

Romans 8:1-13

Mortifying The Flesh

...if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live – v. 13

Paul's thesis in his epistle to the Romans is that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth (1:16). There are a number of ways in which gospel power can be considered:

It can be considered in terms of the power of Christ's death. He is the propitiation for our sins which means that He bore the wrath of God against our sins. God's righteous anger against sin was unleashed upon His Son and such was the power of Christ that He could not only endure that wrath but could prevail over it and make the pronouncement *it is finished* – and thus salvation was accomplished. Such power on the part of Christ should move us to reverence and awe as well as deep humility and heart-felt gratitude.

Another way that gospel power can be considered is in terms of the power of the Holy Spirit to apply salvation to your life. In spite of what Christ accomplished, you see, it would have meant nothing to any of us had the Spirit of God not broken down the gates of our resistance to God by His power. The carnal mind is enmity against God we read in v. 7. And apart from the Holy Spirit regenerating our depraved hearts and enlightening our darkened minds and renewing our rebellious wills we would have hugged our sins all the way to hell, Christ's death notwithstanding.

So we may contemplate the power of Christ's death – He is our propitiation. We may contemplate the power of the Holy Spirit in our regeneration. He brought us forth from spiritual death to spiritual life. There is yet another way in which gospel power can be contemplated and that is by thinking of it in terms of the power that is wrought in our lives to transform us. This is the power of sanctification. The gospel, you see, rightly understood and appropriated by faith conveys the power more than any other religion to take hopeless and helpless rebellious sinners and transform them into those that are morally upright who live in integrity and honesty which is merged with a spirit of humility.

This is a part of Paul's argument in his epistle to the Romans. The critics of the gospel – especially the Jewish critics thought that Paul's logic would leave men free to sin with no dread of the consequences. *What shall we say then?* Paul asks in 6:1 *Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?* And in response to that objection Paul goes on to explain in very practical terms how the gospel in fact succeeds where Jewish legalism could only fail. And it succeeds even though there may be sinners who think they can abuse it by making it an excuse or a free pass for their sin.

It succeeds by implanting a whole new way of thinking and acting in the mind and heart of the believer. And apart from that new way of thinking and acting the sinner has not really been saved by the gospel. This new way of thinking and acting as well as the consequences for the failure to adopt it becomes abundantly plain and clear in the words of our text:

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live (8:13).

On commentator interprets the verse this way: *If you live to indulge your carnal propensities, you will sink to eternal death. Either your sins must die, or you must. If they are suffered to live, you will die. If they are put to death, you will be saved. No man can be saved in his sins. This closes the argument of the apostle for the superiority of the gospel to the Law in promoting the purity of man. By this train of reasoning, he has shown that the gospel has accomplished what the Law could not do - the sanctification of the soul, the destruction of the corrupt passions of our nature, and the recovery of man to God.*

On the surface of it the verse might seem to be a denial of free salvation. And indeed, this is a text, according to Arthur Pink that Arminians twist to support their wrong notions. All the text is indicating, however, is that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. There really is life-transforming power to be found in the gospel of Christ and it becomes the true believer's responsibility to utilize that power. By utilizing that power he will *mortify the deeds of the body*. This duty to mortify the deeds of the body is given as a command in Col 3:5 *Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:*

This is what I'd like to call your attention to this morning – this duty of mortification. Simply put:

We Must Mortify the Flesh

In the moments that remain I'd like to set before you what this means, how it's done and why it's important.

I. What it Means to Mortify the Flesh

The word *mortify* means *to put to death*. The Greek term behind our English word most often appears with reference to Christ being put to death. So we read in Mt 27:1 *When the morning was come, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death:* They took counsel, in other words, to mortify Christ.

It's fitting that this term applies most often with regard to the death of Christ for the same kind of death, spiritually speaking, is what the believer is to apply to his flesh. Christ was put to death by means of crucifixion. Crucifixion is a slow death – and so do we find the process of mortification to be a slow process. It is not something that we'll ever see absolutely accomplished so long as we remain in this world. But it is something that the believer will ever endeavor to do. The tense of the verb in Greek indicates continuous action. This is an action, or a duty, in other words that the Christian must be doing continuously during the days of his pilgrimage in this world.

Not only is crucifixion a slow death but crucifixion is a painful death and mortifying the deeds of the body is likewise painful. The flesh hates to give up sin. The flesh constantly and strongly protests the process of being denied and constantly asserts its lusts. The flesh is ever searching for ways to justify and excuse sin or to play down the heinous nature of sin. Part of the process of mortification is not to give in to such carnal reasoning. Indeed mortifying the flesh involves putting to death that very kind of reasoning.

It's important to understand and you may have gathered by this point, that when Paul deals in this section of Romans with the flesh or the deeds of body, he's speaking about the carnal nature. *The flesh* in the first part of the verse is the same as *the deeds of the body* in the later part of the verse. We are dealing now with that part of man's nature that originally rebelled against God and has the propensity to continually rebel against God. It is the carnal nature of man – the part of him that, like the Jews, says with regard to Christ *we will not have this man to rule over us*.

Eight times we find mention of the flesh in the first 13 verses of Romans 8. And from those mentions of the flesh we come to learn that it is weak through the law and that it is sinful. We learn that it pertains to our minds as well as our conduct and that those that are in the flesh cannot please God. The carnal mind is enmity against God and is not subject to the law of God neither indeed can be (v 7). If we add Romans 7 to the analysis then we can note that in the flesh there dwells no good thing and that the flesh serves the law of sin. It's no wonder, then, that the believer acquires the duty to mortify the flesh. The flesh, you could say, represents all that is wrong with man. The flesh is the very thing from which sinners need to be saved. And yet Paul is not addressing sinners in this epistle but Christians.

John Gill raises an interesting question about those who live in the flesh. *It may be asked, whether one that has received the grace of God in truth, can live after the flesh; flesh, or corrupt nature, though still in such a person, has not the dominion over him. To live in sin, or in a continued course of sinning, is contrary to the grace of God; but flesh may prevail and greatly influence the life and conversation, for a while; how long this may be the case of a true believer, under backslidings, through the power of corruptions and temptations, cannot be known; but certain it is, that it shall not be always thus with him.*

The mark of a true believer is that he will loathe his carnal nature. He will hate the fact that his flesh gets the best of him and he will not and indeed cannot be happy under the constant sway of his carnal nature. David could commit awful sin in the flesh but he couldn't be happy in such a condition. *When I kept silence*, he writes in Ps. 32:3 *my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long*. Such was the effect of the voice of his conscience roaring at him that he felt himself aging faster than he was actually growing old.

The point I want to emphasize this morning is that salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ means salvation not just from a future form of punishment. Thank God it does include that, but salvation means being saved from sin's dominion now. Salvation applies

to us in this life. Salvation doesn't bring us to the point of sinless perfection but it does set us on a path to strive for it.

The mark of a man who is saved is that when he finds himself in the condition Paul describes in Romans 7 – wanting to do the things that he should, but not doing them but doing instead the things that he would not do – his cry is the same as Paul's in 7:24 *O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*

The body of this death is a sinful nature that yet clings to him like the weight of a rotting corpse. Some commentators suggest that the image is taken from Roman law in which a convicted murderer would be sentenced to having the corpse of his victim tied to him until the decaying corpse would eventually spread to the murderer's body and eventually take his life. The believer is taught to view his sin nature that way. It's not something he wants to yield to – it's not something he wants to bargain with – it's something, rather, that he wants to mortify and get the victory over.

The next question we must consider, therefore, is the question *how?*

II. How Do We Mortify the Flesh?

Our text makes two things very plain. The first thing is that mortifying the flesh is something we cannot do in our own strength. *If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body* our text reads. The Spirit must be very much involved in the process. The second thing made clear is that this practice of mortifying the flesh is something that we do. The command is given to us and in our text the condition of life depends on rising to this duty. *If ye through the Spirit do mortify.*

By noting these two things we should be enabled to avoid a couple of grave errors. The first error would be the mistake of thinking that it's simply a matter of our own will power when it comes to mortifying the flesh. The flesh holds too much sway over us to make the conquering of the flesh simply a matter of will power.

There are some, not many, but some, among the ranks of the unsaved that have very strong will power and are able to demonstrate remarkable self discipline. They may abstain from drugs and drink. They may watch their diets and devote themselves to a certain amount of exercise and as a result they keep themselves physically fit. Maintaining physical fitness is a far cry from mortifying the flesh.

Mortifying the flesh, you see, not only involves keeping fleshly appetites in check, it also involves the slaying of pride and self righteousness. It involves the slaying of carnal motives. A man may exhibit what appears to be remarkable self discipline and yet his motive for doing so may be completely carnal. He's living for self – he's devoted to himself and all that he does or abstains from doing goes no further than his own self interest.

Mortifying the flesh is a supernatural process and must be done through supernatural means. It's true that the will of the believer is involved in the process. But it would be a mistake to think that mortification is simply a matter of will power.

On the other hand – it would also be a mistake to think that Holy Spirit performs this task apart from us. The believer is involved in the process and it's his duty to utilize the power of the Holy Spirit in order to mortify the flesh. It is God's Spirit, according to Paul in Philippians that worketh in us both to will and to do His good pleasure. And because of the Spirit's work it becomes our task to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). This is not salvation by means of works but it is salvation that is put to work.

How, then, does the Spirit work in us and how do we utilize the Spirit's power to mortify the flesh? The Spirit works in us in such a way that we're enabled to discover sin. And when we discover it we hate it. We see sin as the very thing that damns our souls to hell. We see sin as an affront against our God. And through the gospel we come to see sin as the very thing that nailed our Savior to the cross.

It certainly is a mark of our degenerate age when even Christians treat sin so lightly. We expect sinners to treat sin lightly. They are, after all, still in the flesh. They hate the fact that their conscience bothers them at all about sin. They can't get enough of it and one of the pains of hell that will move them to gnash their teeth against God will be the fact that they're cut off from pursuing their fleshly lusts which will still be demanding to be fed.

We understand their attitude toward sin – but how does it come about that Christians also can treat sin so lightly as if sin is a thing of little consequence? The only way a Christian can adopt such a light view of sin is by keeping far away from the cross of Christ. The Christian who draws near the cross learns from the cross what God thinks of sin. See the whipping of Christ's back and know that this is what sin deserves. See the crown of thorns pressed into his brow. It's sin that crowns the Savior with mockery and derision. See the nails being driven into His hands and feet. Your fiery lusts forged the nails and your rebellion brings the hammer down upon those nails. And then see Christ suspended between heaven and earth, nailed to a cross in agony and shame. You begin to get an idea of what sin deserves. But you only begin to get an idea.

When it comes to Christ's suffering for sin He must plumb the depths that we cannot see. A veil of darkness must be drawn across the scene from the sixth to the ninth hour. And during that time of darkness we cannot begin to fathom the suffering that our sins placed upon Christ. All we're able to do is hear from behind that veil our Savior's cry *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?* And the answer to that question is because our sins have been laid upon Him. Our sins have brought forth His incomprehensible sufferings. Our sins have slain the Prince of Life.

If you can behold Him bearing shame and scoffing rude and not be moved to deep humility and a holy hatred for your sins then the cause must be traced to the absence of the Holy Spirit in your life and you yet remain in your sins. It's the Spirit, you see, that brings Christ to the believer's remembrance. It must be the Spirit who leads you to Calvary and impresses upon you something of the reality of Christ as your sin-bearing substitute.

And when the Spirit of Christ leads us to the cross of Christ then the follower of Christ is humbled. He's humbled and he's grateful for he sees a manifestation of love that can never be fully comprehended. *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends* Christ said in Jn. 15:13. And how is such love suppose to effect a believer? It effects him by causing him to love Christ in return. It effects him by leading him to seek Christ for forgiveness for his sins. But he doesn't merely want forgiveness – he wants victory over sin. He hates the sin that would have damned his soul, the sin that nailed his Savior to a tree. And in the power of love and the power of hatred he is now resolved to conquer sin and to do all that is necessary to give no occasion to the flesh to tempt him with his sin. In this fashion, then, sin is mortified – the Spirit discover our sin, convicts us of our sin, leads us to Christ to gain forgiveness of our sin – shows us what Christ did to provide that forgiveness – and stirs our hearts by Christ's provision to overcome that sin.

What must we do, then, to gain the benefit of the Spirit's work? We must walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit (v. 1 and again in v. 4). We must mind the things of the Spirit (v. 5). We must recognize and be willing to pay our debt – verse 12 *Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.* What are we debtors to then? By implication we're debtors to the Spirit and we're debtors to Christ Himself.

Paul states the matter very succinctly in Gal. 5:16 *This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.* The only thing that will prevent us from knowing the Spirit's help in mortifying the flesh will be spiritual negligence on our part. And I dare say that where you find instances of Christians, so-called, falling into deep and awful sin, the cause can be traced first to spiritual negligence.

We see, then, what it means to mortify the flesh and I hope you can see how it's done. It remains for us to consider:

III. Why It's Important to Mortify the Flesh

Simply put – it's a matter of life or death. Doesn't our text make that plain? *For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.* As one commentator put it – *If ye do not kill sin, it will kill you* (JFB).

Life and death can be viewed from two different perspectives in this text and I think Paul intends that we view them from both perspectives. There is the perspective of eternal life and eternal death. And the plain truth of the matter is that if you live after the flesh you will die eternally – you will in the end be condemned for your sins.

I said earlier in the message that Arminians have used this text in such a way as to lend credence to their notion that a man may lose his salvation. The verse is not teaching us that. Paul is addressing the same ones that he addresses in v. 1 and in verse 1 we're told that there is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus. Are we holding out the possibility now in v. 13 that there may be condemnation to them depending on whether or not they mortify the deeds of the body?

I don't believe that is what Paul intends – but what he does intend is that there cannot be and should not be assurance of salvation to those who habitually follow after the flesh. They could prove, at the end of the day, to be among those that hear the Lord say to them *I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work iniquity* (Mt. 7:23).

The text, then, becomes a test that enables us to make our calling and election sure. The sinner that's been saved will certainly possess the desire to mortify the flesh. He may not be happy with the extent of his success but on the other hand he can draw assurance from the fact that he has the desire. He hates the sin that too easily besets him and he doesn't deny or excuse his sin. He constantly pleads the blood of Christ over it and presses the battle against his sin. That's evidence of eternal life. That's experiencing the power of the gospel in the way that God meant it to be known. Anything short of that experience amounts to having an outward show of godliness but knowing nothing of the power.

So life and death can be viewed from that eternal perspective, the perspective of everlasting life or everlasting damnation. I believe the text can also be viewed in the practical realm of spiritual life and spiritual death. To the extent that a believer is mortifying the flesh, to that same extent he's sowing to the Spirit, and walking by the Spirit and minding the things of the Spirit. He's keeping close to Christ and is knowing the vitality of everlasting life.

The professing Christian who devotes too much time to the world and the flesh and has become negligent in spiritual things – he spends little if any time in prayer and he spends little if any time in the word – this man loses his spiritual vitality and becomes desensitized to the things of God. His religion becomes to all practical intents and purposes a dead religion and he himself becomes dead to the things of God.

If a solemn and serious thing to contemplate – the awful truth that if your religion seems dead it may be because you are dead. The thing a professing Christian in such a condition needs to weigh is whether or not he's ever known spiritual vitality in his walk with the Lord. Maybe he's never done anymore than give a certain assent to the truths of the gospel without having his heart regenerated.

If you find yourself in such a state that you can say I did know the sweetness of fellowship with Christ – I have known the blessing of walking with Christ in the light of His word – but that was some time ago. I haven't known that peace and joy and assurance of believing in some time now. If that's your case then you need to begin anew to seek Christ with all your heart and plead with Him for the power of the Holy Ghost to be given you that you may mortify the flesh and begin again to know the blessing of life.

The matter of mortifying the flesh is of utmost importance, then. It's a matter of life and death. It's a matter of eternal life or eternal death and it's a matter of knowing the blessing of life or being subject to dead religion. I trust this morning that the Lord will so stir your hearts that you'll find the grace that compels you to say that by the grace of God I will overcome the flesh by mortifying the deeds of the body that I may gain assurance of salvation and walk in the joy and peace of believing in Christ.