

MORTIFYING THE FLESH

WEEK 3: HOW DOES SIN WORK IN EVERY ASPECT OF MY NEW LIFE?

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- In this 6-week series we are going to discuss *how to put to death the flesh*.
- Colossians 3:5 “Therefore *consider the members of your earthly body as dead* to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.”
- Romans 8:13 “...for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are *putting to death the deeds of the body*, you will live.”
- **Killing our sin or flesh is not a once off action nor is it done with your own strength alone.**
- To live the Christian life as God intended, the believer must be actively killing sin in their life.
- **“Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.” John Owen**
- As Owen further states, to clear the woods of sin in our heart is a critical part of the whole process of sanctification. The process of killing sin in our hearts not only allows us to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel but also brings more assurance that we are children of God.
- When our hearts are set on pleasing the father, we are going to want to walk in a way that pleases him, not the world, not ourselves but Christ alone. To do this, we must be able to identify and put to death sin.
- **This is the heartbeat of progressive sanctification, a life lived for God by mortifying our flesh.**
- Week 1: What is the “flesh?”
- Week 2: How important is my new identity? (Col. 3:1-4)
- **Week 3: How does sin work in every aspect of my new life?**
- Week 4: Practical steps for mortifying sin. Part I
 - Learn to admit sin for what it really is.
 - See sin for what your sin really is in God’s presence.
- Week 5: Practical steps for mortifying sin. Part II
 - Recognize the inconsistency of your sin.
 - Put sin to death.
- Week 6: What is personal watchfulness? (1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 6:1; Col. 4:2; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Jhn 8)
 - The necessity and cultivation of watchfulness.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR.

- Our flesh is our unredeemed and unredeemable nature which is set against God from our beginning. It is the flesh that is our control center and until that flesh is eradicated, we will always and only live for ourselves.
- God did a spiritual work in our hearts in which He alone gave us a new heart, one of “flesh” that replaced our heart of stone.
- We then, once being dead to God are now dead to sin. Before this spiritual work, we did not care about the things of God, nor did we understand them. Now, being made alive in our spirit, we are sensitive to sin and can say no to the flesh and its desires.
- We also know that we are not inhabited by both the sinful flesh and God’s Spirit. Our hearts are not at the same time being fought over by two different entities seeking to control us.
- If this is true, *why then do we still struggle with sin?* In other words, how is sin alive in the life of the believer who has had their sinful flesh crucified with Christ?

MOVING FROM THE SPIRITUAL TO THE PHYSICAL

- **Up until this point we have been discussing primarily spiritual matters.** Things that you have done nothing for but things that have taken place within you or things that you have been born with.
- As a Christian, you are now alive to spiritual things and now have a desire to do the will of God. But that desire is not pure, nor can it be this side of eternity.
- Because God certainly knows this, He has given us tools so that we are able to not sin but rather do works of righteousness from a clean heart.
- The Christian is engaged in a 24/7 battle which primarily takes place in his non-material parts, or soul, heart, mind, etc. The Bible itself is clear when it states that it is our hearts, not our physical bodies which cause us to sin.
- Jesus said to His disciples in **Mark 7:18-23** “**Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?**’ (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, **‘That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.’**”
- This is not just speaking of unregenerate mankind but all of mankind, both saved and unsaved.
- A Christian still sins, his body still commits acts which defile him before God.

- To be sure that act of defilement does not bear weight on his salvation but certainly upon his sanctification and communion with Christ.
- But the body is not blamed here by Christ, it is his heart. The things which come into the heart are going to cause the actions of the body.
- This is explained even further in the Old Testament.
- God says in **Ezekiel 14:3-4** “Son of man, **these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity**. Should I be consulted by them at all? **Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols...''**”
- The outward idols that the nation of Israel was worshipping was just the manifestation of what was in their hearts. The outward, physical idols were their stumbling block and their display of their sin.
- If they did not have those idols in their hearts, there would be no physical idol made and then there would be no outward sinful acts committed.
 - **For example:** the people wanted to have comfort in their land. They saw they could have comfort by taking on the gods of the people around them, essentially making peace with the people. By doing so, they set up the pagan idols all around them and worshipped them with the pagan people.
 - They worshipped by giving gifts, sacrifices, and anything else the idols “demanded.”
- **Their sin started in their heart and was shown by their actions.**
- “Idolatry is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for drift from God...Interestingly (and unsurprisingly) the New Testament merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires. Idolatry becomes a problem of the heart, a metaphor for human lust, craving yearning, and greedy demand.”¹
- **Do you see the lines that Powlison is connecting in our own life today?** The thing that we worship is going to be the ruling desire in our heart. From our worship and desire, we are going to be acting in our physical bodies. It is not our bodies that cause our sin but the instrument that our heart uses.
- Whether it’s Jesus in **Mark 7** or God’s prophet in **Ezekiel 14**, the point is that we must be looking to our hearts to find out why we are doing what we are doing.
- **As new creations in Christ we now have the capability to find out what is going on in our hearts and we are able to bring that diagnosis and make real, Biblical and lasting change.**

¹ David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair’”, *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13, no. 2 (1995): 35.

FLESH VS. SPIRIT

- The classic understanding of the Christian life is that of the flesh versus the Spirit.
- Most understand this to be the sin in us which is warring against the Holy Spirit who is living in us. This sin that is left over is best described as our **unredeemed humanness**.
- I believe a better way to put this, a more Biblically accurate way is *the war over the desires of our heart*.
- Since we know that while our sinful nature is dead, sin has not been eradicated from the believer. There are vestiges or remnants which still remain.
 - The way we think, the things we say, how we understand things to be, the desires of our heart, all things which were fully submitted to sin are now being illuminated by the Spirit of God through the Word of God.
- Galatians 5:24 “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus **have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**”
- “The best understanding is to see **have crucified** as an illusion to the cross of Jesus Christ, which, as a past event, fits the aorist tense used here by Paul. **It looks back to the cross, the time at which the death of the flesh was actually accomplished.** Yet, because we are still alive on the earth and still possess our humanness, we have not yet entered into the future fullness of the past event.”²
- **Our desires, passions and affections that were once ruled by the flesh are dead, truly dead.** The idea that sin has any power over us is false. Sin no longer is our oppressor; it has been destroyed at the cross.
- We now truly belong to Christ and He is our head, He is our master, and He is the one in control over us.
- But since this is not our *actual* full and realized reality, we still struggle with the hangover of sin that was left behind after we were *actually* born again in our current time.
- The unredeemed parts that still want control over us.
- In a physical sense, your body is completely unredeemed...it is dying. 2 Corinthians 4:16 “**Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.**”
- There is nothing in us that is from us that is growing better, but that which we have been given, our inner man, that man is growing more and more in the likeness of Christ.
- **As that inner man is growing, the outer man will start to conform to what the inner man desires.**
- **That is why growth in Christ is paramount for the life of the believer.** If we are truly saved and *in Christ*, then we are going to look more and more like Him.
- The war that you have inside of you is only possible because you have been born again. If you had not been born again, there may be a war but not between your own desires and God’s desires.

² John MacArthur, *Galatian*, p. 171.

- The war of the unbeliever is between his own thoughts and desires, not taking God's into consideration.

The already and not yet of the Bible.

- I think that many people struggle with what is commonly referred to as already but not yet. This means that something has already been done for you but the full realization of it has not yet come.
- This is very important when dealing with your sanctification process.
- Paul speaking to the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20:32** “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those **who are sanctified.**”
- Again in **1 Corinthians 6:11** “Such were some of you; but you **were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”
- But then Paul says in **2 Thessalonians 2:13** “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning **for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.**”
- So, in **Acts 20** and **1 Corinthians 6** believers have been sanctified already but then in **2 Thessalonians 2** **how we are saved is through sanctification.** He also adds in **2 Thessalonians 2** that it is by the Spirit and faith in truth that sanctification takes place.

• How can this all be?

- “We live in a theological tension. By faith in Christ, all of these spiritual blessings are ours already, but the full enjoyment of these blessings is not yet ours. This is the life of faith: “the assurance of things hoped for” in the future, and “the conviction of things not seen” in the present (Hebrews 11:1). This is life between the times.”³

The War!

- **Galatians 5:1** “It was for freedom *that Christ set us free*; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”
- In the immediate context Paul is talking to the church and telling them not to go back under the law. Not only can the law not save but it can't sanctify either.
- **The Christian is never told to adhere to the law but rather be filled with the Spirit.** We are told that by being filled with the Spirit, we are going fulfill the royal law, love the Lord and love others.
- **This means that any attempt to bring yourself into a more spiritual state before the Lord is in vain. You have, as Paul says above, subjected yourself again to a yoke of slavery.**
- This will be a war going on inside of you.

³ <https://faculty.wts.edu/posts/already-not-yet/>

- “Although Bible study, prayer, worship, witnessing, and certain behavior standards are commanded of believers and essential to faithful Christian living, spirituality cannot be measured by how often or how intensely we are involved in such things. To use them as measures of spirituality is to become entrapped in legalism, whose only significance is in the outward, the visible, the humanly measurable.”⁴
- We are truly free; we are not working for freedom but from freedom we can now please God.
- **How are we able to do this?**
- 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.**”
- **Here is the war.** You are free because of Christ’s death and resurrection. You are no longer under the bondage of sin; it has no power over you.
- Yet, there is a struggle within you. There is a battle, at times, in your soul that seems to want to take you away from doing what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord.
- **There are only two options, walk in the Spirit or according to the flesh.**
- That battle is real, and Christians should not be sitting on the sidelines thinking that this battle is going to take care of itself.
- Just because you have been redeemed does not mean that you no longer are enticed by the world. Just because you have a new heart does not mean that the sinful ways which once brought you so much pleasure are no longer a problem.
- This is not your flesh which is alive, warring against the Spirit inside of you. Rather this is your old ways, your old thinking patterns, your old responses that once characterized who you are and what you did.
- **I think what Owen says here is very helpful** “we need to set the Spirit against the craft of the old man; to trace this serpent in all of its turning and windings, and to bring its most secret tricks out into the open. We must learn to say; ‘This is your usual method; I know what you are up to.’ So to be always ready is the beginning of our warfare.”⁵
- Do you see what Owen is saying here? Our “old man” had a craft about him, a way of doing things. If we are not wise to what our old self did, we are going to fall back into the same traps.
- If we are simply allowing things to go on as they always have, then we are in danger of following after the flesh and not living in the Spirit.
- **We must, as Owen says, trace what we are doing back to its source.** We must know that our old man had many tricks up his sleeve, many ways about him that were never righteous.

⁴ John MacArthur, *Galatian*, 152.

⁵ John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, The treasures of John Owen for today’s readers. p. 36

- Since we know that we are in the battle then we must always be cautious of what we think and do. **As Owen says, to be always ready is the beginning of our warfare.**
- "...verse 17 is framed as a conflict between two powers, a conflict in which human beings are caught up. The conflict is not between tendencies/natures within human beings (although "flesh" cannot be entirely cut loose from anthropology); **it is a conflict between God's Spirit and the impulse to sin, an impulse that no longer rules in the believer but still exerts influence that must be resisted.** Paul brings to our attention the fundamental spiritual battle that Christians must be aware of so that we will take with the utmost seriousness Paul's command that we "walk by the Spirit."⁶
- Why is this so important? Because you can be saved, you can know the right thing to do, you can know that what you are doing is sin and you can know that you should not be doing it...yet you still do it.
- As people, as humans, we still have this "impulse to sin", it is not ruling over us but it is still there.
- **Our hearts have been changed but the old desires still linger. They truly have been crucified but there is still the remnants of what used to be before we were saved.**

What does Paul *not* say?

- That the Christian is in danger of walking *in the flesh*.
- **If** the sinful flesh still remained in the life of the believer, Paul would be warning believers that they were going to fall back *in the flesh*.
- What does he say instead?
- **Romans 8:4 "...so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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."**
 - Paul's explanation here is not about salvation or justification but about our sanctification. The "walk" motif is all throughout the Old and New Testament's.
 - How we live our life is going to be indicative of who is ruling in our heart. If we are constantly setting our minds on things of the flesh, we show that we have not yet been redeemed.
 - If the idols in our hearts are ruling over our desires, then we are going to be serving them instead of the true and living god.
- This is why Paul elaborates more in **verses 8-9 "...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."**
 - Notice the wording of Paul, those in the flesh cannot please God.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 354.

- The one's who have not been redeemed and do not have the Spirit of God dwelling in them are still considered enemies of God and can do nothing to gain God's favor.
- This is not so with the Christian, while the Christian still sins, he has the Spirit of God dwelling in him which takes him from God's enemy to God's child.

- What is the obligation then for the Christian?

- Romans 8:12-13 "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh--for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."
- We owe our flesh nothing, it is truly dead, having been crucified by Christ. Our new obligation or priority is to live by the Spirit and to destroy or kill the deeds of the flesh.
- This is not a works-based salvation as one cannot put to death their sin if they are not saved. **This means that those who are saved are going to be actively putting to death the sin in their life.** This is not a once off but a lifetime pursuit.

WHY DOES OUR FLESH SEEM TO WIN? (MORE ON THIS IN THE NEXT 3 WEEKS)

- As believers we still make room or provisions for our sin to come about.
- Romans 13:14 "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts."
- Notice that Paul does not say *do not walk in the flesh*, but he says for Christians not to make provisions for the flesh and its lusts.
- We will be discussing the put-off and put-on over the next two weeks. I want to explain what Paul is saying here with regards to *make no provision for the flesh*.
- The word for provision means *forethought, providential care or planning ahead*. This means that the sins which we commit are most often (not always) either wrong ideas that we have had, or they are lustful desires that we have allowed to linger in our hearts and minds.
- By allowing those ungodly thoughts and desires to stay and take root, we have given an opportunity for something sinful to come out of us.
- This sin that is in us is our remaining humanness or our lingering proclivity to sin. When we give way to those thoughts and desires, we are going to act out what we have inside.
- While sin does not have any rule over us, we allow it to when we are not actively taking our thoughts captive (2 Cor. 10:5) and when we are not renewing our minds (Rom. 12:2).
- We must not be passive, thinking that it is going to work without any effort. The believer must be ever vigilant in their fight against sin.