

“The Way to Life, Part 2”
(Romans 8:13)

Last week, we began to look at a very important subject called the Mortification of Sin. Mortification, as you know, refers to death. It’s related to the word mortal, which means something that is liable to death. We are mortal. We know that one day we will die, and of course, if we have trusted in Christ for our salvation, when we die we will go to heaven. By the grace of God, sin is also mortal. It can also die, which is what mortification is all about. It is the putting to death of our sins. This is the same thing Paul talks about when he says to the Romans, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts” (13:14). It is the same thing he wrote, where he says to the Ephesians, “This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (4:17-24).

Mortification is something we rarely hear about today, but something that our forefathers in the faith were very aware of and wrote a great deal about. The reason they did was because they recognized how vital it is, not only to our present, but also to our future well-being. Paul tells us in our passage as clearly as he can that if we live according to the flesh, we must die. If we live according to the desires of our sinful nature, we will perish in hell forever. But if, on the other hand, by the Spirit we are putting to death the deeds of the body, we will live. That is, if we mortify, or put to death, the sinful things we do, by the power of the Spirit of God, we will not perish in hell forever, but will live forever with the Lord in heaven. In light of this, I can’t think of a more important subject to consider, for our eternal salvation or destruction depends upon it.

Last week, we looked at the first part of Romans 8:13, “For if you live according to the flesh, you must die.” We saw what the flesh is: it is the sinful corruption that we inherited from our forefather Adam. It is that principle of action within us that makes us want to do all the sinful things that we are tempted to do, as well as the sinful things we actually do. It is that which fights against us whenever we want to do something spiritual, such as read our Bibles, or spend time in prayer, or evangelize, or do acts of charity to the poor and destitute, or love and forgive others when they offend us and sin against us. In its very essence, it is hatred against God. The Bible tells us it is one of the three greatest enemies that we will ever have to face in life, and the one that will always betray us into the hands of the other two: the world and the devil. We also saw what it means to live according to the flesh: it is to be guided or led by this sinful desire to do the things we should not do. It is to give ourselves over to these lusts and to live in them. And we saw what the consequences will be to everyone who lives in this way: they must die, which means that they must die eternally in hell forever.

This evening, I want for us to begin to look at the second part of the verse, to see what it

means to put to death the deeds of the body, what it means that this work must be done by the Spirit of God, and what it means that those who do this will live. The first thing we will look at is what it means to put to death the deeds of the body, or in other words, what mortification actually is.

In 1654, a very faithful and godly Presbyterian minister in England, by the name of Christopher Love, published a book entitled *The Mortified Christian*. In his book, he asked the question, “What is the nature of mortification?” and answered it in this way, “It is a holy disposition in a regenerate man derived from the efficacy and virtue of Christ’s death, whereby the strength of sin is weakened and the dominion of it destroyed, being utterly disabled from having a commanding power or rule over the man any more. I say it is a disposition in a *regenerate* man because an unregenerate man is an unmortified man. It is derived from the virtue and efficacy of Christ’s death because the death of Christ not only takes away the guilt of sin, in reference to its damning power, but it likewise takes away the dominion and power of sin so that sin shall not reign in us. And I express it further as the disposition whereby the strength of sin is weakened and the dominion and power of it destroyed; not that I extend mortification to an utter abolition and [annihilation] of sin, but only to the subduing and weakening of our corruptions. Though the existence of sin remains, yet the commanding power of sin is taken away” (32-33).

There are some important things in Love’s definition that we should pay attention to here. He says mortification is a holy disposition, it is a new principle of action which is in *every* Christian. It is not in the unbeliever. It is not something we had before coming to Christ. It is something Christ gives to His children. Where does this principle come from? He says it comes from the *power of Christ’s death*. When Christ died, Paul writes in Romans 6:10, “He died to sin, once for all.” Certainly, Paul doesn’t mean that Christ was in bondage to sin, as we were, when we were born into this world, but that He was born into a world of sin. That sin was all around Him, affecting everyone around Him. It even tempted Him, but He never gave into it. When He was dying on the cross, the Bible says, He even became sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21), and bore the wrath of God in our place. But when He died, He passed from this world of sin into the world of righteousness, the world to come. Sin could no longer have any effect on Him at all. When He rose from the dead, He was completely free from its influence to live for God. But Paul also writes that when Christ died, we also died with Him, and when He rose, we rose with Him as well (v. 4). “Even so,” he says, “consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v. 11). Christ’s death gives us the power to die to sin. His death to sin was our death. His being raised to newness of life was our resurrection. But we are not actually united with Christ in His death and resurrection until we believe. When we do, this power is already at work in us, freeing us from our absolute bondage to sin and weakening its hold on us, so that it can no longer compel us to do the things which are sinful. As Love says, Christ’s death not only took away our guilt, it also breaks the power of reigning sin. This is what Augustus Toplady meant in his famous hymn “Rock of Ages,” where he wrote, “Let the water and the blood from Thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its *guilt* and *power*.” Justification is our freedom from the guilt of sin. Sanctification is our gradual freedom from its power. Mortification is one part of sanctification. It is the putting to death the deeds of the flesh. Vivification is the other. It is the putting on the righteous deeds of Christ.

But Love also adds another very important element to his definition, and that is that mortification is never complete in this life. Even though our bondage to sin is broken and its

power weakened, even though sin can no longer rule over us or command us, yet it is not absolutely destroyed. It will continue to live in us, even as regenerate persons, as long as we live, and because it does, there will be a continual battle within us and the possibility of our falling into sin. I should add that what Love defines here as the nature of mortification would better fit the definition of grace, for this is what grace actually is: it is an inclination against our sinful inclination. Whereas our flesh hates God and fights against Him, grace hates sin and fights against it, and as it does, it seeks to kill the sin that dwells in us. And praise be to God, the Lord has ordained that this grace will win the battle in the believer. No matter how many times it is set back by sin, it will ultimately triumph.

The second thing I want us to see this evening is that this work of mortification is done by the power of the Spirit of God. Paul writes, "If by the Spirit you are putting the death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). I have mentioned this to you before, but usually when the Bible talks about grace as the power God gives us to overcome sin, it is referring to the personal presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Grace can more broadly mean God's unmerited favor of any kind. But when it refers to redemption and the power He gives us through His different means of grace, it is talking about the Holy Spirit.

When Christ did what He did in His work of redemption, He purchased for us the work of the Spirit. This is what Adam originally had in the garden when God created him, but lost when he sinned. When Adam was first created, he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit and had perfect communion with God. But when he rebelled against God, he lost the Spirit's influence and became dead in sin. He ceased to be spiritual and became carnal, or fleshly. But what Adam lost for himself and for all his posterity, Christ came into the world to regain. Through His work, He not only cleansed us of our sins, but also merited, or bought, the return of God's Spirit into our hearts. And when the Spirit comes into the life of a believer and unites him with Christ by faith, He becomes that new principle within us that fights against all sin and promotes all righteousness. This is why Paul can write in Galatians 5:16-17, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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." It is the Spirit within us that causes us to hate sin. It is the Spirit's work to make us love God and want to do what He calls us to do. He is the principle of sanctification within us. He is the One who makes us holy. When He is present -- and He is present in every Christian --, the work of mortification goes on. *Every Christian is a mortified Christian.* But when He is absent, there is no mortification. This is why Paul wrote earlier in Romans 8, "For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because 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. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. *But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him*" (vv. 5-9). If a person does not belong to Christ, he doesn't have the Spirit. If he doesn't have the Spirit, then he is in the flesh. And if he is in the flesh, then he cannot subject himself to the Law of God, which is the very goal of mortification. But on the other hand, the one who belongs to Christ has the Spirit, sets his mind on the things of the Spirit and submits himself to God's Law.

Lastly, Paul writes that those who by the Spirit are putting to death the deeds of the body

will live. I don't need to spend much time on this, except to remind you that the life he refers to here is eternal life as opposed to the eternal death that is threatened for living according to the flesh. If you are a Christian, if the Spirit of God is living in you, then your sins are gradually being put to death as the Spirit is preparing you for your heavenly home. This work that He begins, He will complete, Paul tells us, until the day of Jesus Christ. Those whom the Father chooses and gives to His Son will be saved and none will be lost. Those whom the Father foreloved and predestined, will be called, justified and finally glorified with the Lord Jesus Christ forever in heaven (Rom. 8:29-30). It may seem sometimes like our sin is winning and that we are being overcome, but God will not allow us to perish. He will sometimes give us over to our corruption and sin for a while for His holy purposes, but He will never do so wholly. He will renew His power in us. Grace will overcome. The Spirit will triumph over our flesh. This is the promise that we can always hang onto to sustain us during the times when we are sorely tried.

Now we might think that this is all there is to it, but the Bible says there's more. Even though the Spirit will complete this work in us, it doesn't mean that there's nothing we must do. Even though regeneration, or the new birth, is a sovereign act of God which He does by Himself, sanctification is a work in which we must cooperate. Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13, "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure." Actually, the work the Spirit does in us, is to produce the works we must do to overcome sin. He is the One who urges us on in the use of the God-ordained means to put our sins to death. He is the One who is at work in us, both to will and to do of God's good pleasure. Next week, we will see what it is the Spirit does in us, or in other words, what it is we must do, to put our sins to death. Amen.