

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT, LIFE AGAINST THE FLESH
ROMANS 8:12-13

One of the hardest parts of the spiritual life is dealing with the daily reality that we are in a fight.

Spiritual maturity does not come easily. Sin rarely waves the white flag of surrender. The flesh often proposes a truce with sin and then when terms for its submission are offered, it rebels, subverts, and commits traitorous acts against us. The battle against the flesh and indwelling sin is long and hard.

But the fight against the flesh is also necessary. The Spirit of God is given to the believer at salvation as a down payment promise for our coming full redemption and so that we might know the daily provision and presence of Christ in our lives and for the purpose of equipping us for the fight against sin.

As we have seen in Romans 8, the Spirit of God is given so that we might be freed from the power of sin and death (vv. 2-3) and so that we might increasingly fulfill the requirements of the Law (v. 4). But the fight against sin is not fought only by the Spirit of God; we must work with him against sin and the flesh. We must, as Paul says in vv. 12-13, mortify the flesh — put it to death on a daily basis. The theme of these verses can be simply stated as —

TO LIVE IN THE SPIRIT IS TO LIVE AGGRESSIVELY AGAINST THE FLESH.

Or to be alive in the Spirit is to live opposed to every manifestation of the flesh in our lives. Ray Ortlund, Jr. said it well — “But life in the Spirit means killing our sinful impulses. The flesh cannot be refined into holiness. It needs to die.” [*Supernatural Living for Natural People.*]

In this passage, Paul explains two realities about our relationship to the flesh —

1. If You are in the Spirit, You Have NO Obligation to the Flesh (vv. 12-13a)

- ✓ A reminder: you have been set FREE (v. 12)
- ✓ A warning: fleshly living will bring eternal DYING (v. 13a)

2. If You are in the Spirit, You will MORTIFY the Flesh (v. 13b)

- ✓ A definition: what mortification is
- ✓ The resource: the POWER for mortification
- ✓ An explanation: How mortification is done
- ✓ The hope: the END for those who mortify

1. If You are in the Spirit, You Have No Obligation to the Flesh (vv. 12-13a)

- A reminder: you have been set FREE (v. 12)

- ✓ This verse is a transition — **so then** — from the preceding verses. It's a double word that has the idea of "consequently therefore..." He is making an emphatic conclusion about the work of the Spirit. Since all these things about the work of Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit are true, there is an inescapable conclusion to make.
- ✓ Paul wants to make the point that this conclusion is applicable for all believers. It is not for a select few who are particularly spiritual; it is a reality for all who are in Christ. So he refers to his readers as **brothers**; and notice that he uses the first person pronoun, **we**. He includes himself in this statement. The Roman readers are in the same position before Christ as he is as an apostle.
- ✓ What is this reality? Before exhorting them in v. 13, he reminds the Romans and us that there is **no obligation** (debt) **to the flesh**.
 - Paul is thinking about a moral debt or obligation.
 - Someone might ask, "because I still have this human body, and even if I am a believer I still have remaining sin, so do I *have* to sin? Am I obligated to sin? Do I have an ongoing continual obligation to sin?"
 - And Paul says "no!" Now there is an implied obligation — *we are under obligation* he says. And he doesn't complete his sentence, but the clear inference is that our obligation is to the Spirit to live according to the Spirit's direction and desires. *We do* have that moral obligation.
 - But hear this: *there is no obligation to the flesh*. Someone has rightly and simply said, "the flesh has no rights...we owe the flesh nothing." [Morris] The flesh "has no claim on us." [Stott]
 - We sometimes think about sin in this way — when we were unbelievers, we were imprisoned and enslaved by sin; we had to sin and could do nothing but sin. Everything we did, even good and moral things, were acts of rebellion against God and our need for Christ and Christ's righteousness. And having been released from this master, we have been given a certificate of freedom (**Col. 2:14**). We look at that certificate and think something like, "It says I'm free, but I think I still need to report to my probation officer; I still have fines to pay and I still have testing to take to keep my freedom. I still have to listen to my old jailers and obey them."
- ✓ When we think, "I have been absolved of the guilt of sin, but I really don't have any power to resist sin and I not only will still sin, but I *must* sin; I must go back to it..." Paul says, "No." We don't need to live **according to the flesh** because of Christ's saving work — the flesh is no longer our master; we are not under condemnation, we've been set free, and sin has been condemned in the flesh (vv. 1-3). We really have died to sin.

“Because of Christ’s saving work on our behalf, the sinful flesh no longer reigns over us, to debilitate us and drag us back into the pit of depravity into which we were all born....Although there will always be some lingering influence of the flesh until we meet the Lord, we have no excuse for sin to continue to corrupt our lives. The Christian’s obligation is no longer to the flesh but to the Spirit.” [MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*]

- A warning: fleshly living will bring eternal DYING (v. 13a)

- ✓ With the reminder about Christ’s provision, Paul also gives a warning — ***if you are living according to the flesh you will die...*** While Paul was all-inclusive in verse 12 with the first person pronoun, “we,” here he wants to emphasize the aspect of warning so he goes back to the second person, “you.” It is an invitation for the readers to do self-examination. “Is this me?”
- ✓ It’s important to ask that question, because Paul is speaking about a certainty — *when you live this way, it is certain that you will die.* In fact, Paul is emphatic — he is saying, “it is a destiny, it is inevitable, a necessary consequence.” In fact, it has the sense of “you are on the precipice of dying...it’s about to happen.”
- ✓ And the death he is talking about is eternal death, not merely physical death.
 - We know it’s more than physical death because all men will die physically, even believers (v. 10)
 - Paul is talking about the spiritual death that comes from remaining in Adam (5:21; 6:23; Gal. 6:8)
 - This is death in its fullest sense — eternal separation from God and eternal condemnation under God’s wrath. [Moo]
- ✓ One question to ask is, “are you living by the flesh?” If so, then hear Paul’s warning: you are on the precipice of eternal death. You are on the roadway to the cemetery and unless you change your pathway, you will soon arrive.
 - The only solution (but praise God it is a solution) is to repent for your sin. Be grieved that you have been rebellious against God’s Law and God’s provision of salvation and that you have attempted to live life your way, without Christ.
 - And then have faith that Christ is enough to save you from the penalty of your sin and that He is enough to free you from the bondage of your sin, and believe that He is worth living for.
 - Repent and have faith and you will be saved and moved off the road to certain eternal death.
- ✓ Here is another question: “Is Paul suggesting that a believer can lose his position in Christ?”
 - Do you remember what we’ve been saying since Romans 5 about our position in Christ? If we are in Christ, we can never be out of Christ. If Christ has absorbed God’s wrath for us, then we can never again return to being under God’s wrath. If we been removed from the wrath that comes through Adam, we can never go back to that position (5:17; 6:5, 7; 8:1-2).
 - And the security and assurance of the believer is Paul’s particular emphasis in this chapter (vv. 11, 15-16, 30, 31, 32, 38-39).
 - And security is something that is promised throughout the rest of Scripture (1 Pt. 1:4-5; 1 Jn. 5:13; Jn. 3:16; 10:28).

- There is assurance, but that does not remove the obligation (duty, responsibility) of the believer. We see the responsibility of the believer throughout the NT: we are saved *to good works* (Eph. 1:4b; 2:10; Tt. 2:14; 1 Pt. 1:14-19; 1 Jn. 3:3).
 - Neither the indicative of what God has done for us in Christ nor the imperative of what we must do in submission to Christ can be removed. They are both true — they cannot “be severed from one another; they are inextricably linked.” [Moo]
 - What do we say about the one who dies then? Paul means that if one persists in living by the flesh and does not live by the Spirit, then he is spiritually dead and will experience God’s wrath. We are not talking about isolated instances of sin, but we are talking about the totality of life — there is no progression towards Christ (Phil. 1:6).
 - We’re not talking about perfection, but direction. But *we are* talking about direction — there is an inclination and desire and pursuit of Christ in the one who has been saved by Christ.
 - This warning then serves as an opportunity to examine ourselves — what is the direction of our lives? Are we operating out of the flesh? Are we operating out of either blatant and overt licentious rebellion, or subtle and moralistic self-righteousness? Or are we struggling to beat back sin by the power of the Holy Spirit? (More on that in a moment.)
- There is good news and a timely warning in this passage: If one is in Jesus Christ, there is no obligation to sin; we are free. But we must beware to continue pursuing Christ, because the one who lives for the indulgence of his flesh and in rebellion to the Spirit, will die spiritually, even if he claims Christ (Mt. 7:21).
 - Instead of living under the power of the flesh, Paul says the believer will live by the power of the Spirit, and he will give evidence of that by mortifying the flesh.

2. If You are in the Spirit, You will **MORTIFY** the Flesh (v. 13b)

- Paul says that if you are living by the Spirit, *you are putting to death the deeds of the body*.
- A definition: what mortification is
 - ✓ The word “mortification” is used of literally putting a person to death (Lk. 21:16) or experiencing the danger of death (Rom. 8:36). So to mortify sin means just what it says here: it is to cause or put to death. John MacArthur’s definition is helpful: mortification is “a way of life where Christians seek to throttle sin and crush it from their lives, sapping it of its strength, rooting it out, and depriving it of its influence.” [“Mortification of Sin”]
 - ✓ Notice also what we have to mortify: ***the deeds of the body***. He is not saying that the body itself is evil or sinful. Not everything the body does is sinful: it has arms to give a hug of love and care, feet to carry the gospel, lips to speak the gospel, hands to make a meal or repair a car for someone in need. But the body is where the desires of our flesh are manifested. Our sinful desires are carried out through the practices of our body. And it is those sinful practices that need to be killed. So in a sense, Paul is using the term in parallel to ***the flesh*** (or better, as an extension of the flesh).

- ✓ And the fact that we have to *kill* the sin tells us of its power. It's not enough to just tie it up. It's not enough to move to a new residence and hope to leave it behind in our old home. We have to kill it. Nothing less will do. This is akin to the radical amputation spoken of by Christ (**Mt. 5:29-30**).
- ✓ What is also particularly important to notice here is that Paul says it is the believer's regular activity. We don't mortify sin once and say, "That took care of that; I'm done now." To address sin and the flesh is a regular (constant?) activity in the life of the believer. It is something we will deal with every single day of our lives. But the fact that God commands us to mortify the flesh and that He gives us the Holy Spirit to do the work also means that mortification is possible.
- ✓ **[ASIDE:** that should be an encouragement to you. Some of us are feeling the weight of our ongoing struggle with sin. We are weary of it, aren't we? Some of you just want it to end and go away. You want an end to your anger or pride or covetousness or lust or gluttony or laziness or pleasure seeking or materialism. While not every sin will be a weight to you every day, there will be some sin every day which you will have to fight to submit to the Spirit of God. You are not experiencing anything unusual. It's normal. And the provision of God, as we will see, is adequate for you.]
- ✓ Tim Keller is helpful:

"This means a Christian doesn't play games with sin. You don't aim to wean yourself off it, or say: I can keep it under control. You get as far away from it as possible. You don't just avoid things you know are sin; you avoid the things that lead to it, and even things that are doubtful. This is war!"

- ✓ Notice finally a paradox in this phrase: Those who "live" according to the flesh will die, but those who "put to death" the deeds of the body will live. [Schreiner] Life comes by death. Death leads to life. Christ died to give us spiritual life, and when we die to sin we evidence that we have that life.
- ✓ So how will we do this? What is the power for us to mortify the flesh? (Because many of us are weary from attempting to resist sin.)

- The resource: the **POWER** for mortification

- ✓ Paul has been emphatic — it is the responsibility of the believer to mortify sin in his life. It is his job. He must attend to it. He must work at it. He pulls the knife and he slits the throat of sin.
- ✓ And when he kills sin, he must realize that he is not doing it on his own. Sin will never be killed by the redeemed sinner alone. It can only be killed **by the Spirit's** power. The Holy Spirit is the means by which we kill sin. God is honored only when sin is killed as a fruit of the Spirit's work. There is no honor to God when we attempt to kill sin by the power of the flesh.
- ✓ This is what theologians call the synergistic work of sanctification. We work and we labor and we sweat for our sanctification as we kill sin. And as we do that, we know that we can only do this as a fruit of the Spirit of God working in us. If you are *really* killing sin, it's the Spirit who has done that in you (see God gets the glory and credit and you don't). This is the principle of **Phil. 2:12-13**.

- ✓ This verse is so helpful because it is a reminder that we must work at our faith. Lack of obedience is never a matter of “God never took the desire away...” We have a responsibility to work.
- ✓ But this verse also is helpful because it reminds us that our salvation and sanctification are never about our own efforts; our justification and sanctification are the fruit of the Spirit’s work in us.
- ✓ So work hard against sin, and recognize that whatever progress you make in the fight, it’s not you that’s doing the work, but God doing His work through you. He really is adequate (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
- ✓ So two thoughts in relation to this principle:
 - If you are struggling and not making any progress, ask if you are using the Spirit’s tools to conquer sin or if you are battling against it only in the flesh.
 - If you are struggling and your conscience affirms that you are fighting by the Spirit’s power, then thank God for the struggle, for it is a daily reminder to you of your need for God and His daily grace to help you. It is a daily reminder that every day He will be adequate for you.
- ✓ God has called us to mortify the flesh, but He doesn’t expect us to do it on our own; He has given the Spirit to empower all our mortifying efforts.

- **An explanation: How mortification is done**

- ✓ We will spend most of the sermon on this topic next time. For now let’s just notice that if we are going to mortify sin, then we are going to have to do it with the Spirit’s tools. And His primary tool is His Word.
- ✓ In a similar passage to this one, Paul calls the Colossians to mortify the flesh (3:5). He identifies what needs to be mortified (3:5b, 8-9). He identifies new attitudes and actions that should replace mortified sin (3:12-14). And then He tells how to do the mortification — let the peace of Christ rule your hearts and let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you (3:15-16).
- ✓ Mortification happens as we read that Word, let the Word read our hearts and motives, and then submit to and obey that Word so that it fills us with all its richness and fullness.

- **The hope: the END for those who mortify**

- ✓ **You will live.** He is not talking about the physical body living. We know that the physical body will die (v. 10). He means eternal life, just as the death at the beginning of this verse was eternal death.
- ✓ Does he mean that if you are mortifying the flesh you can earn or merit your salvation and eternal life? No. He’s already been clear that justification only is through Christ (4:5). He means that if you are mortifying the flesh through the power of the Spirit, it is evident that the Spirit is in you. And you can only have the Spirit if you are in Christ. And you are only in Christ by grace through faith. So if you are mortifying the flesh by the Spirit’s power, it is evidence of your salvation.
- ✓ When you die to sin and you live for Christ, you will live. The way to life is through death. Our life comes through Christ’s death. And His death produces death to sin in us. And only when we die to sin, will we really live.

CONCLUSION: Ray Ortlund offers some helpful questions in summation of this passage:

What is God saying to you at this point in your discipleship? What have you tolerated in your life that you must today get rid of? Where have you left your flank unguarded and exposed to temptation? Jesus said, 'Watch out! Don't let me find you living in careless ease and drunkenness, and filled with the worries of this life' (Luke 21:34, NLT). Careless ease — is it even possible for modern Christians to stay out of that trap? Drunkenness — along with over-eating and workoholism and other drugs. The worries of this life — fretting over making a big impression and the stock market and politics and so forth. Jesus said, 'Don't let me find you living this way.' Christians are people who live in the atmosphere of grace — not in careless ease and drunkenness and the worries of this life — by the power of the Spirit. Christians are a new race of mankind being created by the Spirit of God. They are normal people being led along an unmistakably new path in life: 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God' (v. 14). Being a child of God makes an unmistakable difference, as God leads us through mortification into ever richer life. Will you open your heart to his Spirit precisely where you have been filling your emptiness with some pet substitute for God? Cut it away and let it die. Let new life be born at that very place in your soul. [Ortlund, *Supernatural Living*, Kindle 873-83.]

BENEDICTION: Romans 8:37-39

First Service — Be sure to take advantage of the hospitality area. Find some physical refreshment and even more look for an opportunity to give spiritual refreshment: get to know someone you don't know; give a word of encouragement to someone who needs help and hope; pray with anyone who has a need.

Second Service — If you have children in the nursery or children's church, please serve our workers in those areas by picking them up immediately after we are dismissed.