

“The Way to Life”  
(Romans 8:12-13)

This evening, I would like for us to begin a short series on the subject of the Mortification, or the putting to death, of sin. This is something that you will rarely hear about from the pulpits of the church today. With the popularity of the self-esteem movement, it has become increasingly unpopular to talk about sin, especially the fact that there are any in the Church who actually commit it. And yet sin is something the Bible says we are all infected with, and something that we must reckon with everyday of our lives if we are to have anything like a successful and victorious Christian walk. As we saw briefly this morning, we have more enemies that are waging war against our souls than simply our doubts. Our main enemy is the sin that lives in our souls, which is the source of our all of our doubts. This is what weakens our faith and every other grace we have. Our fighting with this is where most of the struggle lies in the Christian life. As our sin becomes stronger, our graces become weaker, and along with them, our desire to serve and honor God. This means that if we truly want to live obedient and fruitful lives for God’s glory, if we really want to honor God and love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, if we really want to gain a full and certain assurance that we are His children and on our way to heaven, then we must fight against this sin. Sin is always present, fighting against us, trying to get us to go after the world and away from God. We must wrestle with it and defeat it. Our passage goes as far as to tell us that if we don’t fight against it, if we don’t try to kill it and actually experience some measure of victory over it, it will kill us. Paul writes, “If you are living according to the flesh, you must die.” He is not talking here about the death of our bodies, which is the kind of death that every person in the world will have to face, but he is talking about the death of our souls. What I would like for us to consider this evening is what the flesh is we are to put to death, what it means to live according to the flesh, and what it means that we will die if we live according to it.

First, what is the flesh? The first thing we need to understand is that when Paul talks about the flesh, he does not mean our bodies. There is nothing especially evil about our bodies. There were certain Greek philosophers who taught that anything material was evil, and that everything spiritual is good. They were called dualists. Because of their view of the intrinsic evil of the material world, they could not believe that Jesus ever really took upon Himself a human body. One who is God, who is pure spirit, and therefore good by nature, would never take upon Himself a nature which is evil. And so those from this way of thinking who adopted Christianity said that Jesus only seemed to be a man, but was really a pure spirit. They were called “Docetists.” But no one can hold this view and still be a Christian, because to believe in the true Christ is to believe in the One who was God who took upon Himself a true human nature. John tells us in John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” Paul writes that Jesus “was born of a descendant of David, according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3). And even after His resurrection, He still retained His flesh. He said to His disciples, “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). In this sense, flesh refers to His human nature. But there is another way flesh is used in the Bible. It also refers to a principle or law of action which is in our souls. It is an evil inclination or desire that we have by nature, one that we are born with.

Jesus tells us, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6). This is the same thing David writes about himself in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." When Adam sinned against the Lord, he became corrupt in every part of his being. And since he was our forefather and our representative in the garden, his corruption was also passed down to us, either by way of imputation -- his sin was imputed to us when we were conceived, and our souls became corrupt -- or by our inheriting his sinful nature -- since he was no longer perfectly holy, but now corrupt, he couldn't help but have corrupt children. This sinful nature or spiritual corruption we inherited from Adam is called in the Bible "flesh." It is a principle that is opposed to that of the Spirit. The Spirit's work within us makes us desire the things that are good. But this corruption makes us desire the things that are evil. This is why when both are present, there is a continual and irreconcilable battle between them over who will gain the mastery in our souls. Paul writes in Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please." When this sin is in the soul by itself, as it is in every unconverted person, there is no contest. Paul writes, "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8). Paul says there is nothing good in our flesh (Rom. 7:18), it is evil (v. 21), it wages war against the Spirit (v. 23), it is "the law of sin and of death" (8:2). Is it any wonder that Jesus said, "The flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63)?

Now this enemy, as I said, lives in the soul of every man, woman and child. It is even in the heart of every Christian. And because it is there, it fights against everything we do that has to do with God. When you want to pray, your sin will do everything it can to make sure that you don't. When you think about getting up earlier in the morning to pray, your sin will make you want to sleep in. When you consider whether or not to go to the prayer meeting, your sin will try to talk you into staying home to watch television, or that you are already too tired or too committed to go. When you try and recall the sermon on Sunday so that you can meditate on it and teach it to your children, your sin will either distract you or make it difficult for you to think or convince you that you really don't need to meditate on it because you already know it so well. When we think about giving to promote the Gospel or to help the poor and needy, as the Lord tells us to, our sin will convince us that we can't because we need a new piece of furniture, or a newer house or car, or some more new clothes. When we consider helping a brother or a neighbor, sin will convince us not to. When we consider witnessing to a friend or family member, sin will make us think it really isn't that important. And on the other hand, when we are faced with some temptation to sin, it will convince us that it's really not that dangerous. This corruption is always present in our hearts, always at work, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, resisting everything we want to do to honor and glorify God. When you want to do good, you can't do all that you want to, because this principle is fighting you. It not only takes away our desire to do good things, it also gives us desires for wrong things. It will make good things look bad, and bad things look very appealing. It craves evil, and continually fights against our inclinations to do good. It is a bitter enemy of God and of our souls. It will always hold us back. It wants anything more than to serve God. It can even bring us into at least a partial bondage to sin (Rom. 7:23), and the more success it has, the more powerful it becomes. It is very deceitful (Heb. 3:13). It makes us think that we are doing God's service, when we are really serving our sin. It daily talks us into presuming on the grace of God, by making sin and God's hatred of sin seem so much smaller than it really is, after all, "God will pardon it. It's

only a very little sin.” It can little by little take over our affections, and win over our devotion to God, bringing us into bondage to it. It is very powerful and very dangerous. In short, this sin is an enemy in our souls that hates God and wants to kill us. This is why Paul says we must put it to death.

The second thing we will want to consider briefly is what it means to live according to the flesh.

Living according to the flesh very simply means giving ourselves to these sinful lusts as a pattern of life. It means to live in sin. It means to practice any kind of evil. It means to yield ourselves to any sin without fighting against it. That sin may be little, or it may be great. It might be something relatively small such as fudging a little on our income taxes or telling white lies, or something great like bearing false witness against our neighbor, committing adultery or stealing. It can even be the practice of something which is not sinful in itself, but something which we believe to be sinful, and therefore wrong. To live according to the flesh means to yield to our sinful inclinations on a regular basis to the point where the conscience becomes seared and the heart becomes hard. Now everyone, even every Christian, commits sin every day of his life. We sin in our words, thoughts and in the thing we do. But the one who is truly living in the Spirit hates these sins, confesses them and repents of them. The one who is living according to the flesh doesn't. He just continues to practice them without fighting against them.

Now this is a very serious thing, especially when we consider the third point, “if you are living according to the flesh, you must die.” As I said, this does not refer to physical death, for because of the curse of the Fall, everyone will one day die in this sense. But rather it refers to death in the absolute worst sense of the word, eternal and everlasting death. Now why is this the case? Jesus gives us a simple answer in the Sermon on the Mount: A tree is known by its fruit. He says, “You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes*, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'” (Matt. 7:16-23). The fruit which our lives bear reveal what kind of a tree we are. If we bear good fruit as a habit or pattern of life, then we are good trees. But if we bear bad fruit as a habit or pattern of life, or in other words, if we live according to the flesh, then we are bad trees. *It is not the fruit which makes the tree good or bad; it only reveals whether the tree is good or bad.* Even so the practice of our lives reveals the character of our hearts, whether they are good or bad. This is why the apostle John writes, “No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:6-10). If our hearts have been cleansed by the grace of God, we will overcome our sin to the point

where we will practice righteousness. But if they have not, then we will practice sin. Again, what we do is only an indication of what we are, it is not what makes us good or evil. If we practice righteousness, we show that we are of God. But if we practice sin, we show that we are of the evil one. And, as Paul writes in our text, and as Jesus told us above, if we practice sin, if we live according to the flesh, we will share in the same fate as he will. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 7:19).

As I’ve said, these things are only an introduction to what we really need to look at, and that is how to put these sins to death. If it is true that those who live according to the flesh will die, then we need to kill our sins before they eventually kill us. What I would like to do over the next couple of Sunday evenings, excluding next Sunday since Greg will be preaching, is to consider what the Bible says about subduing our corruption and what it says about how we might keep it from bearing fruit. But may the Lord impress upon our hearts this evening how serious this matter is. Sin must be killed. We must be growing in our sanctification. We must put off the old and put on the new, if we are to ever see eternal life. As the author to the Hebrews wrote, we must “pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). May the Lord grant us all the strength we need to subdue our sin and to live according to the Spirit. Amen.