righteousness. The unbeliever is only free to sin. The Christian has the greater freedom not to sin. *Yes, but how? How do we do that?*

*"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."* (Romans 8:13)

Look at the structure of the verse. It's a comparison between a life according to the flesh and a life according to the Spirit. Two directions with two very different destinies. Flesh leads to death. Spirit leads to life. He is summarizing what he has said in verses 1-11. The life ruled by the sin nature has its own fruits—terrible ones in this life and the next. But the life governed by the Spirit is the opposite. It is life and peace and the confident hope of resurrection and eternal life.

This brings us to the *how*. With regard to sin, do we just stop it? No, *if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live*. There is a huge difference between me in my strength trying to overcome sin in my life and me utilizing the presence of the Holy Spirit in me and through him killing sin.

*"Mortification from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world."*<sup>1</sup> (John Owen)

It is also the substance of so many wrong teachings about sin and obedience for Christians. Let me give you a few:

- **Perfectionism** – Perfectionism says that Christians are able to arrive at a place where sin is no longer present in our lives. I've never met that person and you never will either. Romans 8:13 rejects it as *put to death* is in a verb form that says it's an ongoing and continuous killing that's needed. While it can be weakened and marginalized, sin is with us till we die.
- **A Second Blessing** – This approach says we need something more to get us to the next level. An experience of the Spirit or some other deeply spiritual moment that puts our lives on another and higher spiritual plane.
- **Surrender/Let go and let God** – there is a nefarious teaching out there that the key is to internally let go and surrender that sin to God. That sounds nice and there is an aspect of Christianity that is a kind of surrendering and changing of allegiances to Christ. But when applied to how I overcome sin and temptation, remember sin is our enemy. Sin would love nothing better than for us to lay down our spiritual weapons and surrender. Romans 8:13 says to kill sin, not surrender.
- **Legalism** – Strictly speaking, legalism is redefining the gospel to where my obedience is the cause of my salvation. The condition of my justification. Perhaps we call that legalistic justification. Romans 1-5 nail the coffin on that. We are here in Romans 6-8 which is not primarily justification but sanctification. Here is where legalism also destroys because it says, we are justified by grace and sanctified by our own effort. Legalistic sanctification. Typically, this involves obeying religious rules that go beyond what the Bible teaches.

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, p. 7.

I remember hearing in person a sermon by a pastor who got up and said, "My sermon today is entitled, *Those Dumb Rules.*" His whole sermon was defending the fact that at their church they create rules that go beyond the Bible because that creates a safe zone from sin. Smarter than the Holy Spirit? Smarter than Scripture? Do you see Romans 8:13 which says, "...but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body"? Man-made sanctification is just that, man-made. True sanctification is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Why would we add moral parameters when what's already there in Scripture is plenty challenging for all of us? But Pharisees are alive and well.

*"These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."* (Colossians 2:23)

Legalistic sanctification doesn't work and leaves people either filled with shame or self-righteousness. This is my background and many of yours. We need to let Romans 8:13 reprogram our minds and especially our consciences. This is very difficult to overcome as often it's intertwined with our family backgrounds and childhood. A first step for many of us would be to acknowledge this as a real struggle and to ask God to conform our hearts and minds to his Word, not the word of any human.

The key phrase here is, "*put to death the deeds of the body.*" (Romans 8:13) The Greek word for *put to death* is used 11 times in the New Testament, 9 for actually killing people.<sup>2</sup> One example is Stephen, the first martyr, who was put to death. Same word. This is not a nice word. This is a bloody word. A word of execution. It simply means, *kill it*. Legalism says, *stop it*. Romans says, *kill it*. This requires a posture toward sin that is much more like an assassin. Ruthless. Cold, hard hatred of sin.

Jesus said the same when he said, "*if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.*" (Matthew 5:30) It is not physical dismemberment, but a spiritual dismemberment that sees sin as leading to death. It is an abuse of grace that makes us OK with sin thinking, *I'm going to heaven anyway*. That is an incredibly dangerous posture toward sin and calls into question if we truly understand Jesus shedding his blood for that sin.

We should think of sin like cancer patients think of their cancer. The fighter-types hate cancer. What if you talked with someone after a bout of cancer and they said,

*I miss my cancer. Oh, I remember when I had lots of cancer. Such freedom I felt. Those were the days. Wow, the cancer parties were incredible! Many of my entertainment choices celebrate cancer. I remember driving for my chemo treatments—those were great days. If only I could have another chemo day. Cancer made me so happy.*

When you talk with cancer patients, they'll tell you the only way to beat cancer is to declare war on your cancer. When you see a bald woman wearing a wig, or a scarf on her head, respect her; she went to war. You must kill those cancer cells. How many of them? All of them. You hate it. You are willing to deal ruthlessly with it. Change your diet. Change your lifestyle. Stop your smoking. Whatever. You will shoot chemicals and radiation in your body to kill cancer. The courage in those cancer wards comes from people who don't want to die, they want to live!

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<sup>2</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Disciplines of Grace*, p. 192.

Romans 8:13 says, hate your sin. Hate it. See it as creating death in you. Don't coddle it. Don't ignore it. Go to war with your sin. You can't defeat cancer by loving cancer and you can't overcome sin and temptation by loving your sin. There is an old word that describes going to war and killing sin. **Mortify** it. When you see that word, it means, kill zone. DEFCON 1. Going nuclear. Annihilation. Is this the posture of your heart toward your sin?

### **We Kill Indwelling Sin by the Power of Indwelling Spirit**

*"If by the Spirit we put to death."* (Romans 8:13) The agency for this is the Holy Spirit in us. Religion tries to make people moral by means of self-effort. That fails miserably. If you are a Christian, you have God in you. Because of this, as we attempt to put sin to death we have access to divine power to overcome.

This should encourage us especially with long-term habitual sin where we may despair and think, *I can't get past this. I'll always be addicted to this. I'm a victim in this.* None of that applies to a Christian's struggle. If God is for us and in us, who can be against us?

### **We Kill Sin by Starving**

If they couldn't take a city, the ancient armies would make war by starving the city to death. We will always have this sin nature. Until we die, there is an enemy within us ready at any time to reassume the throne of our hearts. But sin needs fuel like fire needs oxygen. Water extinguishes fires by taking away the oxygen. Kill sin by suffocating it, taking away the desires and temptations that fuel sin's power in us. How?

### **Deal ruthlessly with temptation**

Sin begins in our minds and hearts. It starts on the inside. Perhaps in a future message, we will do an autopsy on how this works. Check out James 1:13ff. Every day temptations come to us from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Jesus urged us to deal ruthlessly with temptation. Cut off your hand. Gouge out your eye. Are you struggling with a sin? What are you actively doing to kill that sin at the temptation?

If your mind is preoccupied with a woman at the gym, it's time to change gyms. If there is a context where there you feel a strong temptation to sin, don't go there, don't watch that, don't put yourself there. Is a little sin OK? Is a little cancer OK?

### **Make no provision for the flesh**

*"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."* (Romans 13:14)

Again, how would you treat cancer? Get as close as you can to it? Flirt with it? No. If there is a vile of fluid that says, *Cancer*, I'm not touching it. I'm getting out of the room. Killing sin requires us to see it like Hazmat material. Don't go near it. Don't put yourself in compromising situations. This requires the next point...

### **Know thyself**

This requires self-reflection and self-awareness. What are my weak points? What in my past creates a propensity toward sin? How has it taken me down before and what can I do to avoid that? We are not all the same, but the same principle applies.

## Picture Jesus struggling on the cross for that sin

I heard this somewhere and I have found it to be very helpful. When all else fails, bring to mind a mental picture of our Savior bloody on the cross. I have found whatever temptation I may be having, it disappears. There's so much more to say on that and hopefully we will as Romans continues.

## We Kill Sin by Stoking

But it's not just starving sin. The most powerful weapons have to do with stoking. We starve one fire and we stoke another. This is where prohibitions fail. Starving is hating sin, stoking is loving God. We overwhelm the lesser desire with the greater desire. Where does that desire come from? The heart. Who is there? The Holy Spirit. The more my heart is loving and treasuring God and his purposes in my life, the less interested I am in whatever drivel sin is offering.

Suffocating sin is the defense. Stoking holy affections is the offense. We should do everything we can to increase our affections for God. Time doesn't allow much on this, but these are well-known. The daily disciplines of prayer and time in God's Word stoke holy affections for the day. Ignore those and what happens to our attitudes? Have you noticed?

The grace of corporate worship, fellowship with other Christians, serving Jesus in meaningful ways, giving generously to the poor and God's work, biblical preaching and teaching, and a host of other graces from God stir and stoke our desires toward him.

Do you see? [Illustrated with a fire extinguisher and lighter.] We minimize sin's power by starving it [demonstrated by using the fire extinguisher] and we maximize the power of the Spirit by stoking it [demonstrated by using the lighter]. This is known as progressive sanctification—the lifelong passionate pursuit of decreasing sin-likeness and increasing Christ-likeness.

Some of the best things I have ever read are on this subject. These articulate it far better than I can.

*"A way of life where we seek to throttle sin and crush it from our lives, sapping it of its strength, rooting it out, and depriving it of its influence."* (John MacArthur)<sup>3</sup>

*"What then is this killing of sin? It is the constant battle against sin which we fight daily – the refusal to allow the eye to wander, the mind to contemplate, the affections to run after anything which will draw us from Christ. It is the deliberate rejection of any sinful thought, suggestion, desire, aspiration, deed, circumstance or provocation at the moment we become conscious of its existence... It is not accomplished only by saying 'no' to what is wrong, but by a determined acceptance of all the good and spiritually-nourishing disciplines of the gospel. It is by resolutely weeding the garden of the heart, and also by planting, watering, nurturing Christian graces there, that putting sin to death will take place. Not only must we slay the noxious weeds of sin, but we must see that the flowers of grace are sucking up the nourishment of the Spirit's presence in our hearts. Only when those hearts are so full of grace will less room exist for sin to breathe and flourish."* (Sinclair Ferguson)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *Vanishing Conscience*, p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, p. 162.

*"Sanctification is an immediate work of the Spirit of God on the souls of believers, purifying and cleansing of their natures from the pollution and uncleanness of sin, renewing in them the image of God, and thereby enabling them, from a spiritual and habitual principle of grace, to yield obedience unto God, according unto the tenor and terms of the new covenant, by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ."* (John Owen)<sup>5</sup>

*"Indeed, the more sanctified a person is, the more conformed he is to the image of his Savior, the more he must recoil against every lack of conformity to the holiness of God. The deeper his apprehension of the majesty of God, the greater the intensity of his love to God, the more persistent his yearning for the attainment of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, the more conscious will he be of the gravity of the sin which remains and the more poignant will be his detestation of it."* (John Murray)<sup>6</sup>

All of these explain one small but mighty 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."* (Romans 8:13)

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<sup>5</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, p. 453.

<sup>6</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 145.