

Who's Going to Die: You or Your Sin?

Romans 8:12-13

Jason Van Bommel

Forest Hill Presbyterian Church

July 19, 2015

“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 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.” – Romans 8:12-13, ESV

Sometimes you can be reading through a passage of Scripture and be so encouraged and uplifted by what you read until you come across a verse that hits you hard in the gut and you double over from the blunt impact of it. Verse 13 is like this in Romans 8. When he preached through Romans 8 and called it “The Best Chapter in the Bible,” Derek Thomas said he did not have verses 12 and 13 in mind when he called Romans 8 “the best,” and yet God speak the truth, whether it comforts or it cuts. And so we must hear it all, whether it raises us up with encouragement or knocks us over with conviction.

“So if you live according to the flesh you will die” is really saying the same thing as verse 6, “For to set the mind on the flesh is death,” but it’s so much more direct and personal and harder to hear. Sometimes we just need to acknowledge that the Scripture can be hard to hear. That doesn’t make it any less God’s Word or any less meaningful or relevant to our lives. Sometimes we also need to listen well enough to step back and make sure we’re understanding a verse in its context. Taken out of context, each of these two verses could be badly misunderstood.

I. We are Debtors

What does Paul mean in verse 12 when he says, “So then, brothers, we are debtors . . .” Obviously, we are indebted to God, to the Spirit, and not to the flesh. But what does that mean?

Last week, Matt Miller saw a church sign that said, “Be worthy of God’s grace.” Is that what Paul means? After all, Paul writes in Ephesians 4:1: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to

which you have been called.” “Walk worthy of the calling” is kind of the same as “Be worthy of God’s grace,” isn’t it? Well, no.

Put simply, you can’t be worthy of grace, by definition. That’s what makes it grace and not merit – it’s undeserved and can’t be deserved.

So what does Paul mean when he calls us debtors? Does he mean what Tom Hanks’ character in *Saving Private Ryan*, Captain John Miller, meant when he said to Private Ryan, as he was dying, “Earn this, James. Earn this.” Jesus sacrificed Himself for our salvation, just as Captain Miller sacrificed himself for Private Ryan. So, are we supposed to “earn this”? How do you earn the sacrifice of another person’s life?

We can’t earn the merit of Christ any more than we can deserve it or be worthy of it. But we are debtors. We literally owe the Spirit our lives. On the other hand, Paul is emphasizing that we don’t owe the flesh anything. As Paul said of the sins of the flesh in Romans 6:21, “What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!”

Whether we’re considering the sinful, shameful works of the flesh or the self-righteous religious merit badge deeds of the flesh, we don’t gain anything from either of them. We don’t owe them a thing! So we shouldn’t live for them as though we do owe them something. We get no benefits from the flesh, but we do get all benefits from the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has applied all the benefits of Christ to us – new birth, forgiveness of sins, justification before God, adoption as sons – we owe Him everything. But Paul’s point in saying this is not that we should pay Him back or seek to earn or deserve these blessings, but that we should follow the Spirit. We should live for the Spirit and live by the Spirit because He has given us everything.

Our modern English word “ought” comes from the Old English word for “owe.” “Owe” and “ought” are two ways of speaking of obligation, of debt. In other words, when it comes to what we ought to do, we ought not to live for the flesh, for it only brings death. We ought to live for the Spirit, who gives us life.

II. Salvation by Works?

If verse 12 is easily misunderstood, then verse 13 is even more so. Think about it: If you didn't know anything about the Bible or the Gospel and someone just read this one verse to you: "*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.*" What would you think is the way to have eternal life, to be saved?

It sure seems like this verse is saying that only as we "put to death the deeds of the body" will we gain eternal life, by works, by something we do. But we know that's not what Paul means exactly. Think about what he has said already in Romans 8 and elsewhere:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." – Rom. 8:1-2

"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not a result of works, so that no one may boast." – Ephesians 2:8-9

"¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified . . . ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." – Galatians 2:15-16, 20-21

"So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." – Romans 11:5-6

Clearly, salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Clearly, salvation is not a result of works. We must always magnify and cling to the grace of God in salvation. Always.

Yet while these other verses help put Romans 8:13 in context, Romans 8:13 also helps put those other verses in context. In other words, Scripture helps clarify Scripture, but Scripture does not nullify Scripture. What Paul says in Romans 8:13 still stands: “*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.*”

So, what does it mean?

III. Holiness by the Spirit

Freed from the law, O happy condition!

I can sin all I want and still have remission!

Is that the cry of your heart? “Yay, I get to sin and get away with it!!”?

Grigori Rasputin was known as the “mad monk,” a mystical “holy man” in the late days of Czarist Russia in the early 1900’s. In 1905, the Empress Alexandra became convinced that Rasputin healed their son, Alexis, of hemophilia by laying hands on him. As a result, Rasputin quickly became a favorite in the Russian court. Unfortunately, Rasputin had a radical and unbiblical notion of grace and the relationship between grace and sin.

Rasputin believed that the way to experience more of the grace of God was to sin more – the more outrageous the sin, the more radical the experience of God’s grace. As a result of his theology, Rasputin was a notorious drunkard and womanizer, also given to fits of rage and eccentric outbursts. His presence in the palace filled the final years of Russia’s Czars with notorious scandal. He was so scandalous that he was assassinated in 1916 as he was seen by everyone in Russia as the source of their despair and defeat in World War I.

The Bible doesn't teach the crazy relationship between sin and grace that Rasputin believed. In fact, Paul directly and forcefully refutes this kind of thinking in Romans 5:19 - 6:4

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

***6** What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

When the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, He gives us a new heart. He gives us a strong love for God's holiness and a strong hatred of sin.

Paul's main point in Romans 8:13 is not about how we get saved, how we're made right with God. Rather's it's about how we can succeed in our struggle against sin. How can we grow in holiness in our lives? How can we overcome sin?

If you truly have no deep desire to do so, then you need to examine your heart before the Lord to see whether or not you have a new heart in Christ, whether you have been united to Christ and have new life in Him.

If you do desire to overcome sin, you cannot do so by the works of the flesh, in a flesh mindset. In other words, you can't become holy in your life on your own, by your own strength.

The fact that it is God who changes our hearts and gives us a desire to obey Him out of love is taught consistently in Scripture, along with the idea that we can only obey God by the power of the Holy Spirit:

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. – Deut. 30:6

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. – Jeremiah 31:33

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. – Ezek. 36:26-27

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. – 2 Cor. 5:17

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. – Colossians 3:9-10

But that is not the way you learned Christ!—²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. – Eph. 4:20-24

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to^[c] his own glory and excellence,⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. – 2 Peter 1:3-4

So we can see that, if we are truly in Christ, God has given us a new heart and a new desire to obey Him, and He has also given us the ability to obey Him from the heart. But we must obey in the power of the Spirit, for it is only by the Spirit that we can put to death the deeds of the body.

But HOW do we do that?

Application:

Learning how to live in holiness and obedience by the power of the Holy Spirit is something which none of us will fully master in this life, but I believe the Bible gives us some solid guidance as to how we can do this:

1. Stop listening to yourself so much and start preaching to yourself more.

Your flesh is always making demands and excuses. Counter these pleas of your sinful appetites with the words of Scripture and with Biblical truth.

The pleasures of sin are fleeting at best but the consequences of sin are long-lasting and costly. Memorize Scripture and tell yourself the truth every day about sin and righteousness, about God and the devil, about truth and deception.

2. Believe who you are.

Your enemies - the world, the flesh and the devil – are always trying to tell you who you are: You're only human. You're just a man. It's your right as an American!

Counter these lies with a deep faith and confidence in who God say you are:

- You are a child of God.
- You are holy and beloved.
- You are chosen and adopted.
- You are more than a conqueror through Him who loved you.
- You are a member of the body of Christ.
- Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.
- You are an heir of God and a co-heir with Christ.

3. Be who you are.

Don't just believe these truths about yourself; live them.

4. Repent readily and grieve well.

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. ¹¹ For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. – 2 Cor. 7:9-11

5. Don't surrender to doubt and despair.

Satan is a master tactician – the punch combination: the jabs of temptation followed by the uppercut of besetting sin and the roundhouse knockout of despair.

Instead, take God's combination of 1 John 1:5 – 2:6

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. ³ And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we

are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

We can see here a five-step counter-strategy to Satan's 1-2-3- combination attack:

1. Walk in the light: Actively live abiding in Christ and in His truth. That means daily time in the Word and in prayer, praying throughout your day, living your life with Jesus.
2. Have fellowship with one another: You weren't meant to walk alone or fight alone. Live in fellowship in the body of Christ; let's walk together in the light.
3. Believe and receive the cleansing from sin found only in Christ's blood.
4. When you sin, confess your sin to your advocate with the Father and receive anew the cleansing for your sin.
5. Once you receive forgiveness anew, strive to keep his commandments by the power of the Holy Spirit, as you abide in Him and seek to walk as He walked.