

Adoption

Putting Sin to Death

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

Romans 8:13

Turn with me now, if you would, to Romans chapter 8—Paul's epistle to the Romans, chapter 8—and we're going to pick up the reading at verse 12. Before we read together the word of God, let's come before Him in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, this is Your word. It is a light that shines in a dark place. We thank You that it is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith that is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Come, Holy Spirit, and enlighten us. Illuminate these words. Cause us to see and understand, and help us once again not just to be hearers, but also to be doers of your word, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let's pick up the reading at verse 12 of Romans chapter 8.

“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. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

We've been looking together—and for the sake of my friends from the seminary, let me just say David Jussely and I were doing our nightly chore last night of walking our two respective dogs at about 9:30; and on the third...I think it was the third lap around, he asked me, as he often does, what am I doing tomorrow? And I explained to him what I was doing, and all of a sudden, both of us sort of stopped in our tracks and said, “What an incredible privilege it is to be involved in the ministry of the word of God and teaching at seminary.” And, especially, I was thinking tonight of how a small thing that we do may end up in Myanmar. I probably will never get to Myanmar, but what an incredible privilege that something that you do— in giving a dollar or two or in a prayer that you pray—will end up in Myanmar or amongst the Sudanese exiles in Uganda or in Argentina or however you pronounce it. What a wonderful privilege that is!

Now we've been looking at the role of the Holy Spirit and the role of the Holy Spirit in adoption in recent weeks. And we've had cause in the past to look

together at some aspects of Romans chapter 8; and particularly since in verse 15 of Romans 8, Paul uses this expression that, in fact, only occurs here: “the spirit of adoption” or “the spirit of sonship” as sons. And that in addressing, as Paul is doing here in Romans 8, this grand beautiful doctrine of adoption: that by the grace of God we are brought into the family of God and into a relationship with God as our Father and with Jesus as our Elder Brother and with the Spirit as the spirit of adoption or the spirit of sonship—Paul, now, in this section, draws together the implication of adoption and our holiness of life. He says to us in verse 13, “If ye by the spirit do mortify”...I like that word; that may say a whole lot about me, but I, I like that word. We need to keep that word. “If ye by the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, you will live.”

Many of us can testify to reading either John Owen, *Volume 6* on mortification—maybe in the little paperback, and let me commend it to you. Some 60 pages or so in his collected writings, sermons delivered to 15 and 16 year old boys in a high school—actually in university but they went to university much younger than they do now—with hormones coming out of their ears you understand, and preaching to them a series of messages on mortification. Many of you perhaps have read Jim Packer, one of his ubiquitous introductions to many books. And his introduction to John Owen's book on mortification is one of the best things that he ever wrote. Picture the scene with me: a man is sitting in an armchair, his favorite armchair, and on his lap is a big, shaggy dog. And he's stroking that dog, and as happens he falls off to sleep. And he awakes a few minutes later; resumes stroking the dog; but hasn't realized that, in fact, it's not a dog anymore: it's a lion, a ferocious lion! And, you know, sometimes I think that's the way we treat our sins. We think of them as our pet dogs rather than as ferocious lions.

And Paul is addressing that issue here that one of the marks, one of the distinctives of being a child of God, of being adopted into the household and family of God is the way you deal with personal sin, the way you address it, the resolve you have or don't have towards that personal sin. Robert Murray McCheyne in that brief meteoric life of his in gospel ministry, barely seven years before God took him home—Robert Murray McCheyne once said, “My greatest need is...” and fill in the blank for a second. “My greatest need is my personal holiness.” Let's think through parameters of how Paul deals with this issue of mortification as emblematic of what it means to be a child of God. Because it's not the language and not the logic of the apostle Paul here, because he goes on in verse 14 after mentioning “putting to death sin”—and by the way, there are no pacifists in the Kingdom of God. I'll steal your point for a minute. Actually it was going to be mine, and I forgot and you mentioned it, so let me steal it back again. There are no pacifists in the Kingdom of God. Every Christian, every believer is engaged in an act of warfare. And act of warfare that will lead to death, the death of sin. And notice the logic, because Paul will go on to explain what he means in verse 14 using the language of “being led by the Spirit.” What does it mean? What does it look like to be led by the Spirit? Well, he's just told you that being led by the Spirit looks like putting sin to death. The engagement of the leading of

the Spirit results in the act of mortification on our part.

I. Know your enemy.

There are four things that God wants you to know. If I may steal a phrase for a second—four things God wants you to know. You must know, first of all, your enemy. Sometimes there's a superficiality in reading the epistle to the Romans and you will have heard some, granted from a bygone era it has to be said, speaking in terms of getting out of Romans 7 and into Romans 8; that in Romans 7 you have Paul's struggle with sin, but when you come into Romans 8 you come to the language of the Holy Spirit and the language of assurance and the language of perseverance and the language, "Who can separate from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord?"

But it's right here in Romans 8 that Paul picks up the theme of struggling with personal sin. It's right here in Romans 8 that the apostle Paul mentions that, in fact, we groan in this world; that right here in Romans chapter 8 he says in verse 23, "Not only the creation but we ourselves who have," note, "the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly." Yes, that one of the results of being filled by the Holy Spirit is that you have a greater appreciation of your inward sinfulness. That one of the consequences of being filled with the Spirit is that you groan about your existence in this world, longing, in fact, for that world which is to come. "We need to know our enemy," Paul is saying. "We need to know something about sin. We need to know something about sins' reality." Oh, I would love to hear some of those veterans talk about how well they knew their enemies: the plans, the studies, the little maps. And Paul is saying here, "You've got to know your enemy...and your enemy is sin, sin that lies within you." Sin is alive. "Each one of us as Christians," Paul is saying, "is in conflict with ourselves. The good that we would we do, not the evil that we would not, that we find that we do." Sin is seeking to ruin our souls.

I wonder if you would do it now. Maybe in your mind's eye or if you're taking notes, write it down on a piece of paper with a pen. Identify one or two of those sins that so easily beset you: sins perhaps for some of us we thought we'd been rid of a long time ago, and thirty, forty years into our Christian experience they're still with us. Sin is a reality. Identify your sin. Know them. Know what it is that besets you: sins that perhaps you nurse and feed and allow to grow and keep on reassuring that "it's okay" that they be there. Know your enemy.

II. Know your objective.

Secondly, know your objective. One of the hallmarks of the spirit of adoption is that we should know what our objective ought to be in this life. Ignorance of one's enemy means we're fighting blind, and ignorance of an objective is that we're

fighting in the dark and we're fighting aimlessly. And you know, of course, the adage that "if you aim at nothing, you will, of course, achieve nothing." The Puritans had a saying—actually they had a couple of sayings, "Kill a sin or it will kill you." A dear friend, now in glory with angels and archangels and cherubim and seraphim, Erskine Wells, and that rebel yell—I would have loved to have seen that. But that was the issue for him, wasn't it, and his men? It was either them or him. This is a fight to the death. "Kill sin or it will kill you," Paul says. This is not play-acting. This is not something that you do in kindergarten. This isn't a stage. This isn't a pretense. This isn't a masquerade. This is reality. You kill sin or it will kill you. And the Puritans had another little saying, "Kill a sin or a part of a sin everyday." That's your objective.

You know, "Some sins," John Owen says in *Volume 6* somewhere, "Some sins are like great big trees." You know, it will take more than one blow of an axe to get that tree down. And, you know, some sins—as I can testify, when you don't take a tree out by its roots, you can chop it down, but in a few months it will start growing again; it will send up shoots again. The assumption, of course, here in Romans 8:13 is that we need to do it. That sin is still present. That sin although dethroned is still there. As McCheyne said, "The seeds of every known sin are within our hearts," within yours, within mine. We are responsible here. Paul isn't saying this is something that the Spirit does. Now the Spirit helps; the Spirit aids. It is by the Spirit...it is through the strength and energy, praise God...it's through the strength and energy of the Holy Spirit, but it's your responsibility. This is something that you must do and that I must do. If we call ourselves "the children of God," if we call ourselves "the sons of God," this is our responsibility; this is our charge; this is what our Great Commander tells us to do. You put sin to death.

It assumes, of course, in the context of the book of Romans, that it's possible to actually do this. And why is it possible to actually do this? Because of what Paul has said in Romans 6: that "sin no longer has dominion over us." It cannot bully us as once it did. It has been dethroned. The great deathblow to sin has already been achieved. Isn't that the great problem: believing that, trusting that, knowing that—that by virtue of our union with Christ, by virtue of the spirit of sonship, the spirit of adoption that dwells within our hearts, by virtue of what Christ has done on our behalf, by virtue of the Spirit's regenerating of us and bringing us into union with Christ, that we're actually in a position now to do it?

Do you see what the great question is tonight—a fundamental question, the bottom line, where the rubber meets the road? Do you want to do it? Is that your desire? Is that where your heart is tonight? Do you long with all of your heart to be rid of sin—to be rid of specific sin, anger, resentment, lust, greed, covetousness? That's the great question. Is that your longing? Is that your aspiration? Is that your desire? Is that where you are tonight: at war with sin? Or are you treating that sin like a shaggy dog, and you're just stroking it and feeding it and nursing it and playing with it and allowing it to grow?

I think every now and then we need to take an inventory, a spiritual inventory, a coming close to the end of the year inventory, and maybe that's what some of us need to do once again. That's why I like the idea of keeping a journal. Some of you journal on a regular basis. Some of you may think it's a fad and a fashion. It's been something Christians have done for centuries: marking out the spiritual progress. Are you holier than you were a year ago? More consecrated? More devoted to Christ? More in love with Him and His kingdom? More in love with His word? You wake up in the morning longing to read His word, longing to speak with you heavenly Father? Some of you, and let me get sensitive for a second, but some of you perhaps have bad relationships in this world and sometimes than can be reflected in our relationships with our heavenly Father and with our Elder Brother and with the Spirit of sonship who indwells us. And here's the great question: Do we have this desire to meet this objective of putting sin to death?

III. Know your motivation.

Know your enemy, and know your objective, and know your motivation. Know your motivation. What is our motivation? Look at how he puts it back in the context of verse 6, "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Do you see what Paul is saying? He's saying, you reap what you sow—you reap what you sow. If you live according to the flesh then you will die, but if you live in the style of the Spirit you will live. It's one of two things here: it's life or death. And we are too shortsighted. "And here's the motivation," Paul is saying. "Take a long term view of things." Actually what he's saying is, "We need to, we need to see what the consequences of all of our actions are in terms of the big picture." You know John Owen uses this illustration and he says, "You know, you can take a penny, a cent..." you call it a penny too. "You can take a penny, and you can hold it up to your eye, and you can block out the sun." That's all it takes. You can be so focused on what's right before you that you miss the grand picture. And Paul is saying here, "Do you see the consequences of neglecting personal, indwelling sin? It leads to death. It leads to a spiritual moroseness. It leads to decay."

But notice something else, another motivation that he picks up in verses 13 and 14. "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." And he goes on to say, "For all who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God." And he puts it in the plural as though Paul is saying, you know, one of the motivations for putting sin to death is the obligation that we have to each other as family members within the household of God. Because what you do and what you say and what you think and your behavior and your laxity towards indwelling sin—actually affects more than just yourself. It affects all of the people of God; it affects everyone around you.

You know how it is in your own personal families when someone is in bad form,

the whole family is in bad form. Think of the obligation that you have to your family. I think I've told you this story because it's personal. When I was in school, high school, I did something. And it's not any of your business what I did, but it was something that I shouldn't have done, and I was ashamed of, and I'm still ashamed, and if I think about it I'll start blushing. I was, I don't know, thirteen. My brother was fifteen, and he may have even been sixteen, and you know when you are thirteen, a sixteen year old is big. Actually he was more than that. He was four years older, so he was seventeen or eighteen. And he pulled me aside and he said to me, "You're letting the family down." It was like one of these Sicilian mafia-type scenarios. I was letting the entire family down. And the threat that lay behind it was that he would go home and tell my father or worse my mother. And the sheer thought of it, that my mother would find out what I had done was terrifying! It's still terrifying to me.

And Paul is saying, "Here's one of the obligations: we are the people of God." We're not just so many individualities. That's the age in which we live, but there's something about the Church that is different from the age in which we live. And one of the distinguishing features of the Church of Jesus Christ is our family, collectivity, the socialness of our gatherings. We are the people of God. We are members one of another. And when somebody stands on your little toe, the whole body knows about it. And that's what Paul is saying here, "Think of your obligations to the family."

But look at what he says in verses 3 and 4. He talks about Jesus, "By sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemns sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." What is Paul saying? He's saying, "This is why Jesus came and died: in order to deal with sin in the flesh. That's why He died. That's why He went to Calvary." So do you see what you're doing when you say to yourselves, "It's only a little thing? "You're actually passing a judgment on the death of Jesus," Paul is saying. You're treating the death of Jesus—you're treating the cross as a mere trifle, as a mere small thing.

IV. Know the method.

But there's a fourth thing that Paul wants us to see, and that is to know the method. And note the language: "...to put to death," to put to death, to strangle it. Can I press that metaphor without becoming crude? You know, to hold your hands on the throat of that sin until it breathes no more. That's what he's saying: put it to death. Declare all out war on sin.

Oh, there are a number of things that he says to help us do that. He says in verse 6 that we're to set our mind on the Spirit, be careful what you think—be careful what you think. Don't even think about sin. Don't even think about it. And there's something of an urgency about what Paul is saying here, isn't there? It's

actually in the present tense as though it's something that continues. There's an urgency about this. This is something that we need to do, we need to engage in.

You know, if we were to engage tonight in an assessment of how it is we are dealing with personal sin, I wonder how we would go about measuring that? One thing is for sure, that it cannot continue unless it first of all begins, or some sins will take your entire lives to deal with. That's no reason not to begin or start or aim, or begin to chop at that tree and to start now, because as Paul says, "This is one of the marks. This is what distinguishes a child of God." That's what enables you to say, "I am the child of a King, THE KING. My Savior, the Lord Jesus is my Elder Brother. The third person of the Trinity dwells in my heart. I've been given the key of Heaven to run around the mansions of glory like the child of a President may run around the Whitehouse on occasions and sit in the Oval Office and in the great chair." But here's the mark and here's the criterion: Are you putting personal sin to death? May God help us so to do for His name's sake. Amen.

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