

## THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part nineteen

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### THE MEAN STREAK OF GENUINE SPIRITUALITY

**Romans 8:12-14** - “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. [13] For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. [14] For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

These are powerful verses. They are sharp words, tailored to cut the legs out from under the notion that when we sin, we sin because we can't *help* but sin. Sin *feels* so unavoidable when we commit it. Our default rationalizing is to plead *helplessness* in the face of temptation. And that's why Paul starts this section off with a concept we all understand - *debt* - “So then, brothers, we are *debtors*, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh” (8:12).

Almost nothing else pictures *obligation* as strongly as *debt*. We can't wait to eliminate our *mortgage*. That's because it hangs over us for so much of our lives. When you *possess* a mortgage you *have* to pay it. You can't put your money into other *optional* things because your money *must* go into your mortgage. Your *debts* diminish your *freedom* to do what you might prefer to do with your money each month. And you can't *forget* about this debt. There are deadlines and amounts. In fact, the next time you feel like nobody cares if you're even alive, you're wrong. Just try missing a mortgage payment! That's what it *means* to be a “*debtor*” (8:12).

Even *worse* than being in debt would be *thinking* you were in debt when you, in fact, *weren't*. Imagine a person struggling to sock money away each month for a mortgage that no longer existed. Imagine carrying around a burden like that - skipping vacations and leisure and children's education - just because you *thought* you owed the bank a fortune each month when you *didn't*.

That's the situation Paul confronts in our text today. He starts out with those words “*So then....*” (12). They draw our minds back to **8:9-11** - “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. [10] But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

Then come the important words - “*So then....*” (12). In view of this - because of this - knowing this is now true of you - things are permanently, drastically different. Paul wants us to make a definite record of a huge change in these verses. Because of all this, says Paul, we are *not* debtors to the flesh - “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh” (12).

Stop making *payments* to the flesh. Stop living as though you were *obligated* to the desires that used to rule and reign. You might *think* like you still have to do that, but you don't. You belong to *Christ*. Christ's *Spirit* lives in your heart.

Our text today explains *how* this all works. What is this change that has taken place? How does it work? How do *I* cooperate in this process? There is nothing more important than these questions. This is why Paul works through this process so slowly. He is careful to take our hands and pull us through all the details. He doesn't want us *assuming* we know these things. He doesn't want me nodding in agreement the way I do when someone I stop for directions in the street is explaining them to me. He wants us all to really *know* how this works. Here are the main principles in today's text:

#### 1) FREE JUSTIFYING GRACE PUSHES US INTO A DESPERATE BATTLE TO KILL INDWELLING SIN

**Romans 8:12-13** - “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. [13] For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

Free grace *justifies* us, but it also *awakens* and *energizes* us. The first thing free grace does is *awaken* us to what is at stake in our Christian walk. Nothing could be clearer than the warning Paul sounds in this text - “For if you live according to the flesh you will die....” (12a). This is what is at stake. And when Paul says, “....*if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body,*” he means it is the Holy Spirit that awakens you to what is at stake in what seem to be small compromises to the flesh.

We need to be clear here. You and I don't *earn* God's grace by putting “*to death the deeds of the body*” (13b).

Rather, the proof that we have **received** God's Spirit is we **do** put to death the deeds of the body. In other words, Christ's imputed righteousness, while real, is never a **replacement** for our righteousness, but the **empowerment** of our righteousness.

Before we were saved we never knew what was at stake. We may have had some general desire to be better people in certain areas of life, but that was all. Then divine grace came. God's Spirit quickened our minds and hearts. Suddenly, we can no longer be content with sins that Christ died to purge us from.

And there's something else. When Paul says those who live according to the flesh will **die** he isn't talking about physical death. We know that because he tells us in the next phrase that those who, by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the body will live. So some die and some live. Yet we know that **all** these people will die physically. So the death Paul pictures is a **spiritual, eternal death**. That's what is at stake here.

Paul is saying if we know this - if we see the seriousness of sin and the death it brings - we will allow the Holy Spirit to make us **violent with the sins of our flesh**. This is not **legalism**. This is a **Spirit inspired** battle. It is **pleasing** to the Lord. I'll talk more about **how** we fight it in a moment, but my concern here is very different. I'm deathly afraid of the **ignorance** - the **broad based** ignorance - that there is in the church about the necessity of being **brutal** with the sins of the flesh and the frequent, careless way we think of this as **legalism**. **Legalism** is never pleasing to the Lord. Killing sin is **always** pleasing to the Lord.

John Piper puts it this way: **"Stop making peace with ears and eyes and tongues and hands and feet that betray you like Judas...."** That's it exactly.

Listen to these words from Ed Welch's new book, **"A Banquet In The Grave"** - **"There is a mean streak to authentic spirituality....Self-control is not for the timid. When we want to grow in it, not only do we nurture an exuberance for Jesus Christ, we also demand of ourselves a hatred for sin.... The only possible attitude toward out-of-control desire is a declaration of all-out war....There is something about war that sharpens the senses....You hear a twig snap or the rustling of leaves and you are in attack mode. Someone coughs and you're ready to pull the trigger. Even after days of little or no sleep, war keeps us vigilant."**

Until you understand that spiritual life is war you will just play at Christianity. Jesus understood this - **Matthew 11:12** - **"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force."**

This is not violence against **others**. It is violence against sin in **ourselves** - **"And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire"**(Matthew 18:8).

Yes, Jesus knew better than anyone that the kingdom was brought to us by divine grace. He **died** to purchase redemption and entrance into that kingdom. But He also knew what divine grace **did** to the one who received it. It doesn't just **cleanse** the recipient. It **enlists** him. It gives birth to drastic decisions about killing sin because Jesus says **small decisions against sin are useless**.

## 2) **THE TIME TO KILL THE SINFUL DEEDS OF THE FLESH IS BEFORE THEY HAPPEN**

**Romans 8:13-14** - **"For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. [14] For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."**

Somehow, the key to putting to death the sinful deeds of the body is the presence and leading of the **Holy Spirit**. We simply can't kill the sinful deeds of the body just by trying to **stop** doing bad things. We **should** try very hard to stop doing sinful things, but, on its own, our will-power will fall short of success.

So how does the Holy Spirit change all of this? How does He make killing the sinful deeds of the body something **more** than moral improvement? I think Paul has already hinted at how this works in **Romans 8:5** - **"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit."**

Sinful deeds must be killed at their **root**. You don't change deeds at the point of **action**. That's too late. They already have too much momentum by then. The sinful deeds of the flesh must be killed **earlier** on - before the moment of actual temptation. Paul says the key is to live life with our **"minds set on the things of the Spirit."** This is the same point he makes in today's text, when he says we will live if we **"by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body...."**(13).

Now it remains to see **how** we are to put to death the deeds of the body by minding the things of the Spirit:

3) **BELIEVING THE WORD OF GOD IS THE LINK BETWEEN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE POWER TO KILL SIN**

**Romans 8:13-14** - “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. [14] For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

There are several steps in this closing point:

First, we’ve already seen the link between **Romans 8:13** and **Romans 8:5** - “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” So the capacity to kill the sins of the flesh comes from the Holy Spirit (8:13), and, more specifically, it comes from **setting our minds** on the **things of the Spirit** (8:5). We gain the power of the Spirit by setting our minds on the **“things of the Spirit.”**

But what are these things? What exactly is Paul telling us to set our minds on? There is only one other place in the whole Bible where that exact phrase - **“the things of the Spirit”** - is used: **1 Corinthians 2:13-14** - “And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. [14] The natural person does not accept the **things of the Spirit of God**, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

When Paul says the natural person is **“....not able to understand”** the things of the Spirit he doesn’t mean there is an **intellectual problem**. The kind of understanding problem Paul means is that the natural person **“....does not accept”** spiritual things. It’s a desire problem. It’s an affection problem.

But main point of this text is in identifying the **“things of the Spirit.”** Here, the **“things of the Spirit”** are the words taught by the Apostles - the doctrines and teaching of the New Testament. So when Paul says those who are of the Spirit **“set their minds on the things of the Spirit”** (8:5), he means they set their minds deeply and permanently on the Word of God.

Now we’re on our way to discovering how we kill sin in the power of the Spirit. It starts with setting our mind on the Word of God. And what makes me think we’re on the right track here is the way Paul describes the Word of God as the **“sword of the Spirit”** in **Ephesians 6:17** - **“....and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God....”**

The Bible is the **sword** of the Spirit. And we mustn’t soften this picture. Swords are for **killing**. And **Romans 8:13** tells us we must **“put to death the sinful deeds of the body.”** This is all starting to fit together. But it’s not quite complete yet.

**How** does the Holy Spirit use the Word of God to kill sin in my life? This is where the rubber meets the road. How can this truth be a flame with a power that burns up sin instead of becoming a religious cliché? I think Paul explain this in **Galatians 3:5** - **“Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?....”**

How does the power of the Spirit get applied through the Word? Paul says it must be by the **“hearing of faith.”** This means the power of the Spirit - the sin killing power of the Holy Spirit - isn’t conveyed by the print on the page of your Bible **automatically**.

The power to kill sin - to kill sin **before** the outward **act** of sin is committed - comes from **believing** God’s promise **more than** we believe the **promise of our own sinful desires**. The power of the Spirit through the Word is released as we **“set our minds”** to relish and taste the goodness of God’s promise **more than** the promise of our fallen tastes and desires.

It might help to remember the root problem in all our sinful responses. You can trace it right back to the Fall in **Genesis 3:1-5** - **“Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” [2] And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” [4] But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”**

Nowhere does the serpent **tell** Eve to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. No one sins out of duty. He **creates the desire** for sin. Then Eve gives in to that desire. And the righteous fruit of the Spirit is created in the exact reverse of this same process. This works in all areas of holy living. Here are some specific examples from the Scriptures.

We trust that God's sovereignty is better to look after our personal rights **more than** our own vengeance - **Romans 12:19-21** - "**Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."** [20] **To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."** [21] **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**

We trust God's promise to meet our material needs **more than** we trust our own greed that we alone secure our future security - **2 Corinthians 9:6, 10-11** - "**The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully....10-11....He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. [11] You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God."**

These are just two examples of how hearing the Word with faith unleashes the power of the Holy Spirit to use the Word - use it as a sword - to kill sins like vengeance and covetousness.

Finally, it is in this sense - this **sin killing work of the Spirit** - that we're meant to read those famous closing words of our text today: **Romans 8:14** - "**For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."**

There is a very context-specific way of interpreting these famous words. Paul isn't just talking about the leading of the Holy Spirit in all the guidance decisions of life - where to go to college - whom to marry - or which career path to take. The Holy Spirit **does** guide in these things to be sure, but that's probably **not** what Paul is describing here.

He's talking about letting the Holy Spirit use the sword of the Spirit - the Word of God - to **kill sin before it happens** in our lives. He's telling us yet again to keep our "**minds set on the things of the Spirit**"(8:5), and to so follow His direction that we can indeed "**by the Spirit....put to death the deeds of the body."**