

Putting Sin to Death

Romans 8:13

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John Owen was a 17th-century English Puritan pastor and theologian – he published some 22 works, but his most famous is entitled *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. It's based on a series of sermons that he preached at Oxford where he served as the vice-chancellor. The book is an exposition and an application of Romans 8:13 that I want us to examine together this morning – let's get a running start; Romans 8:12. "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh" – instead, verse 13, "If you are living according to the flesh, you must die." In other words, if, as a pattern of life, you are obeying your flesh, you are obeying your fallenness – if that's what marks your life, then Paul says you're about to die. In other words, you're not a believer, and you will certainly experience eternal death. Verse 13 goes on to say, "but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." If you're a Christian, you understand the importance of, and there is within you a desire, to put the sins in your life to death. Sadly, many Christians try to do this, try to kill the sin in their life, using all the wrong means – maybe you've tried some of these wrong means to put sin to death in your life. Here are some of the most common ones.

First of all, man-made rules, or legalism – many Christians think that if they just keep their extra-biblical rules, they'll eventually be spiritual. The truth is, they'll eventually be like the Pharisees, because the flesh has no power to control the flesh.

A second wrong means is a secret method or formula – there are many people out there who will tell you that there's some secret, and that if you can just find that secret, suddenly you're going to be catapulted to some higher spiritual level. You need to "let go and let God;" you need to stop living in Romans 7 and live in Romans 8; you need to stop trying to live the Christian life and just let Christ live through you. I hate to tell you this, but there is no secret.

A third wrong means is a sudden spiritual crisis – there are those who believe that, in a moment in time, you're somehow rocketed to this new level of spirituality. The Methodist version of that is a second crisis, like salvation – sometimes called a second blessing. The Baptist version under

which I grew up was, you just need to dedicate your life to Jesus, rededicate your life to Jesus, or you need to fully surrender; you're a Christian, but at some point you just need to fully surrender, and at that moment, you'll be rocketed to a new level of spiritual growth in life. Some Bible churches teach that, okay, when you became a Christian, you accepted Jesus as Savior, and at some later point the real issue for you is, you just need to accept Him as Lord. That's a lie – you come to Jesus as Savior and Lord, or you don't come to Him at all. It doesn't come by a sudden spiritual crisis.

Number four – sanctification doesn't come by prayer alone. We'll see prayer plays a part, but Paul says in the text we just read a moment ago, *you* must put the sins in your life to death; it's not just prayer.

Some say no, it's by charismatic experience – they think spiritual growth is dramatically advanced by some sort of ecstatic experience, some vision of Jesus or an out-of-body experience or speaking in tongues or something else like that.

Self-reformation or behavior modification is another means some try – let me tell you something; it is really hard to change your behavior, but it is impossible to change your heart.

I think the false means that is most common in churches like ours is what I'll call spiritual osmosis – in other words, they think, if I just, you know, read my Bible sometimes, maybe even daily, and read it and put it in the drawer and tuck it away, or if I come to church regularly, if I'm there most Sundays or every Sunday, then I'm just going to become more spiritual. That's ridiculous – that's like saying, you know, if I just read a lot of books about exercise, and if I just go sit in the gym, then I'm going to get in shape.

There are wrong ways, and those are some of them, to put sin to death in your life – but in Romans 8:13, Paul explains the right way. Look at it again, the second half of verse 13. "If, by the Spirit, you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." You will live. Notice the duty in that – "put to death the deeds of the body." That is severe, violent language – this kind of language occurs here, and in a parallel passage we'll look at in a few minutes, in

Colossians 3:5, where literally it says, "put to death the members of your earthly body." The Greek word for "put to death" here in our text means to cause the total stoppage, or the total cessation, of an activity; you and I are to kill the sins in our lives. John Owen writes, "Be killing sin, or it will be killing you." Paul says we are to kill the deeds of the body – what does he mean by that? He means every use of our body and brain, every use of our body and our mind, that serves our fallenness – that includes sinful habits of thinking, sinful attitudes that we foster, sinful speech, things that come out of our mouths that are contrary to God's will and purpose, and sinful actions, habits and patterns of life. It's like Galatians 5:19, where Paul calls that list, you remember, "the deeds of the flesh" – that's what he's talking about. Or like Jesus outlines in Mark 7, when He gives us that list of sins that proceed out of our minds and evil thoughts. That's the duty – put to death the deeds of the body. Notice the power – "by the Spirit" – God assigns us the duty to put our sins to death, but we can only accomplish that through the Spirit. But then, notice the promise at the end of the verse – "you will live." Here's the good news – if you are trying, through the help and power of the Holy Spirit, to obey God's word, you're trying to kill the sins in your life, then be encouraged – you have eternal life; that's what Paul is saying. In other words, putting sin to death in your life, the desire to do that, acting on that in your life, that is a mark of a true Christian. Look at verse 14 – "For," because, "all who are being led by the Spirit of God" – that is, in context, to obey His word and to pursue holiness – "those are the sons of God."

So, beloved, you and I must put the sins in our lives to death. Owen summarizes verse 13 like this – "Believers who are freed from the condemning power of sin ought to make it their business all their days to mortify," or to kill, "the indwelling power of sin – this is the constant duty of believers." And if you're a Christian, you resonate with that – that's your desire; you don't love the sins in your life, you hate them, you want them out of your life. So, the question is, how – how do we put to death the deeds of the body? By what means can you kill the sins of thought that are in your life? By what means can you kill the sinful attitudes that are constantly rampaging through your life and destroying your own soul and the souls of others? What about your sinful words, the things that come out of your mouth that you know are contrary to God's purpose – how do you put those to death? How do you put the sinful actions and habits in your life to death? Well, Romans 8:13 tells us the real means to put to death the sins that are in our

lives – but before we get to our text, let me start with a means that is a sort of overarching, general one, and that is, we must live by faith in Christ. We must live by faith in Christ – Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ," he's talking about a reality for every Christian. If you're a Christian, at the moment of your salvation, it's as if you died with Christ, the old person you were died, and you've been raised to new life. "And it is no longer I who live," it's not that person who lives anymore, "but Christ lives in me" through His spirit. "And the life which I now live in the flesh" – here it is – "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." That's how we live – we live; we're not only saved by faith, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us. Jerry Bridges writes, "We are not to wage this warfare in the strength of our own willpower – instead, just as we by faith look to Christ for our righteous standing before God, so by faith we are to look to Him for the enabling power to live the Christian life."

But what exactly does it look like – what do we mean, live by faith in Christ? Let me give you several practical ways you can live by faith in Christ. Number one – believe that the benefits of Christ's death are for you. Look at Romans 8:1 – "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" if you've repented and believed in Him. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law couldn't do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did; He sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin." God the Father – don't miss this, the end of verse 3 – God the Father condemned your sin in Jesus' flesh – that's what happened on the cross. But that wasn't all, it wasn't just your forgiveness – look at verse 4, "so that the requirement of the Law," what God requires, "might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." Christian, do you understand that when God saved you, He didn't just save you to forgive your sins, He saved you so that you could now live in obedience to Him? You need to believe that.

Secondly, if you're going to live by faith in Christ, you need to believe that the Spirit made you a new person in Christ – that's the point of verses 5-8; He contrasts those who are in the flesh, those are unbelievers, with those who are now in the Spirit, those are believers. Do you understand what happened to you at the moment of salvation? You had what Jesus called a new

birth; you're no longer the person you used to be – you need to believe that and live in light of that.

Thirdly, if you're going to live by faith in Christ, you need to believe that Christ can and will finish His plan for you – that's the messages of verses 9-11. But just look at verse 11 – "If the spirit of Him," that is, of God, "who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you," and if you're a believer, that's true, "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." If you're a believer, you have the Holy Spirit, and He not only regenerated you, saved you, changed you, but He's at work in you to sanctify you, and one day He will glorify you – you need to believe that Jesus can and will finish what He started. Ephesians 5:25, "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her" – that's why Jesus died and saved you, so that He might sanctify you. And he goes on to say, so that He might present the church to Himself one day like a pure, spotless bride – and He's going to do that; He saved you to that purpose, and He's going to get there. Titus 2:14, He "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed," there's the forgiveness part, "and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession," who will be "zealous for good deeds." If you're in Christ, it's not just about your forgiveness – it's about the Spirit He placed within you to complete what He started, and He's going to do it.

Sometimes it doesn't look like it, right? I mean, we look at ourselves and we wonder – that's why John Owen suggests that we say this to ourselves; it's a longer quote, I want you to read it with me. He says, say this to yourself.

I am a poor, weak creature; unstable as water, I cannot excel. This corruption is too hard for me and is at the very door of ruining my soul.... I have made promises and broken them.... Many persuasions have I had that I had got the victory and should be delivered, but I am deceived; so that [here's the key] I plainly see, that without some imminent...assistance, I am lost.... [Where does that assistance come from?] Behold, the Lord Christ, that has all fullness of grace in His heart, all fullness of power in His hand, He is able to slay all these His

enemies. There is sufficient provision in Him for my relief and assistance. He can take my drooping, dying soul and make me more than a conqueror.

Christian, you have to believe that – that's the truth!

To live by faith in Christ, fourthly, is to contemplate Christ's person with the eye of faith. Turn to 2 Corinthians 3:18. This, by the way, was – I'd mentioned going out to John MacArthur's memorial service; this was his favorite verse, 2 Corinthians 3:18. "But we all, with unveiled face," all of us as believers, now we can see clearly the truth of God's word, we are "beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord" Jesus – he's talking about looking in the scripture. When we look in the scripture, we see the glory of Jesus Christ, and as we see Him in the scripture, we "are being transformed" – literally, metamorphosized – "into the same image," like Him, in our moral characters, "from one level of glory to another, just as from the Lord, the Holy Spirit." Here's how John MacArthur and the faculty at the Master's Seminary put it in the book *Biblical Doctrine*, writing about this very verse – "When the believer apprehends the glory of Christ with the eyes of faith, the sight of His beauty satisfies his soul in such a way that he does not go on seeking satisfaction in the false and fleeting pleasures of sin. The spiritual apprehension of Christ's glory" – here's the first step – "when we see Christ in the word, it conforms believers' affections to the divine will." He changes your desires, He changes your loves, "causing them to hate sin and love righteousness. Then" – here's the second part – "sanctified affections direct the will in such a way that it desires the righteousness it has come to love and repudiates the sin it has come to hate. Finally, the internal transformation is brought to fruition externally in our behavior" – how? Here's the third step – "as the sanctified will issues in holy living." That's how you change – you look at Christ, you see Him, you begin to hate your sin and love His righteousness, you want to be like Him, that changes your desires, which changes your will, and your will then causes a change in your actions. So, we must live by faith in Christ, and that's what it means to live by faith in Christ.

That brings us back to our text – a second means for putting our sin to death is learn, meditate on, and apply the word. Look at Romans 8:5 – "Those who are according to the Spirit;" that is, if you have the Holy Spirit within you, if you're a Christian, people like that, true believers set

their minds on "the things of the Spirit." What are the things of the Spirit? It's the word that the Spirit inspired, that's the things of the Spirit – believers are absorbed with the word of God, with learning it, meditating on it, seeking to apply it. That's why Jesus prayed in John 17:17, "Sanctify them, Father, by the truth – Your word is truth." This is what Paul means in Ephesians 4:23 when he says if you're going to change, your mind has to be "renewed," your mind has to be changed by understanding the word of God. Real change only happens when we understand and apply God's word. Let me say that again – real change only happens when we understand and apply God's word; it's not spiritual osmosis.

A third means – as we come to understand and to seek to apply the word of God, is then, we must, number three, expend maximum effort in pursuit of obedience. And what does that look like? Well, it means we put off old patterns of thinking and of speaking and of acting, and we put on new patterns. How does sanctification happen? Look again at verse 13 – it happens, one, by the Spirit, and two, you – by the Spirit and you. You see, biblical sanctification is synergistic, working together. I love what John Owen writes – he says, "The Spirit works in us and with us, but not without us." Not without us. It's like Philippians 2, right, where Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." What does that mean? Well, earlier in verse 12, he says be about obeying, be seeking to obey – that's what it means to work out your own salvation. But then he says in verse 13, "for," because, here's why you're to work, because God, by His spirit, "is at work in you, to will and to work according to His good pleasure." In other words, God is at work in you to change you by His spirit. Sanctification is not solely my work, and it's not solely the Spirit's work – but don't misunderstand, it doesn't mean we both do our part, you know? I do my fifty percent, and the Spirit does His fifty percent – that's not how change happens. Rather, we work because God's Spirit is at work within us – God, by His spirit, is at work in you. How? Philippians 2:13 – to change your will, and to change your actions; that's what He's doing. But don't miss this; this is key – your progress in sanctification will always be commensurate with your effort. "The Holy Spirit works in us and with us, but not without us" – you have to put to death specific thoughts, attitudes, deeds, habits.

How do you do that – how do you put off old patterns and put on new ones? Well, turn to Colossians, a parallel passage, Colossians 3. I wish I had time to really spend time here, but I

don't; let me just give you some practical insights about this putting off and putting on, this expending the effort, what it looks like, here in Colossians 3. Insight number one – if you're going to do this, you must deal with all sin, not one sin. John Owen puts it well; I'm not going to read the whole quote, you can find it with the slides later on, but basically, he's saying this – you know what we do? We come to one sin in our life that we just hate, we don't like it, it embarrasses us, we don't like being under its control, and we want to get rid of that one sin. Look at what John Owen says, about halfway down this quote – he says, "Do you think that God will ease you of that which perplexes you, so that you may be at liberty to do that which no less grieves Him? No – God says, here is one; if he could be rid of this lust, I should never hear of him more. Let him wrestle with this, or he is lost. Let not any man think to do his own work that will not do God's work." And here's the key, last sentence – "God's work consists in universal obedience." Notice verse 8 of Colossians 3, "Put them" – what? "All aside." If you're going to cut sin out of your life, if you're going to put it to death, you can't just say, well, there's this one sin that I just really want to be rid of – God's not going to cooperate with you in that; He wants you to be like Jesus Christ. You've got to fight this war on every front, not just one.

Number two – you must deal not solely with behavior, but with the root sins; what are the root sins? They're in your thoughts, your desires, and your affections – that's where the real problem is. Look at Colossians 3:5, it's with "evil desires and greed;" it starts in the soul. Look at verse 8, "malice" – that's not an external activity; it can produce external actions, but it's in the soul. Listen – you can't just cut the fruit of sin out of your life; you've got to deal with the root, and the root is what happens between your ears. That's where the root is – it's how you're thinking. Jesus says in Mark 7 it's out of the heart, out of the evil thoughts that all of these things come – so, you've got to deal with the things that are happening in your brain.

Number three – you must use biblical labels for your sin. Look at verse 5 – well, you know, I tripped up and, you know, I had a one-night stand – no, it's immorality. Well, you know, I struggle with wanting things that aren't mine – no, it's greed. Verses 8-9 – you know, I get frustrated sometimes – no, it's anger. Well, you know, I probably shouldn't have said that, that wasn't kind – no, it was slander. Use biblical labels for your sin.

Number four – you must grasp the true evil of sin. Look at verse 6, Colossians 3:6 – "It is because of these things," these sins, these patterns, "that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience." Listen – the sins in your life, they're not little things, they're not harmless little peccadilloes that really don't mess anybody up; no, they are an affront to the righteousness of God, to the holiness of God, and one day, the very sins that are in your life and mine that we sometimes play around with, those are the sins that will bring the wrath of God on this world, and on every person who doesn't know His Son. Take them seriously.

Number five – you must act to kill the sin. Look at the marginal note in verse 5 there in Colossians 3, if you have a NAS and you have a marginal note – it says, "literally put to death the members which are upon the earth." In other words, we're talking about violent effort, we're talking about maximum effort. Be committed to lifelong effort, constant – the verbs here and in Romans 8 are present-tense verbs; be putting sin to death. Sanctification progresses only through continual, sustained, long-term effort – if you have it in your mind that someday in this life you're going to arrive at this spiritual plateau where you no longer struggle with your sin, you need to wake up and smell the coffee; that's not true! You're going to battle your sin every day of your life here, and you will only make progress inch by bloody inch – but you have to keep fighting. Perfection only comes when the Lord takes us in death or returns for us.

Number six – you must act to put on Christ's virtues. Here's the positive side – put off the sin, kill the sin, but look at Colossians 3:10. Verse 8 says put all these sins aside, but verse 10 says "and have put on the new self" – you're a new person, so put on the clothes that belong to that new person. What is this? Verse 12, "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on" – put on Jesus! "Put on a heart of compassion," put on "kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Bear with one another, forgive each other, if you have a complaint against anyone. As the Lord forgave you, so should you." In other words, begin to act like Jesus, begin to respond to the people in your life like He wants you to respond. "Beyond all these things, put on love," verse 14, "which is the perfect bond of unity." You have to put on the virtues of Jesus Christ – kill the sin and begin to pursue acting like Jesus wants you to act, thinking like He wants you to think.

What does this process of sanctification look like? You know, I think, and I've used this before with you, but I think the best illustration is a game of tug-of-war. In elementary school, I was one of the smallest, scrawniest kids in my class – clearly, that eventually changed, but I've always been extremely competitive. So, when we played tug-of-war, I wanted to be on the team with the biggest kids, with the strong, heavy anchor – and I'd get on that rope and, being a competitor, I'd pull on that rope with all my heart, but frankly, there were times when I'm not sure my feet were even touching the ground; I'm just dangling on the rope, hanging on for dear life. And so, when we won, I knew it wasn't my strength that caused us to win – well, that's exactly how it is with sanctification. You have to expend maximum effort, you've got to pull on the rope like it all depended on you, but listen – it's not our effort that wins the battle with our sin, it's our strong anchor, the Holy Spirit. And in a tug-of-war, okay, if you've ever played tug-of-war, you know this – there's a ribbon, often, that's tied in the middle of the rope that marks the center, and it goes back and forth during the tug-of-war, but it slowly moves where? In the direction of the team with the strongest members – that's how it is with sanctification. From day to day, our progress may pull us slightly back and forth between the flesh and the Spirit, but our overall progress, if we're true Christians, will be toward the Spirit, and the ultimate outcome is assured – the Spirit wins; we will be like Jesus Christ. But you have to expend maximum effort – just remember it's not your effort that wins the race.

A fourth means for putting our sin to death – and this is key – depend completely on Christ and His Spirit for two things: one, to enable you to pursue obedience, and two, as you're pursuing obedience, to do what you can't do, and that is to change you at a heart level. Look at verse 13 – "By the Spirit," back in our text, Romans 8:13, "By the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body." Real sanctification is accomplished solely by the Spirit of Christ that dwells within us – that's why Jesus said in John 15:5 to His disciples, without Me, "apart from Me, you can do" what? "Nothing." This has to be our mindset – expend maximum effort, pursue obedience, try to put on the virtues of Jesus Christ, but don't ever think that it's your own efforts; we must never depend on our own efforts or even on the means of grace, but rather, on the Spirit of grace and the Spirit of holiness.

So, what's the primary way that you and I can do this, that we can show our dependence on Christ and His Spirit? That brings us to number five – pray; pray for sanctification. Now, as I said, some people think you're sanctified by prayer alone; that's not what the Bible teaches – but you won't be sanctified without prayer. It's involved absolutely – this is how we express our dependence. Jesus prayed and prays for our sanctification, John 17:17, "Sanctify them, Father, by means of the truth; Your word is truth." And Jesus taught us to pray for our own sanctification and that of others in the Lord's Prayer, the final petition in Matthew 6:13, "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil" – that should be your prayer every day.

What does that look like – what does it look like to pray for sanctification? Years ago, I came across a prayer that Charles Spurgeon suggested, and I love this prayer, and it's a prayer I've prayed often through the years. He says, here's how you pray – he says, "You will never be delivered from your besetting sin in any way but by the blood of Jesus – take it to Christ, tell Him, 'Lord, I have trusted You, and Your name is Jesus, for You will save Your people from their sins. Lord, this is one of my sins – save me from it.'" That's not all you should do, prayer alone – but that is what you should do, because that's how you express your dependence on Him.

So, there are the five biblical means of putting sin to death – but what is Paul's main point? Look at the end of verse 13 – if you do this, "you will live." In other words, your hatred of sin and your working to kill it, to put it to death in your life, and your pursuit of holiness – those things provide evidence, they provide proof, they provide assurance to you that the spirit of Christ actually indwells you. Why? Because only the Holy Spirit can produce a genuine desire for, and effort after, holiness. If this is what you want, you weren't born with that – you have that desire and you have that drive because the Holy Spirit lives within you; that's Paul's point in this context. The Spirit changed you in regeneration, and He is now empowering you to grow in likeness to Christ – and if the Spirit indwells you, if He saved you, if He's working in you, then He guarantees your eventual perfection. Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will" what? "Be faithful to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." You will be sanctified, and one day you will be glorified. But Romans 8:13 also reminds us that, even as we come to the Lord's Table, to celebrate our justification, we must, at the same time, be wholeheartedly

committed to our sanctification. As the men come to serve us, take a moment, confess your sin and renew your resolve to cut the sin out of your life.

Father, thank You for what we have seen in Your word this morning – thank You that You have saved us, that You've given us the forgiveness of our sins. But Father, we thank You that You have also, with that forgiveness, You've given us Your Spirit who dwells within us, and that He is our strong anchor who is pulling us with all of His power toward likeness to Your Son. Lord, help us to expend maximum effort to that end, but help us to depend not on ourselves but solely on Him as we pull at the rope. And Lord, as we come now to the Lord's Table, I pray that, for those of us in Christ who are going to take of the Lord's Table together, that You would forgive our sins – we've been reminded of the seriousness of the sins in our lives, that these sins are the very sins that will one day bring Your unmitigated wrath on this planet and on all who have rejected You. Help us not to play with these things, to take them lightly, but even now, to confess each sin that You bring to mind and seek Your forgiveness so that we can take of the Lord's Table in a way that honors Him and His sacrifice, with clean hands and pure hearts. Receive the worship that we bring now as we celebrate our justification and are reminded that we must pursue sanctification.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.