

Mortification of Sin

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[0 : 0 0] Well today we're going to carry on looking at Romans and in particular we're going to continue making our way through Romans chapter 8 and as I said we are going to focus in particular on verses 12 to 14. So then brothers we are debtors not to the flesh to live according to the flesh but 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 for all who are led by the spirit of God our sons of God. Now two weeks ago we were looking at verses 2 to 11 in Romans chapter 8 and we saw that our union with Christ brings two wonderful blessings for every single person who puts their faith in Jesus. In Christ we have freedom and we have life that means that if you are a Christian or if you become one then you are free to turn away from sin and to become all that God has created you to be and you have been given the extraordinary gift of eternal life. You can look forward to the amazing blessings of the new creation where we will be with Jesus and be with all our brothers and sisters in Christ forever more. And again Paul is reminding us of the astonishing transformation that takes place when you put your faith in Jesus. Always remember that becoming a Christian doesn't just make a we difference in your life it makes the biggest difference it makes the best difference it is the most wonderful thing that can ever happen to us and that changes everything and in particular it changes our relationship with sin. As Paul says at the very start of

Romans 8 there is now no condemnation for any of you if you are in Christ if you are trusting in him. That has various implications for our relationship with sin. It means first of all that we've been delivered from the power of sin so the power of sin no longer grips us we are free sin has no dominion over you sin is no longer your master. It also means that in Christ we are free from the penalty of sin because Jesus has taken that penalty he took the punishment that was meant to be applied to us he died as our substitute and therefore instead of us facing condemnation and death we have been justified we've been declared righteous and we have life. So in Christ we have freedom from the power of sin we have freedom from the penalty of sin all of these things have been dealt with but in terms of the presence of sin we have not been delivered yet. We will be one day but not yet and that's why in the world around us sin is still causing havoc that's why in our own lives we are constantly confronted by the effect of sin and that's why even in our own hearts we are in a daily battle against our indwelling sin. So being a Christian doesn't mean that sin now has no effect on you whatsoever we are free from the power yes free from the penalty but sin is still a very real presence in our lives and that's a very important thing to remember because that's what real life as a Christian is like never think that a Christian is somebody who is just perfect who's at this standard and never falls from it that is not what the Christian life is like. Christian life is one where we are constantly, constantly battling against the presence of sin in our lives. The final goal of the Christian faith is still a future event Paul talks about that later in chapter eight and he says that even creation itself is groaning in anticipation and expectation of that day because until that day comes we face the daily reality of the presence of sin in our lives. So we will all wake up tomorrow morning and look at the news and we will see cruelty suffering and wickedness in the world. We will no doubt go through this week and we will see people we know and who we love dearly and their lives are being wrecked by sin and we only have to look in our own hearts right now and see that sin is crouching at the door and it springs upon us in a moment so that we can't even go a day without thinking or saying or doing things that are wrong. So the power of sin was broken by the cross, the penalty of sin was paid in full but the presence of sin remains and so that raises a really important question for us. What does God want us to do about that? How do we deal with the reality of indwelling sin as a Christian? Well that's what we're going to think about a little bit today and we have to start by saying that there's two mistakes that we have to avoid. The first is to think that you don't need to do anything about your

sin. It's very easy to think like that, we think to ourselves well if I become a Christian I've been forgiven, I've been freed, therefore it doesn't really matter what I do, I can do what I like and God will deal with it and you sometimes see people who say they are Christians and yet this is the way they live their lives, basically they don't live their lives in any different way but yet we must never ever forget that that is not what the New Testament teaches us. In fact the New Testament is really, really strong in its language. 1 John 2.4, whoever says I know him, in other words whoever says I'm a Christian but does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him. So we must never think since nothing we don't need to worry about it but another mistake that we can make is to think that we can't do anything about sin. So people might find well they think yes I know sin is serious, I know it's something that I shouldn't do but I just can't help it. I'm too weak, I can't overcome it and I just find myself again and again and again and again making the same mistakes and that leads us to the conclusion that we think that we're just helpless and useless and it's just inevitable that we're going to sin. Again the New Testament does not teach that as Paul himself has said back in Romans 6, sin will have no dominion over you. It's not inevitable that we sin as Christians. Sin is not our master anymore. So on the one hand we must not be casual about sin because that's like playing with poison but neither can we simply capitulate in the face of sin because that will be allowed to allow sin to have a rule over us that it does not have anymore. So if that's what we're not supposed to do what should we do about indwelling sin? If you think about the last week of your life and whether you're a professing Christian or not even if you're somebody who is seeking the Lord, thinking about the last week of your life and thinking about the things that you've done that you wished you hadn't done, I can think of things I've said that I think, why did I say that? I can think of things I've done, I thought I wish I didn't do that. I think of things that I didn't do that I wish that I did and you can all think of the same I'm sure. We ask ourselves what do we do about that? What should be the response to our indwelling sin? Well the New Testament answer to that question is that we must mortify our sin and that's our topic for today, mortification of sin because that is what Paul is talking about in Romans 12 to 14. Well it's one of the things he's talking about in Romans 12 to 14. Now you might be seeing that phrase there and you think what on earth are you talking about Thomas? Maybe that's a phrase you've heard, maybe it's a phrase you've never heard of and it sort of sounds a wee bit archaic in its terminology but we will work our way through it and we're going to do so by asking four very simple questions. What is it? Who does it? How is it done? Why is it important?

So question one, what is mortification by sin? Well it's not very complicated, it's really pretty simple because the word mortification basically means to put to death. That's what we have in Romans 8.13. If according to the spirit you will die, if you live according to the spirit you will die but if by the spirit you put to death the deed to the body you will live. Now those of you who've got the authorised version will see that the word they use, that version uses, is mortify. So when we say mortify we're not much thinking about being embarrassed, sometimes we'll say oh I was mortified because I did something stupid, so regular event in my own life. That's not what we mean. We're specifically talking about the idea of putting something to death. We see exactly the same thing in Colossians 8.15. ESV says put to death, the King James version says mortify. And the word that's used in Romans 8.13 basically means to deprive something of life, to cause it to cease, to kill it, to put it to death. And the New Testament is telling us that that is what we need to do with the sin that is within us. Now that's not saying that Christians never sin, it's actually saying the very opposite. The fact that the Bible commands us to mortify sin is because sin is a reality within us, it's something that we still do. But it's telling us that our response to that sin has got to be something that we treat with the utmost seriousness. Mortification of sin is a deep rooted, a radical response to sin, a deliberate effort to make sure that sin does not take root in our hearts and when it does we want to root it out. A good illustration of that is a garden like we were saying to the children. You imagine a garden that's been beautifully restored and it looks stunning. If you were the gardener you would be watching for weeds and whenever you saw those weeds you would get them out of your garden as quickly as you could. And it's a reminder that you will never find a verse in the Bible that is casual about sin. You will find people in the world who are casual about sin. You will maybe even find people in the church who are casual about sin, but you will never find a verse in the Bible that is casual about sin. The Bible takes sin immensely seriously. When it comes to sin in our lives we must be ruthless. That's why Jesus said, if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. The language that Jesus uses there is as strong as it could possibly be. Would any of us dare say that, that use this kind of language? I don't think we would. We would

never express something in as strong terms as that and yet Jesus does. And he's telling us that we must be ruthless with sin. We must take it very, very seriously. It's something that must be dealt with in our lives. And so when Paul tells us to mortify the deeds of our body, he's simply echoing what Jesus himself has said, we do not want sin to take root in our hearts. Now it's a really important point to just highlight here very briefly. And that is that we need to make sure that when it comes to sin we are biblically minded and not culturally minded. That's a very, very important thing to recognise because it's always a danger for us, for everyone here, for professing Christians and for those who are yet to profess their faith, even if anyone's yet to come to faith, this is a really, really important thing. We live in a culture where certain sins are offensive but other sins are perfectly acceptable. So I think it's fair to say that in Scotland today, theft is still regarded as unacceptable. But I think that lying is quite often accepted. Greed is definitely accepted and gossip is even encouraged. Many sins are culturally acceptable and that can even shape the mindset of us as a church. We can find ourselves in a church culture whereby certain sins are not regarded as particularly serious. It is vital that our view of sin and our view of everything else is biblical, not cultural. Because if you go to the Bible, you will find that it does not make a difference whether it is sexual immorality or covetousness, whether it's drunkenness or gossip, none of them are acceptable and they are all worthy of the same action. They are all to be put to death. And I have to ask myself, before I ask any of you,

[15 : 34] I have to ask myself, is my view of sin cultural or biblical? And I have to make sure that I don't pick and choose which sins I think are more serious than others. So what is mortification for sin?

It's a ruthless, serious, radical, putting to death of sin within us. Question two, who does it? Well, really there's actually two questions here. Who does it and then who is it that gets it done to them? If you know what I mean. So who does the mortifying and whose sin gets mortified? Well, the answer to this is found in verse 13. Look at that verse there and ask yourself the question, who does it? Who does the mortifying? The answer is you and me.

It's not something that is primarily God's work. It's something that we do. Yes, we do it with God's help, as Paul himself says, it's by the spirit that we do it, but it's a command for us. We are not spectators. We are active participants in this process. In Colossians 3.5, the word for mortify is an imperative. It's a command, something that we have to do. So that means that as Christians, there's lots of things that we do. As Christians, we come together to worship. As Christians, we pray, we read the Bible, we tithe, we help the poor, we celebrate the Lord's supper and we mortify our indwelling sin. It's part of the basics of Christian life.

What about the second question? Who's sin gets mortified? Well, the answer to that is primarily our own. That's the great emphasis that Jesus made in Matthew 5. He says, if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. And the crucial point is that this is something that we do to ourselves. We look at our own hearts and we look at the sin that dwells within us and we strive to eradicate the sin that takes root in our hearts. Now, this is a really, really important point because this is one area where I would say we must be inward looking. In so many other ways, as Christians, we want to be outward looking, looking at needs, looking at gospel opportunities, looking at ways to serve. We don't want to be self-focused, but in terms of mortification for sin, yes, you are looking inwardly because this is something that we do to ourselves. And we must recognise that because how often are we far more concerned about the sins of other people than we are with our own? If I ask myself the question, in the past year, how many times have I spoken about the sin in other people's lives? The answer is probably quite a lot. And then I ask myself how many times have I spoken to people about the sin in my life? And the answer is not very much. And that's something that I need to repent of because it's wrong. The New Testament again and again and again says, watch yourself. And this is where we need to remember the importance of what the Bible teaches us. Very often, we can be ruthless in regard to other people's sin.

Isn't that true? So somebody makes a massive mistake in their lives. Somebody gets caught up in a scandal and it's just everybody's talking about it. It's the talk of the island. We are ruthless in regard to other people's sin, but we are gracious in regard to our own.

[20 : 01] The New Testament is telling us that the truth is the other way around. We need to be ruthless about our own sin and we need to be gracious with the mistakes and the failings of others.

Modification of sin is something that we do. Okay, so that means we need to ask the third question, how do we do it? And that's our really, really important question. We must make sure that we don't

just think we can ignore sin. If you imagine a garden, if you have made a really beautiful garden and you thought that you saw one or two weeds, if you just thought to yourself, well, if I ignore these weeds, they'll go away. Would that work? Of course not. The weeds are only going to thrive if you ignore them. So we must be very careful that we don't just ignore sin and think it will go away. But we also have to watch that we don't go to the other extreme.

And that's the idea of establishing a big list of man-made rules that will keep us well, that will keep us in good spiritual health. And this is something that we've seen throughout history. Since the early church, there have been people who have advocated a high form of asceticism, the practice of denying yourself things, whether it's food or shelter or possessions or marriage, in order to benefit you spiritually. So you would have people way back in the early church who would just disappear into the desert on their own with the view that it would be spiritually healthy for them. And people can do similar things today. People might say, you know, you must not go into your garden on a Sunday. People say that you must not listen to music or participate in something like that. You must not be involved in sport. We can create all sorts of man-made requirements that we think are going to do us spiritual good.

Now, whilst self-denial is an important biblical principle, if it becomes extreme and if it is man-made, then it's something that will do us harm. And the New Testament warns us against it.

Colossians 2, Paul says, if with Christ you die to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. That's like the asceticism, referring to things that all perish as they are used according to human precepts and teachings. So man-made rules, don't do this, don't do this, don't go here, don't go there. They have an appearance of wisdom, so they sound good, 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. And one of the main reasons for that is these kind of man-made requirements can often simply lead to pride, where we think, well aren't we doing well, because I'm doing this, this, this, this, this, this and this. And if pride is growing in our hearts, then sin is being cultivated, not mortified. So avoid both extremes. Can't just ignore sin, but we can't be extreme in man-made rules either. So how do we mortify sin? Well, the Bible gives us some really good, helpful instructions and we want to make sure that we take these on board.

[23 : 42] First of all, as we said, mortification for sin is a command. So just at a basic level, if God says do it, we do it, or we certainly strive our best to do it. So we want to actively, consciously try to do this in our lives. Following on from that, we need to recognise that in many ways the starting point for that work is in terms of the way we think. Now a good bit of homework for you to do is to read a letter like Romans and to think how often does Paul talk about the way we think? Because it's very, very, very often. Romans 8, 5, 6, 7, for those who live according to the Spirit, set their minds, that's thinking language on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. We need to think about how we can deal with our indwelling sin. So going to work tomorrow, if you're prone to maybe get frustrated with colleagues when they're difficult to work with, think about that. Think about how to react in that situation. We mustn't just go with our gut, we need to think about how we can deal, how we can purposefully resist and reject sin. And that, what we're thinking, then needs to be applied to many, many different areas. Paul says, put to death the deeds of the body. Now that's a very general statement, he doesn't tell us what they are. You think deeds of the body, how many different things are we going to do in our bodies, in our lives, in the week to come? Loads of different things. And the reason it's general is because sin can creep in in a whole host of different ways. Just as different weeds can grow well in different soil, so too different sins can take root in different people. So some of us might struggle with anger, others might be very, very chilled out. Others may struggle with lust, other people might not find that difficult.

Some people might struggle with pride, others that might not be an issue. Some people might struggle with gossip, but other people, maybe they've got no interest in that. Different sins will be a challenge to different people. Whatever it is we struggle with, we need to set our minds towards the deliberate modification of sin as it tries to grow in our hearts.

So how exactly are we going to do this? I don't want this to be discouraging. In fact, this should actually really encourage us because I'm not going to ask you to do it, but if I ask you to put your hands up if you struggle with sin, I think every one of us will put our hands up because we all do. Last week we'll have struggled with sin, in the week that's coming we will struggle with sin. But

we're not hopeless or useless in that struggle, and the Bible gives us really, really helpful teaching that if we listen to it, it'll get us on a better path in terms of how we want to live our lives. So how exactly, in practical terms, do we mortify sin? Well, let's go back one more time to our illustration of the garden.

If you've got weeds in your garden, how are you going to get rid of them? Well, whilst I'm not an expert in gardening, I can think of three things that you can do to get rid of weeds. You can starve them. As we said, plants need nutrients to grow, and if you can starve the weeds, then they'll die. So for example, gardeners will often put bark over an area where they don't want anything to grow, because the bark starves any seeds and plants under there of light, so they're going to die. You do the same with chips and tarpaulin or whatever else you do, but you can starve plants of life and they'll die. Second thing you can do is you can uproot weeds. That's perhaps the most common, so you can go along to a weed and you pull it out.

Now, my general experience of weeding is you go to a weed and you pull it and the thing snaps, and you've left the thing in the ground, and we've already did a gross back. But if you can get it right out to the very root, then that weed is no longer in your garden, so you can uproot them.

[28 : 26] And thirdly, you can treat them. So you can put weed killer onto your weeds and they will die. So you can starve them, you can uproot them, and you can treat them. And I think that the New Testament tells us to employ all of these three strategies in terms of our own sin. We must starve sin. That's a very, very important thing to remember. When you face a temptation to sin, the way to get rid of that temptation is not to feed it, it is to starve it. Feeding something only makes it stronger. Starving something makes it weaker. So often we think, if I just allow myself this one more wee sin, then that desire will go away. So the person who struggles with pornography might think one more look will just satisfy that desire and it'll be gone. The person who struggles with covetousness might think, if I just buy one more thing, then I'll have enough. The person who struggles with gossip might think, well, if I just pass this one thing on, then I'll be able to leave it. But every time we do that, we are not mortifying sin, we are fortifying sin. We're making it stronger.

The desire to do it gets stronger. The same thing applies with food. I get into the habit of liking a chocolate after dinner. And very quickly you want to have two chocolates, and very quickly you want to have three chocolates. And you're not getting rid of the desire to have chocolate, you're just making it bigger. I'm talking about myself, I just make it bigger and bigger and bigger.

We have to make sure that when it comes to sin, we don't feed it, we starve it. That's why James says, resist the devil and he will flee from you. So we must refuse to allow our eyes to wander.

We must refuse to allow our minds to stew on things and on circumstances. And we must refuse to allow our hearts to fall for the deceptive attractiveness of sin. As Paul will say later in Romans in chapter 13, make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires. Don't feed it, starve it.

Now it'll take a while to get weaker. So if there's a particular sin that you struggle with, that you need to starve, it's not going to go away like that. But if you keep starving it, it'll get weaker and weaker and weaker. We must starve sin. We must also uproot sin. If we see it in our lives, we must root it out. Whatever seed is germinating in our hearts, whether it's bitterness, pride, selfishness, greed, anger, whenever we see anything like that, we want to root it out. And the way that we root out sin is very simple. We confess it to God and we confess it to one another. When we see sin take root in our lives, we want to tell God about it. And we want to tell our brothers and sisters about it so that we can work together to overcome it.

[31 : 49] It's a daily battle. Every day I need to pray about my pride, about my speech, about my selfishness, about my conduct. Every day. Every day. And even if we are taking the same weeds out again and again and again, we need to do it. Paul says, don't let sin reign in your body to make you obey its passions.

So we need to starve sin. We need to uproot sin. And we need to treat sin. So just as you can apply a treatment to get rid of weeds in your garden, you can apply a treatment to get rid of sin in your heart. There is a weed killer for sin in the Bible. And you might be thinking, what do you mean? Well, the weed killer for sin is revealed to us in 1 Peter 4, 8. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Now, it's really important to recognize that that's not just a kind of optimistic, you know, positive statement. It's actually teaching us a very, very specific truth, that love is the treatment that will help us eradicate sin from our lives. So for example, if you are envious of somebody, and at times we are all envious of people, whether it's the job they have, the house they've got, the success they've

achieved, often we can find ourselves just or sprung up. If somebody younger than us achieves more than us, if we expect to do well in a certain situation, someone else does better. And if we see people who we haven't seen since the years of school, and we discover that they've excelled, people can be envious, easy to be envious, you can mortify that sin by loving that person. So instead of resenting what they've achieved or what they have, you can be thankful that this person has done something special in their lives.

It's great that they've done it. If you're angry with somebody, you can mortify that sin by loving that person. So somebody does something and work tomorrow which is really, really annoying.

[34 : 27] And we're fighting this seed that's trying to burst into life in our hearts with anger. You can mortify that sin by accepting that that person made a mistake. And that person's behavior probably arises from their own insecurities or from their own weaknesses or from something major that might be going on in their lives that you know nothing about. You can mortify sin by loving that person.

They probably feel 10 times worse about it than they're actually letting on. Love can cover that sin as well. And a third example is gossip. You can mortify the temptation to gossip by loving the person. So you hear something about somebody and I do it myself, you hear something about somebody and you think, oh, I want to tell that to somebody else. And yet I can mortify that sin if I love that person and I think, well, I would not want that spread about me. So I'm not going to spread it about them. We need to love one another. Love is the treatment that will help us mortify sin.

And in all of that, God will help us. That brings us back to what we said that God's not saying, do this on your own. God is saying, this is what I want you to do and I will help you.

By the Holy Spirit's help, we are able to do this. We're able to turn away from sin and live in God's way. Now, time has disappeared. We had four questions. We've only done three.

We asked what it is, who does it, how do you do it? The last question is, why? I'm going to say one sentence about three reasons why as we finish. Paul says, why should we do it because we're debtors, not to the flesh? In other words, we don't owe sin anything. So if sin says to you, oh, come on, just indulge yourself. You don't owe that sin anything. We are not debtors to the flesh. God has a better way for us. Reason number two is that if you put to death the deed to the body, you will live. Now look at those words, you will live. Now that's, I don't think, talking about how to achieve eternal life in the sense that we're saved by works. That would be to contradict what Paul's been saying all along. I think what it's actually telling us is that the key to a joyful, peaceful, purposeful life is to go God's way, to follow Him and to obey Him. And so

[37 : 10] I don't think that any of us would look back over our lives and think, I wish I'd sinned more. I wish I'd been more greedy. I wish I'd been more angry. I wish I'd hurt more people. Nobody in their right mind thinks like that. We will find a happy, fulfilling, wonderful life by following God's way. And then the final reason is this. The reason we want to mortify sin is because you are sons of God. God is our Father. And what greater motivation do we need than simply the desire to obey Him and live for Him? So mortification of sin, a really, really important thing, but also a wonderful thing. A reminder that living for Jesus is far, far better.

That's what God wants for you. He wants to give you a better way. And I hope that we're all ready to follow. Amen. Let's pray. God our Father, we pray that by the power of your spirit working in us and through us, that we would mortify our sin. Amen.