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Mortification of the Flesh

Romans 8.12-13

Series: The Pure Gospel

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The Village Church

September 15, 2024

I. Introduction

- A. Let me begin by telling you a story
 - 1. Not of anyone in particular
 - a. But could have been anyone in rural America
 - b. It was first told by Garrison Keillor on *A Prairie Home Companion*
- B. Uncle Al is a gentle man who has no stomach for killing.
 - 1. He loves to eat fried chicken but not one whom he knew personally, so he killed a couple hours uptown as the rest of us executed forty-seven chickens that Dad brought in from Uncle Larry's farm the night before.
 - 2. There had been forty-eight chickens but one got loose when we emptied them out of the gunny sacks into Al's garage to spend their last night.
 - 3. She flew up in my face, a burst of feathers that made me let go, and took off....
 - 4. Dad went after her but he is seventy years old.
 - 5. The chicken tore around the trash barrel and down the alley.
 - 6. The others milled in the garage all night, mumbling to themselves – that it wasn't fair that *she* got to go when *they* had to stay, that if *anyone* got to go, then *everyone* should go – and finally the sun came up and a young rooster sang and about nine o'clock we arrived and sat down to have coffee.
- C. My mother already had two big pots of water on to boil, my dad had sharpened the ax blade, and out we went, into the wet cold yard.
 - 1. The chickens fell silent in the garage when the back door slammed.
 - 2. I looked in the alley for the forty-eighth chicken..
 - 3. “Well,” we said, “we might as well get started.”
- D. My job hasn't changed since I was a child: I help out here and there doing this and that, but mainly my job is to select the chicken and catch its legs with a long wire hook and grab its ankles and carry it to my dad, who takes care of the rest.
- E. All the chickens had to die, so it wasn't like I had any real power; I was only a lower-level bureaucrat trying to keep things going smoothly.
 - 1. I didn't have the power of clemency, so why did they look at me that way...?
 - 2. “I took a deep breath and snagged one and it cried out, “Oh no, gosh no, please no, don't do this,” and I took it to my dad and handed it over and

- turned my back not wanting to watch as this creature, who had been alive in my hands just a moment before, now – *whack* – was gone.
- F. We were down to two chickens unless No. 48 walked in, so when I took out the next-to-last one, I said, “Maybe I’ll do the next one.”
1. Okay, he said. I caught the last chicken.
 2. I was glad to be getting rid of it, the last witness to the massacre.
 3. My dad said, “Want me to hold it for you?”
 4. I shook my head.
 5. My mother said, “You be careful, now.”
 6. Imagine going to bat against your first chicken, you cut you own foot off, and walk funny the rest of your life, a stiff walk, like a chicken.
- G. I got a grip on the chicken’s legs and swung it up on the block and hauled off with the ax and hit down hard and missed by two inches.
1. I had to pry the ax out of the wood and now I was mad.
 2. I swung again and down it came dead center *whack* and at the same time I let go and the chicken took off running.
 3. IT had no head.
 4. It dashed across the yard and out in the street and was gone – I never saw a chicken move so fast.
 5. I guess without the extra weight they can really go.
- H. My dad explained afterward that when I missed the first time and planted the blade in the block, the blade got hot.
1. So when I cut the chicken’s head off, the blade cauterized the wound and stopped the flow of blood, and you had a running chicken in pretty good shape except with no brain.
- I. We took off after it down the street and around the corner and up and across the neighbor’s yard.
1. A high-speed chicken.
 2. It raced through flower beds and bounced off fences, pure energy, no thought, kept going – fast.
 3. Ran over two little kids in a sandbox.
 4. Ran past a couple of dogs, who looked up and decided not to get involved with it.
 5. My dad and me trotting along far behind.
- J. We heard the squeal of brakes when two cars stopped and the headless chicken tore across Main Street by Bunsen Motors...
1. It went up behind the café toward Our Lady Church, losing speed.
 2. Mrs. Mueller was standing by her garbage can and she has a face that would stop a clock.
 3. It slowed down the chicken to where she was able to trip it and grab it.
 4. She took it in and rebutchered it and plucked and cleaned it and put it in her fridge, but my dad and I didn’t know that until hours later.
- K. SO when we came wheezing along the alley and saw a chicken walking toward us with its head on its shoulders, we were momentarily confused.

1. It was the forty-eighth chicken, of course, and we chased it in behind the church and cornered it against the fence and snatched it and took it home.
 2. Then Mrs. Mueller called.
 3. We said, "You can keep it."
- L. In our study of the book of Romans we have been exploring the gospel
1. The gospel is the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself
 2. But we cannot understand the good news without first understanding the bad news
 3. The bad news is the natural condition of humanity apart from the grace of God is that we are enemies of God
 - a. That we suppress the truth about God
 - b. That we do not honor Him as God
 - c. Or give thanks to Him
 4. So that we are under the wrath of God
 - a. The wrath of God – God’s righteous anger against His moral creatures who have rejected his right to reign and rule
 5. We recognized that our sinful natures are such that sin is universal and pervasive
 - a. Universal – that every human being is a sinner by nature
 - b. Pervasive – that sin affects every dimension of our personalities, every human faculty – our minds, wills and emotions
- M. But the good news is that God has provided us with the righteousness that we so desperately need
1. The righteousness of Jesus Christ
 - a. Which is credited to our account through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe
 2. And in that transaction, we are justified by faith – declared “not guilty”
 - a. And we are saved from the wrath of God
 - b. And have peace with God
 3. So not longer are we at enmity with God
 - a. God is our friend, our father
 - b. And Christ is our Savior, our brother!
 4. That’s the first 5 chapters in a nutshell
- N. And then in Romans 6 and 7 Paul has been dealing with some objections to the gospel
1. Most notably the idea that, if salvation is by grace alone, why not sin with abandon?
 2. And he answers that it is because we are changed people
 3. That in turning to Christ, we have died to sin
 - a. We have been united with Christ in both His death and resurrection
 - b. And by the indwelling Holy Spirit, we, as new creatures in Christ, have both the desire and inclination and ability to live the righteous life that God intended
- O. And yet, we have discovered in these chapters, that there are still issues

1. We have died to sin, having turned to Christ
 2. Our sinful natures, however, still persist
 - a. And we find, as Paul teaches so plainly in Chapter 7, that...
 - b. While we "... delight in the law of God, in my inner being,..." we "... see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." (Romans 7.23)
- P. That raises a significant conundrum in the life of believers
1. How is it that we have died to sin
 - a. And yet find that sin still persists?
 - b. That sin still lives in us, wreaking havoc, causing problems?
 2. Leading us to cry, with Paul, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7.24)
- Q. There is perhaps no better metaphor for the residual influences of the sinful nature in the life of believers than a chicken with its head cut off
1. Running around, causing chaos, reaping destruction
 2. It is dead – to be sure
 - a. But nevertheless acts as if it doesn't know it's dead
 3. Eventually, it will diminish, slow down
 - a. And it's final end has always been a settled conclusion
 4. But in the meantime, we have to do something about it
- R. And what we do about it is the subject of our text this morning:
1. **The Mortification of the Flesh**
- S. **Romans 8:12–13 (ESV) —**
1. 12 **So then, brothers, we are debtors,**
 - a. **not to the flesh,**
 - (1) **to live according to the flesh.**
 2. 13 **For if you live according to the flesh you will die,**
 - a. **but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body,**
 - (1) **you will live.**

II. **The Believer's Power**

- A. In our last message in Romans we learned that, even as the residue of sin in our bodies – our flesh, the sinful nature – persists
1. The believer has extraordinary spiritual resources to draw from in our battle against the flesh
 2. We have, in fact, the **Holy Spirit** dwelling within us!
 - a. The Spirit of God is called the **Spirit of Christ**
 3. In other words, we have the life of Christ living in us if we are believers!
 - a. And that is an amazing power
 - b. And we learned that this power within us has astonishing implications
 - c. For our lives now and in the future
- B. The Spirit's presence gives us power for living right now
1. **Romans 8:10 (ESV) —**

- a. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
 - 2. The Spirit who made us alive to God in the first place – through whom we were born again – He gives us the capacity to really live the life God intended
- C. And not only that, but the Spirit gives us promise for the future resurrection
 - 1. **Romans 8:11** (ESV) —
 - a. 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.
- D. That's why Paul elsewhere put it this way:
 - 1. **Colossians 1:27** (ESV) —
 - a. 27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
- E. This is crucial to know for what we will examine this morning – the mortification of the flesh
 - 1. For not only are we united to Christ in His death and resurrection
 - a. Not only have we died to sin in the core of our beings
 - 2. We have the very life of Jesus Christ dwelling within us by His Spirit
- F. Because none of us can actually finish off the headless chicken by ourselves!

III. **The Believer's Obligation**

- A. The first thing we see in our text this morning is that we, as believers, have an obligation
- B. **Romans 8:12** (ESV) —
 - 1. 12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.
- C. Now the idea of being debtors can be misleading
 - 1. Some Christians live their lives as if we are paying off our debts to Christ
 - 2. Christ died for us – He paid the penalty for our sin
 - a. But we look on His work on the cross as simply a loan
 - b. And we spend the rest of our lives trying to pay Him back
 - c. Thinking that we actually can pay off the debt of our sin
 - 3. But that's impossible!
 - a. Ridiculously impossible!
 - 4. We are sinners who cannot pay their debts!
 - 5. Salvation in Jesus Christ is a free gift of grace
 - 6. **Romans 3:23–24** (ESV) —
 - a. 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...
- D. So when Paul says we are debtors, he's not talking about earning our salvation by paying off a loan
 - 1. He's talking about something else entirely

- E. We have two laws, or principles, acting in us – seeking to influence our choices
 - 1. That’s what we saw with clarity in Romans 7
 - 2. There is the flesh – that headless chicken
 - a. Which seeks to wreak havoc in our lives by enticing us to sin
 - b. Trying to get us to be influenced by the world
 - c. Seeking to provide in-roads for the enemy of our souls, Satan
 - 3. We have died to sin; the flesh no longer has the right to reign and rule in our lives
 - a. But our flesh still lies to us, deceives us, entices us
 - b. But the flesh is not the only principle or law acting in us
 - 4. We have the Spirit of God dwelling in us!
 - a. The Spirit of Christ Himself!
 - b. He really does have the right to rule in our lives
 - c. And He is at work in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure (**Philippians 2.13**)
- F. And our obligation is not to the flesh
 - 1. Our obligation is to Christ
 - a. He’s our new commander!
- G. I’ve used this illustration before – but it bears repeating
 - 1. A career military man retires from the Army
 - a. He’s in civilian clothes a couple of weeks after his retirement
 - b. He goes into the grocery store
 - 2. He’s walking down an aisle, turns into the next aisle, and there in front of him is his previous commanding officer, in his full dress uniform
 - a. And the immediate impulse of the man is to stand at attention and salute
 - 3. But his commanding officer just laughs
 - a. He says, “You don’t have to do that anymore!”
 - 4. The retired military officer is no longer under obligation to the commanding officer!
- H. So neither are we obligated to obey the flesh
 - 1. We are not debtors to the flesh!
 - 2. Our obligation is to the Spirit!

IV. **The Obligation’s Condition**

- A. Then the text tells us there is a condition
- B. **Romans 8:13** (ESV) —
 - 1. 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.
- C. Now there are different kinds of conditions in scripture
 - 1. And they are not always evident in the English translations
 - 2. But this condition is expressed in terms of a relationship of means to ends
- D. We know what the end is – eternal life
 - 1. Paul has spoken of eternal life several times in Romans
 - a. And in every case eternal life is a gift of grace for all who believe

2. **Romans 6:22–23** (ESV) —
 - a. 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.
 - b. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
3. In this case the end – eternal life – is explicitly shown to be a free gift of God
 - a. And it is also the end of the means of sanctification
 - b. “... the fruit you get leads to sanctification...
 - c. ... and its end eternal life.”
4. Sanctification is the means
 - a. Eternal life is the end
- E. It’s the same thing in our text
 1. **“If you live according to the flesh you will die...”**
 2. We saw earlier in Romans 8 that those who live according to the flesh are non-believers
 3. **Romans 8:5** (ESV) —
 - a. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh...
 4. **Romans 8:6** (ESV) —
 - a. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death...
 5. **Romans 8:7–8** (ESV) —
 - a. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,
 - b. for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.
 - c. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.
 6. So clearly, those who live according to the flesh are not genuine believers
 - a. The means – they set their minds on the flesh
 - b. Leads to the end – to set the mind on the flesh is death
- F. But then positively...
 1. **Romans 8:13** (ESV) —
 - a. 13 ... but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
 2. That’s just what we saw earlier
 3. **Romans 8:5** (ESV) —
 - a. 5 ... but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.
 4. **Romans 8:6** (ESV) —
 - a. 6 ... but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.
- G. So, the end – life; eternal life
 1. **Romans 8:13** (ESV) —
 - a. 13 ... but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
 2. Putting to death the deeds of the body – an important part of the sanctification process – leads inevitably to eternal life

- H. The end has been determined for believers
 - 1. Those who are believers live according to the Spirit
 - 2. And the means to that end is killing the flesh
 - a. Putting to death the deeds of the body
 - b. The mortification of the flesh
 - 3. Working to finish off that headless chicken!

V. **The Obligation's Cause**

- A. Next we have the cause of this process
 - 1. Which is that glorious resource every believer has
 - a. The Holy Spirit
 - b. The Spirit of Christ
- B. **Romans 8:13** (ESV) —
 - 1. 13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die,
 - 2. but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body,
 - a. you will live.
- C. I think it's incredibly important that Paul doesn't say, "if *you* put to death the deeds of the body you will live"
 - 1. He says instead, "... if *by the Spirit* you put to death the deeds of the body you will live."
- D. The Spirit is our only hope of catching the headless chicken
 - 1. Or should I says chickens
 - a. Because slaying the flesh is the daily obligation that we face
 - b. For we will always have the remnants of the flesh with us until we reach glory
 - 2. But we must have the resources of the Spirit of Christ to effectively put to death the deeds of the body
- E. Well, how does the Spirit do this job of mortification?
 - 1. We've already seen that He gives us life – spiritual life
 - 2. **Romans 8:11** (ESV) —
 - a. 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.
 - 3. The Spirit brings to life our desires for Christ
 - a. We have a longing for fellowship with Jesus that we never had before
 - b. And it is only through the Spirit of Christ that we can have genuine fellowship with Him
 - c. And we put to death the deeds of the body when our fellowship with Christ is vibrant
 - 4. The Spirit brings to life our love of the Word of God
 - a. The Bible becomes alive to us because of the Spirit of God living in us
 - b. And the Bible helps us put to death the deeds of the flesh as well

- c. Just as Jesus used the Bible to fend off Satan during His temptation episode
- 5. The Spirit brings to life our worship
 - a. Our attendance upon the corporate worship is enflamed by the Spirit of Christ living in us
 - b. Worship is not a pro forma exercise; a mere weekly routine
 - c. Worship becomes the exciting encounter with the living God through Jesus Christ
 - d. All because of the Spirit
 - e. And genuine worship is one of the ways the Spirit causes us to put to death the deeds of the flesh
- 6. The Spirit brings to life the body of Christ
 - a. The church – which is the people of God – becomes alive to us in our affections
 - b. We learn to love each other
 - c. And our love for each other overflows into our capacity to put to death the deeds of the flesh
- 7. The Spirit of God is not only said to dwell in us individually
 - a. He is said to dwell in us as a body
 - b. The church is the temple of God – the dwelling place of God
 - c. Christ loves the church – and then so too do the true people of God
 - d. And our fellowship together – as we share our lives together – helps encourage us to put to death the deeds of the body
- 8. We are building a community of forgiveness, purpose and hope in Jesus Christ
 - a. Community – we have to do this together
 - b. We can't do it alone
 - c. And the Spirit helps us by binding us together in Christ
 - d. And we become one in mission and purpose
 - e. Growing together
- 9. **Ephesians 4:15–16** (ESV) —
 - a. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,
 - b. 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.
- 10. Building ourselves up in love is the way the Spirit causes us to put to death the deeds of the flesh
- 11. And the Spirit also prays for us!
 - a. What a glorious ministry!
- 12. **Romans 8:26–27** (ESV) —
 - a. 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.
 - b. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

- c. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
- F. So the Spirit is the grand cause of our sanctification – and of our putting to death the deeds of the flesh
 - 1. Human effort will not suffice
 - a. Human attempts to create a system of man-made laws, rules and regulations will accomplish nothing
 - 2. **Colossians 2:20–23** (ESV) —
 - a. 20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—
 - b. 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”
 - c. 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?
 - d. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.
 - 3. All kinds of human attempts to suppress the flesh have been attempted
 - a. None of them ever work
 - b. Apart from the work of the Spirit of God dwelling in you, human attempts at sanctification will never succeed.
- G. The Spirit is the cause of the mortification of the flesh

VI. **The Obligation’s Definition**

- A. But let’s take a moment and define what it is that we must do by the Spirit
 - 1. What does Paul mean by “putting to death the deeds of the body”?
- B. You’ll recall from our earlier studies, the flesh finds its operational base our bodies
 - 1. We are embodied creatures
 - a. That is a wonderful thing!
 - 2. But at the same time the habits and inclinations of the sinful nature reside somewhere
 - a. And when the Spirit of God takes up His residence in our spirits, the flesh seeks to continue its influences through bodily passions
 - 3. But be careful – that doesn’t absolve the mind from these same sinful tendencies
 - a. Remember – the brain is a part of our bodies!
 - 4. So the remaining corruption and sinfulness continues to operate in our bodies
- C. What, then, are the deeds of our bodies?
 - 1. **Galatians 5:19–21** (ESV) —
 - a. 19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,

- b. 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,
 - c. 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.
 - d. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.
 - 2. Those are the things that we are to put to death
 - 3. **Colossians 3:5–10** (ESV) —
 - a. 5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.
 - b. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming.
 - c. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.
 - d. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.
 - e. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices
 - f. 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.
 - 4. These things you can do – indeed, must do
 - a. By the Spirit
 - b. Allowing the Spirit of God to motivate you, empower you, control you
 - c. So that the deeds of the flesh are put to death
- D. These things are contrasted in Galatians with, of course, the fruit of the Spirit
 - 1. **Galatians 5:22–23** (ESV) —
 - a. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
 - b. 23 gentleness, self-control...
 - 2. When the Spirit of God is active in you, you will find that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control will replace impurity, evil desire, covetousness, anger, malice, slander
 - 3. And that’s the positive way the Spirit works to put to death the deeds of the body, the works of the flesh
- E. Now, when Paul says “put to death” or as some translations put it “mortify”, what does that mean
 - 1. Well, to kill something is to deprive it of its strength, vitality and power
 - 2. It is to render impotent the desires and inclinations of the remnants of our sinful nature
 - 3. It is, as Paul said earlier, to consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (**Romans 6.11**)

VII. **The Obligation’s Promise**

- A. So finally, we come to the promise of the mortification of the flesh
- B. **Romans 8:13** (ESV) —
 - 1. 13 ... if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
- C. Life abundant is promised as we mortify the flesh

1. Eternal life, to be sure
 2. But eternal life begins right now
 - a. And eternal life is not just a really long life
 - b. It is, as Dallas Willard used to say, an eternal kind of life
 - c. It is qualitatively superior to any other kind of life that pretends to offer satisfaction
 3. But the world's understanding of life is nothing but vanity
 - a. Emptiness
 - b. Leading ultimately to bitterness and defeat
 - c. And eternal destruction
- D. **John 10:10** (ESV) —
1. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.
 2. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.
- E. That's the promise of Jesus
1. The promise of eternal life
 - a. The promise of the glorious life with Christ that we can enjoy right now!
 2. And one of the great means to that glorious end is the mortification of the flesh
 - a. Putting to death the deeds which flow from the remnants of our sinful natures
 - b. Catching and killing those headless chickens that can do nothing other than destroy us

VIII. Conclusion

- A. Putting to death the deeds of the flesh is the great debt of the believer
 1. Not a debt because we are repaying Christ for something
 - a. That could never be
 2. But a debt, an obligation, of all who have the Spirit of Christ dwelling within them
 3. Because the Spirit of Christ will not allow you to languish in your sinfulness forever
 - a. Sooner or later He will have His way
 - b. For He works in you both to will and work according to His good pleasure
- B. As John Owen put it, "You be killing sin or it be killing you"
- C. What are the deeds of the flesh that come to mind in these moments?
 1. The things that you need to ask forgiveness
 - a. And the things which you need to ask the Spirit of God to work in you to defeat and destroy?
 2. What are the chickens that need to be captured and eliminated
- D. That is the business of every believer
 1. And we are never free of this obligation until we see Him face to face in glory!