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## KILL YOUR SIN!

Romans 8:12-13

By

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Romans Lesson 46

Kill Your Sin!  
Romans 8:12-13

You've probably seen the bumper sticker that says, "Kill your TV!" That may be wise advice, but the apostle Paul gives us even wiser counsel in our text: Kill your sin! It's a concept that we don't hear much about any more. But it used to be a widely understood approach to sanctification. The Puritans called it "the mortification of sin." In our times, to be mortified means to be embarrassed, but the word really means to be killed. The Puritans all knew that we are engaged in mortal combat with an enemy that lurks within: the flesh (or the old man, or indwelling sin). Either you kill it every day or it will kill you.

Back in the 1980's I was at Campus Crusade's Arrowhead Springs headquarters, when I ran into my former church history professor, Dr. John Hannah. I asked him, "What's the best book that you've read on the spiritual life?" Without hesitation he replied, "John Owen's, *Temptation and Sin*." Since Dr. Hannah is both a godly man and widely read, I thought, "I need to read that book."

It is the first half of volume 6 in Owen's *Works* [Banner of Truth]. He writes over 300 pages on just about every imaginable aspect of what it means to mortify indwelling sin. I also discovered that Owen, who lived in the 1600's, wrote in what J. I. Packer calls "lumbering Latinized idiom" (*A Quest for Godliness* [Crossway Books], p. 16). In other words, he's not very easy to follow! But, like mining for gold, the reward is worth the effort.

Thankfully, there are some easier to read versions of Owen's great work. One is, *Sin & Temptation*, abridged and edited by James M. Houston [Multnomah Press, 1983]. A shorter one is, *What Every Christian Needs to Know*, prepared by A. Swanson [Grace Publications, 1998]. Also, Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor have come out with a recent edition [Crossway, 2006]. Philip Graham Ryken, the president of Wheaton College, endorses it by saying, "John Owen is a spiritual surgeon with the rare skill to cut away the cancer of sin and bring gospel healing to the sinner's soul. Apart from the Bible, I have found his writings to be the best books ever written to help

me stop sinning the same old sins." I can only scratch the surface on this topic today. If you want to go deeper, get Owen and dig in.

Paul here explains further and applies what he wrote in 8:6, "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace." The *death* in 8:13, like that of 8:6, is not physical death, which we all must face, but spiritual death, eternal separation from God. In other words, Paul is saying,

Kill your sin or it will kill you!

He is saying here what he says in Galatians 6:8, "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." There are only two ways to live, with only two outcomes: To live according to the flesh ends in eternal death; to live according to the Spirit ends with eternal life. Charles Simeon (*Expository Outlines of the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 15:269) put it, "Either sin must be our enemy, or God will." So this is serious business!

To understand and apply these verses, consider three points:

1. To kill your sin, remember your obligation, not to the flesh, but to the Lord (8:12).

Romans 8:12: "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—" Paul breaks off in mid-sentence, leaving us to supply the implied second half, that we *are* under obligation to the Lord. He bought us with His blood, so that now we belong to Him (3:24, 25; 8:9). His Spirit now dwells in us. It follows, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation . . ."

Paul expresses the negative, "not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh." The flesh is our old nature or old man that we are born with by virtue of our being "in Adam" (5:12-21). To live "according to the flesh" means to live under the domination of the flesh, according to its desires, which are self-centered, opposed to God, and not subject to His Word (8:7). Those who live habitually according to the flesh (or "in the flesh") are not truly born again.

But the fact that Paul addresses this obligation to believers ("brethren") means that we still have the flesh dwelling in us, trying to gain dominance over us. Everett Harrison (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 10:92) says, "It is

tremendously important to grasp the import of v. 12, because it teaches beyond all question that the believer still has the sinful nature within himself, despite having been crucified with Christ. The flesh has not been eradicated." Bishop Moule put it (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 221), "Say what some men will, we are never for an hour here below exempt from elements and conditions of evil residing not merely around us but within us."

Some teach, based on Romans 6:6, that the old nature or the flesh was eradicated because it was crucified with Christ. In my estimation, they are greatly minimizing the danger of the monster that dwells within the hearts of even the godliest saints. It's never beneficial to minimize a great danger! If an enemy is threatening to kill you and you ignore it, he will succeed! If you live under the dominance of this enemy, you will die. But Paul says that we have no obligation or debt to the flesh. What good did it ever do us? What favors has it done? None! We owe it nothing.

But by implication, we owe God everything! He loved us while we were yet sinners (5:8). He sent His own Son to bear the awful penalty of our sin, so that we no longer fear condemnation (8:1). We now belong to Him and we owe it all to His grace, not to anything that we have done. So to kill your sin, remember your obligation, not to the flesh, but to the Lord.

2. To kill your sin, understand the horrific consequence if you do not kill it—it will kill you (8:13a)!

Romans 8:13a: "for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die. . . ." Or, as the ESV puts it, "you will die." The literal Greek is, "you are about to die." While the expression is equivalent to a future tense, it implies that there is still time to repent and avert the horrific consequence. Paul is saying two things:

A. A life of unchecked sin leads to eternal death.

Death is a strong word, in stark contrast to the life promised to those who set their minds on the things of the Spirit and who by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body (8:6, 13). Note that Paul did *not* say, "If you don't kill your sins, you'll lose some rewards in heaven." He wants us to view this as mortal combat: Ei-

ther you kill your sin or your sin will kill you, not just with an early death, but with *eternal* death!

Paul says the same thing in Colossians 3. After stating that we have died with Christ and been raised up in Him, he draws a conclusion (Col. 3:5-8, NASB marginal reading): "Therefore, put to death the members which are upon the earth to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth."

In these warnings, Paul is following Jesus, who in the context of warning about mental lust said (Matt. 5:29-30), "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." (See also, Matthew 18:8-9.) Jesus does not mean literally to tear out your eye or cut off your hand. That wouldn't solve the root problem. But He is warning that if we do not get radical in killing our sin, we will spend eternity in hell!

Maybe you're thinking, "If Christians are saved by grace, not by works, and are eternally secure, how can Jesus and Paul both say that if we don't kill our sin, we'll end up in hell?"

The New Testament has frequent warnings to those who profess to know Christ, but show no evidence of it. Perhaps the most frightening is Jesus' warning (Matt. 7:21-23), "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" Those who truly know Christ live in obedience to Him, which means that they kill their sin. False believers may serve in ministry, but they do not kill their sin.

John Piper (“How to Kill Sin,” Pt. 1, on [DesiringGod.org](http://DesiringGod.org)) explains, “Putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit – the daily practice of killing sin in your life – is the result of being justified and the evidence that you are justified by faith alone apart from works of the law.” He adds, “If you are not at odds with sin, you are not at home with Jesus, *not* because being at odds with sin makes you at home with Jesus, but because being at home with Jesus makes you at odds with sin.”

James Boice (*Romans: The Reign of Grace* [Baker], 2:826) puts it bluntly, “Paul is saying that if you live like a non-Christian, dominated by your sinful nature rather than living according to the Holy Spirit, you will perish like a non-Christian—because you are a non-Christian.” A life of unchecked sin leads to eternal death.

B. Sin is not neutral and it definitely is not nice.

Sin always destroys lives, both for time and eternity. It always dangles the promise of happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction before the victim, but it is only bait to lure him into the trap, which leads to eternal death. Burn Paul’s words into your brain, “If you are living according to the flesh, you will die”!

But Satan tries to get us to minimize the serious nature of our sin, so that we excuse it as no big deal, tolerate it as normal, or even re-package it as a good thing. I’ve heard Christians say things like, “I’ve lived with this angry, nagging wife for years. It’s impossible to please her. But now I’ve met a wonderful woman at work who treats me right. Don’t I deserve a little happiness after what I’ve had to endure?” And so he justifies his adultery and divorce.

Or, as I said, some Christians argue that as believers we’re never to view ourselves as sinners, but only as saints who occasionally sin. They camp on verses like Romans 6:6, which says that our old man was crucified with Christ so that our body of sin might be done away with. They insist that they are dead to sin, so they don’t fight against it. But that is to minimize the deadly enemy.

Some years ago, the French aristocrat Baron Richard d’Arcy kept a two-year-old lion in his home as a pet. One night in June, 1977, the Baron tried to make his pet go into the bathroom, where it usually spent the night. But the lion refused to go, leaped on its master, and in minutes, had clawed him to death.

Indwelling sin is like that lion. It may be nice at first, but at some point it turns on you and the result is never pretty. Kill your sin or it will kill you! But, how do we do it?

3. To kill your sin, put it to death by the Spirit and you will live (8:13b).

Romans 8:13b, “but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” This is a daily process that will not end until you are with Jesus. As Christ’s words about plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand imply, it’s not painless. But we’ve got to keep at it as long as we live in this body of sin. John Owen (*The Works of John Owen: Temptation and Sin* [Banner of Truth], 6:11) put it, “When sin lets us alone we may let sin alone.”

But what does Paul mean when he says, “But if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body...”? Let’s take it phrase by phrase. First, “by the Spirit” means to rely on the Holy Spirit, or to trust in His power. The Holy Spirit is not a tool that we use, but a Person whom we trust. There is a mystery in that we are responsible to trust and obey and yet it is the Spirit who gives us the power to trust and obey.

Paul puts it together 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.” (See, also Rom. 15:18; 1 Cor. 15:10.) We are not passive, but neither do we obey by sheer will power or determination. Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], 6:418) says, “We cannot do it without the Spirit working it in us, and the Spirit will not do it without our doing our endeavor.” Ironically, one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. When we rely on the Spirit, He gives us the power to control ourselves, which includes killing our sin.

By “putting to death,” Paul means cutting off sin before it goes anywhere. We must take whatever radical action is necessary to separate ourselves from sin. He explained how this works in chapter 6, where he said that when we believed in Christ, we were baptized into His death (6:2, 3). We died with Him when He died to sin. That’s our new position, but we have to act on it. Thus, Paul

exhorts (6:11), "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." In other words, be what you are.

Why does Paul say "deeds of the *body*," not "of the *flesh*"? Some commentators insist that the difference is significant, while others say that it is mainly a variation of style. Paul has used "body" to refer to the "body of sin" (6:6), "the mortal body" where sin should not reign (6:12), and the "body of this death" (7:24). He also refers to "the members of your body," which we are not to present to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but rather to God as instruments of righteousness (6:13).

So if there is a difference here, he is focusing on the body as the instrument through which the sinful deeds of the flesh are expressed. Until Jesus returns, we live in a body that is still prone toward sin. Sin is sin even on the thought level, before it ever displays itself through the body (Mark 7:20-23). But if we kill it on the thought level, it will not become a deed of the body. Sins that are expressed through the body are always worse than sins of the mind, because they damage others and bring dishonor to God. Thus we must put to death the deeds of the body by cutting them off in the mind before they are expressed openly.

### Conclusion

To make this as practical as I can, let me give seven steps to kill your sin. I could come up with more, but I hope that these help. I'm assuming that you have experienced the new birth, so that the Spirit of God now dwells in you (8:9).

(1) Purpose to be godly and discipline yourself for that purpose.

Paul writes (1 Tim. 4:7), "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." You must decide, "My aim is to become a man or woman of God, so that my life glorifies the God who saved me." In light of that purpose, make plans *not* to sin. Usually, we fall into patterns of living that set us up for sinning. Study yourself and work out a plan to cut off any opportunity for sin. If you're easily tempted to pornography, set up safeguards and accountability to keep you away from the temptation. If you're tempted to drunkenness or drugs, stay away from people or places where you could fall. Discipline implies going against your immediate feelings and impulses for a higher goal. Just as an athlete who wants to win



avoids certain foods even though they taste good and works out when he doesn't feel like it, so a Christian who purposes to be godly disciplines himself for that goal.

(2) Kill your sin at its root and it will not bear its deadly fruit.

You can knock the fruit off the tree, but if you don't want it to grow, you've got to cut the tree down at the roots (Owen, p. 30). Sin begins on the heart or thought level. If you cut it off there, it will not go any farther. No one commits adultery without first thinking about it. So when lust, greed, selfishness, or pride pop into your mind, cut the thought off right there. Don't entertain it.

(3) Cry out to God for deliverance and take whatever action you must to flee temptation.

This is the mysterious balance that I mentioned: You trust God, but you also take action. God says (Ps. 50:15), "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me." But the Spirit also inspired Paul to write (1 Cor. 6:18), "Flee immorality." "Flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22). Pray and flee!

(4) Set your mind on the things of the Spirit, not on the things of the flesh (Rom. 8:5; Col. 3:1-4).

The "things of the Spirit" refers to the many wonderful truths and promises of God revealed to us in His Word (1 Cor. 2:9-13).

(5) Spend time daily in the Word of God.

As has often been said, "Either sin will keep you from the Word or the Word will keep you from sin" (Ps. 119:9, 11). Jesus defeated Satan by quoting the Word (Matt. 4:1-11). Meditate on and memorize the Word, because you won't always have a Bible and concordance handy when temptation hits.

(6) Keep the cross in view at all times to deepen your love for Christ, your hatred of sin, and your desire to glorify God.

The motive for killing sin is that the Son of God loved me and gave Himself up for me (Gal. 2:20), thus I want to honor and glorify Him. The motive for killing sin should not primarily be to rid yourself of a frustrating problem that is disrupting your life: "My anger or my drinking is causing problems in my marriage, so I want to kill these sins." Rather, it should be, "My anger or my

drinking is dishonoring to God, who gave His Son for me, so I want to kill these sins.”

(7) Walk each day in dependence on the Holy Spirit.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). A walk is a step by step process that takes you toward a goal. If you fall, get up and keep walking.

You’ve probably heard about or seen the movie about the young man who was hiking in Utah when a boulder fell and pinned his arm between it and the canyon wall. He was trapped like that for an agonizing week. He finally realized that he must cut off his arm or he would die there. So he did that gruesome deed and he is alive today.

You’ve got to do that with your sin. If you don’t kill it, it will kill you. The indwelling Holy Spirit will give you the power to kill your sin as you walk in dependence on Him.

### Application Questions

1. If killing sin is an evidence of eternal life and since we can never kill it all, how can we know if we’re saved?
2. Where is the biblical balance between viewing ourselves as sinners versus saints? How do we maintain the proper tension?
3. Someone may argue that the steps for killing sin are legalistic. How would you answer?
4. What other steps for killing sin can you find in the Bible? Which have been the most helpful for you in the battle?

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