

Live According to the Spirit

Aren't you glad that the Holy Spirit still moves in and among His people today? He's going to do that right now as we look to His Holy and inerrant Word because He will illuminate that which He also inspired. 1 Corinthians 2:12 says, **"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God."**

Let us pray,

Romans 8:12-17

12 Therefore, brethren, 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 as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

17 and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

In Romans 8:1 we learned that there is no condemnation for the Christ-follower. We saw in verses 2-8 that 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. Last time we rejoiced in the fact that we are in the Spirit because the Holy Spirit of God indwells us as believers in Jesus Christ.

Our text today begins with the word "therefore," in verse 12. This is a clue that Paul is now moving from instruction to exhortation; from what God has done for us to what is expected from us. As a result of having no condemnation, having our minds set on the things of the Spirit and having the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Paul is going to describe how we should then live.

I. We live under a new obligation

You and have been given so much, haven't we? With all of the privileges of being a child of God comes some responsibility. See it there in verse 12:

"Therefore, brethren, we are debtors--not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh."

The word "debtors" refers to one who owes another and is under duty to live a certain way. We have an "obligation" a moral compulsion as Christians to live a new kind of life.

Does this mean that the Christian stacks up points with God, by paying his "obligation" or debt that he owes God? Those of us who have studied verse by verse through Romans know better than that. Paul has proven that we are justified by grace through faith, not by doing works of the law. He cannot mean that we are paying God back for our salvation or earning it in any way. That would contradict everything that we have learned in Romans so far. So what does he mean when he tells us that we have a different sort of obligation?

We can think of this obligation, this debt, both negatively and positively.

A. Don't live like you used to, according to the flesh.

He begins by stating it negatively. As a matter of fact, the positive is so obvious that Paul does not even have to state it. The negative will suffice to get the point across. **“we are debtors--not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.”**

Keep in mind what Paul means by “flesh.” It is man in his natural state apart from grace; unregenerate man; the whole of our humanness viewed as corrupt and unredeemed, ‘our fallen human nature.’ In chapter 7 Paul said, **“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells.”** The flesh is where sin finds a place to still live in us. I came across this acrostic for the word F.L.E.S.H. that is helpful to remember: Following Long Established Sinful Habits. To live **“according to the flesh”** means to live under the domination of the flesh, according to its desires, which, as we saw in verses 5-8, are self-centered, opposed to God, and not subject to His Word.

If you're a born again believer, you are now someone you never were before as 2 Corinthians 5:17 says: **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”** Galatians 5:24 says, **“And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”**

So Paul tells us, we have no more obligation to that part of our humanity. It has no more call on our lives. The flesh's authority is over—killed at the cross of Christ and effective when by faith we were united to Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:4-6).

In one sense, this should be obvious to us as Christians. We should realize that if something has been put to death then it has no more power over us. Yet the reality is that the flesh, though killed by the cross, still bears influence upon us. How can this be? When someone has lived all their lives under the authority of an evil tyrant, even at his death it is difficult to be freed from his iron hand of tyranny.

The flesh does that to us. It is an evil tyrant that exercised full authority over us until we died to the flesh through Christ. Yet we still hear its demands. Memories of the flesh still haunt our minds. And so too many of Christians fall back into flesh-living instead of faith-living.

Listen, this verse says you and I owe the flesh nothing because it has never done us anything good. Verse 13 says that living for the flesh leads only to death, **“For if you live according to the flesh you will die.”**

Death is the ultimate outcome for those who live according to the flesh. 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.

Note that Paul did not say, “If you don't kill your sins, you'll lose some rewards in heaven.” He says you will die. He wants us to view this as mortal combat: Either you kill your sin or your sin will kill you.

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. John Owen challenges the believer to “be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Kill your sin or it will kill you! But, how do we do it?

B. Live a new life according to the Spirit.

So if we are not obliged to walk in the flesh then that leaves only one other realm in which we can walk in Paul’s theology: “in the Spirit.” The flesh is no longer to have power over us, the Spirit of God rules in our lives.

What does it look like to live according to the Spirit?

1. Put to death the deeds of the body.

Verse 13 again says, **“but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”** “Putting to death the misdeeds of the body” refers to “slaughtering sin” in your life. This same word is used in Romans 8:36: “...We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” We must be killing sin. We cannot be passive about sin in our lives.

The verb translated “put to death” is in the present tense and it indicates an ongoing action. There’s no one-time act that puts to death the deeds of the body (so it does not happen with finality at conversion) but rather it is a constant, day-by-day, even moment-by-moment part of the believer’s sanctification. *“But if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”*

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. Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out that we must take action when we have the first stirring of sin. “Nip it in the bud, deal with it at once; never let it get even a moment’s foothold... Expose the thing and say, ‘This is evil, this is vileness, this is the thing that drove the first man out of Paradise’.” Then he adds, “Pull it out, look at it, denounce it, hate it for what it is; then you have really dealt with it. You must not merely push it back in a spirit of fear, and in a timorous manner. Bring it out, expose it, analyse it; and then denounce it for what it is until you hate it” [ML-J, Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17, The Sons of God, 143].

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 causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”** Jesus does not mean literally to tear out your eye or cut off your hand. That wouldn’t solve the root problem of sin which begins in the heart. But He is warning that if we do not get radical in killing our sin, we will spend eternity in hell!

The body is the instrument through which the sinful deeds of the flesh are expressed. So Paul said in Rom. 6:13, **“And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”** 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.

2. Kill your sin by the Spirit.

“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. It’s not a matter of me alone doing this nor can I just sit back and wait for the Holy Spirit to do it. It’s not an either/or but rather a both/and. It’s a beautiful balance: I must do it by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit chooses to do it through me.

We see this in Philippians 2:12-13: **Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.**

I must do it...but it’s God who works in me to do it. We could say it this way: I cannot do it without the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit will not do it without me.

How do we kill sin by the Spirit?

Let me give you some practical ways:

1. Set your mind on the things of the Spirit (Rom 8:5; 1 Cor. 2:9-14).
You don't just look at the temptation and say NO. You do that! But if you are going to put it to death by the Spirit, you have to do more: you direct your mind, your heart, your spiritual focus another way, namely to the "things of the Spirit." The “things of the Spirit” refers to the many wonderful truths and promises of God revealed to us in His Word.
2. Take up the sword of the Spirit, the word of God (Eph. 6:17)
In our spiritual warfare, the only offensive weapon that Paul mentions in our spiritual armor is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The sword that kills sin is the word of God. And the way we kill sin "by the Spirit" is to set our minds on "the things of the Spirit," that is, the word of God in Scripture, which becomes then the sword of the Spirit.
3. Kill your sin at the root and it will not bear its deadly fruit. (2 Cor. 10:4-5).
“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,”
“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. Sin begins on the heart or thought level. If you cut it off there, it will not go any farther. Jesus pointed out that 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. Choose to focus on the things of the Spirit. Remind yourself of the truth of God’s word.
4. Keep the cross in view. (Gal. 2:20)
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.”

A missionary couple was with us ministering were headed with three small children to a Muslim controlled war torn country in Africa. Their prayer letter was one of the clearest examples of how to put sin to death by the Spirit that I have ever seen.

They listed the sins that were threatening them and then gave the promises of God that they were using to put the sins to death.

"Whereas the Constitution of [this country] may state one thing, the Word of God says, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Where fear says, "what if . . . happens?" faith says, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

When worry surfaces, faith responds, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

When doubt and frustration scoff, "These people will never change, this is a waste of time!" Jesus looks us in the eye and responds, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:27).

You see we overcome daily sin the same way we were saved in the first place. By grace, because God does it by His Spirit in us; through faith by believing God's promises in His Word; in Jesus Christ because it is His death and resurrection that secures it all for us.