



The Doctrine of Mortification



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1. Introduction

2. An Outline

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1. Introduction

It is the studied judgment of this writer, and he is by no means alone therein, that *doctrinal preaching* is the most pressing need of the churches today. During the past fifty years a lot has been said about and much prayer has been made for a God-sent *revival*, but it is to be feared that that term is often used very loosely and unintelligently. Unless we are mistaken, if the question were put, A “revival” *of what?* a considerable variety of answers would be given. Personally, we would say a revival of old-fashioned piety, of practical godliness, of fuller conformity to the holy image of Christ. The “revival” we need is a deliverance from that spiritual apathy and laxity which now characterizes the average Christian, a return to self-denial and closer walking with God, a quickening of our graces, and the becoming more fruitful in the bringing forth of good works. Whether or not Scripture predicts such a revival we know not. Two things we are sure of: that whatever the future may hold for this world, God will maintain a testimony unto Himself (Psa. 145:4; Matt. 28:20) and preserve a godly seed on earth, until the end of human history (Psa. 72:5; Isa. 27:3; Matt. 16:18). Second, that there must be a return to doctrinal preaching before there will be any improvement in practice.

Both the teaching of God’s Word and the testimony of ecclesiastical history testify clearly to the deep importance and great value of doctrinal instruction, and the lamentable consequences of a prolonged absence of the same. Doctrinal preaching is designed to enlighten the understanding, to instruct the mind, to inform the judgment. It is that which supplies motives to gratitude and furnishes incentives unto good works. There can be no soundness in the Faith if the fundamental articles of the Faith be not known and, in some measure at least, understood. Those fundamental articles are denominated “the first principles of the oracles of God” (Heb.

5:12) or basic truths of Scripture, and are absolutely necessary unto salvation. The Divine inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures, the ever-blessed Trinity in unity (John 17:3), the two natures united in the one person of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 2:22, and 4:3), His finished work and all-sufficient sacrifice (Heb. 5:14), the fall, resulting in our lost condition (Luke 19:10), regeneration (John 3:3), gratuitous justification (Gal. 5:4)—these are some of the principal pillars which support the temple of Truth, and without which it cannot stand. Of old God complained, “My people are destroyed [cut off] for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6), and declared, “Therefore My people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst” (Isaiah 5:13). When He promised “I will give you pastors according to Mine heart,” He described the same as those “which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15), and that knowledge is communicated first and foremost by a setting forth of the glorious doctrines of Divine revelation. Doctrinal Christianity is both the ground and the motive of practical Christianity, for it is *principle* and not *emotion* or impulse which is the dynamic of the spiritual life. It is *by the Truth* that men are illuminated and directed: “O send out Thy light and Thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto Thy holy hill, and to Thy tabernacles” (Psa. 43:3). We are saved by a knowledge of the Truth (John 17:3; 1 Tim. 2:4), and by faith therein (2 Thess. 2:13). We are made free by the Truth (John 8:32). We are sanctified by the Truth (John 17:17). Our growth in grace is determined by our growth in the knowledge of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:2 and 3:18). It is mercy and truth that preserve us (Psa. 61:7 ~ Proverbs 21:28)—“understanding shall keep thee” (Prov. 2:11).

Pertinently is the inquiry made, “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psa. 11:3). The Hebrew word for “foundations” occurs only once more in the Old Testament, namely in Isaiah 19:10, where it is rendered “and they shall be broken in *the purposes* thereof.” As it is from our purposes that our plans and actions proceed, so it is from the “first principles” of the Word that its secondary truths are derived; and upon them both, precepts are

based. “The principles of religion are the foundations on which the faith and hope of the righteous are built” (Matthew Henry). While those foundations cannot be totally and finally removed, yet God may suffer them to be so relatively and temporarily. In such case the righteous should not give way to despair, but instead betake themselves unto prayer. “Some thing the righteous ones may do, and should do, when men are attempting to undermine and sap the foundation articles of religion: they should go to the throne of grace, to God in His holy temple, who knows what is doing, and plead with Him to put a stop to the designs and attempts of such subverters of foundations; and they should endeavour to build one another up on their most holy faith” (J. Gill).

During the past century there was an increasingly marked departure from doctrinal preaching. Creeds and confessions of faith were disparaged and regarded as obsolete. The study of theology was largely displaced by engaging the mind with science, psychology and sociology. The cry was raised, “Give us Christ, and not Christianity,” and many superficial minds concluded that such a demand was both a spiritual and a pertinent one. In reality it was an absurdity, an imaginary distinction without any vital difference. A scriptural concept of Christ in His theanthropic person, His mediatorial character, His official relations to God’s elect, His redemptive work for them, can be formed only as He is contemplated in His essential Godhead, His unique humanity, His covenant headship, and as the Prophet, Priest and King of His Church. Sufficient attention has not been given to that repeated expression “the doctrine of Christ” (2 John, 9), which comprehends the whole teaching of Scripture concerning His wondrous person and His so-great salvation. Nor has due weight been given to those words “the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3), which refer to the deep things revealed of Him in the Word of Truth.

The most conclusive evidences for the Divine origin of Christianity, as well as the chief glory, appear in its doctrines, for they cannot be of human invention. The ineffable and incomprehensible Trinity in unity, the incarnation of the Son of God, the death of the Prince of life, that His obedience and sufferings satisfied Divine justice and expiated our offences, the

Holy Spirit making the believer His temple, and our union with Christ, are sublime and lofty truths, holy and mysterious, which far surpass the highest flight of finite reason. There is perfect harmony in all the parts of the doctrine of Christ. Therein a full discovery is made of the manifold wisdom of God, the duties required of us, the motives which prompt thereto. It is in perceiving the distinct parts and aspects of Truth, their relation to one another, their furtherance of a common cause, their magnifying of the Lord of glory, that the excellence and beauty of the whole are apparent. It is because many apprehend only detached fragments of the same that some things in it appear to be inconsistent to them. What is so much needed is a view and grasp of the whole—acquired only by diligent and persevering application.

There is much preaching, but sadly little *teaching*. It is the task of the teacher to declare all the counsel of God, to show the relation of one part of it to another, to present the whole range of Truth: thereby will the hearer's mental horizon be widened, his sense of proportion promoted, and the beautiful harmony of the whole be demonstrated. It is his business not only to avow but to evince, not simply to affirm but to establish what he affirms. Of the apostle we read that he "*reasoned* with them Out of the Scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead" (Acts 17:2, 3). He was eminently qualified for such a task both by nature and by grace. He was not only a man of God, but a man of genius and learning. He made considerable use of his reasoning faculty. He did not ask his hearers to believe anything that he averred without evidence, but furnished *proof* of what he taught. He usually preached on the basic and essential doctrines of the Gospel, which he felt ought to be verified by plain and conclusive reasoning.

"And he *reasoned* in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks" (Acts 18:4, 19). Because such reasoning may be abused, it does not follow that it should have no place in the pulpit. To reason fairly is to draw correct consequences from right principles, or to adduce clear and convincing arguments in support thereof. In order to reason lucidly and effectively upon the truth of a proposition, it is usually necessary to explain it, then

to produce arguments in support of it, and finally to answer objections against it. That is the plan Paul generally follows, as is evident from both the Acts and his Epistles. When he preached upon the existence of God, the first and fundamental truth of all religion, he reasoned simply yet impressively: “Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we *ought not to think that* the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device” (Acts 17:29); “For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen” (Rom. 1:20). When he enforced the doctrine of human depravity, he *proved* it first by a lengthy description of the character and conduct of the whole heathen world, and then by quotations from the Old Testament, and concluded “we have before *proved* both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin” (Rom. 3:19).

It is the teacher’s task to explain, to prove, and then to apply, for hearts are reached through the understanding and conscience. When he appeared before Felix, the apostle “reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come” so powerfully that the Roman governor “trembled” (Acts 24:25). But alas, solid reasoning, exposition of Scripture, doctrinal preaching, are now largely things of the past. Many were (and still are) all for what they term *experience*, rather than a knowledge of doctrine. And today we behold the deplorable effects of the same, for our generation lacks even a theoretical knowledge of the Truth. That which was termed experimental and practical preaching displaced theological instruction, and thus the grand fundamentals of the Gospel were brought into contempt. No wonder that popery has made such headway in the countries once Protestant. It may be that that satanic system may yet prevail more awfully. If it does, none will be able to overthrow it by any *experiences* of their own. Nothing but sound doctrinal preaching will be of any use.

No wonder, either, that practical godliness is also at such a low ebb, for the root which produces it has not been watered and has withered. “Where there is not the *doctrine* of Faith, the *obedience* of Faith cannot be expected . . . On the other hand, doctrine without practice, or a mere theoretical and speculative knowledge of things, unless reduced to practice, is of no avail . . . Doctrine and practice

should go together, and in order both to know and to do the will of God, instruction in Doctrine and practice is necessary; and the one bringing first light will lead to the other” (J. Gill). That is the order in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable [first] for doctrine, [and then] for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Thus Paul exhorted Timothy, “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee” (1 Tim. 4:16). So too he enjoined Titus, “This is a faithful saying, and these things [namely the doctrines of verses 3-7] I will that thou affirm constantly, that [in order that] they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works” (3:8).

Alas, very, very few now preach the doctrine of Christ in all its parts and branches, in all its causes and effects, in all its bearings and dependences. Yet there can be no better furniture for the spiritual mind than right and clear apprehensions thereof. Our preservation from error lies therein; our spiritual fruitfulness depends thereon. Doctrine is the mould into which the mind is cast (Romans 6:17), from which it receives its impressions. As the nature of the seed sown determines what will be the harvest, so the substance of what is preached is seen in the lives of those who sit regularly under it. Where are the purity, the piety, the zeal, that close walking with God and uprightness before men, which were so pronounced in Christendom during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Yet the preaching of the Reformers and Puritans was principally *doctrinal*, and, under God, it produced such a love of the Truth that thousands willingly suffered persecution and great privations, and hazarded their lives, rather than repudiate the doctrines and ordinances of Christ. To say it matters not what a man believes so long as his practice is good is utterly erroneous. Indifference to the Truth betrays a heart that is not right with God.

It also requires to be pointed out that those men whose ministry was most owned and used of God during last century were those who followed in the steps of the Puritans. C. H. Spurgeon, Caesar Malan, Robert Murray McCheyne, and the great leaders of the Scottish Free Church disruption, gave a prominent place to

doctrinal instruction in all of their preaching. An observant eye will soon perceive that there is a distinct *spirit* which attends different types of preaching, manifesting itself more or less plainly in the regular attenders thereof. There is a solidity and soberness, a stability and godly fear seen in real Calvinists, which are not found among Arminians. There is an uprightness of character in those who espouse the Truth which is lacking in those who imbibe error. Where the sovereignty of God is denied there will be no holy awe of Him. Where the total depravity of man is not insisted upon, pride and self-sufficiency will obtain. Where the impotence of the natural man is not stressed there will be no dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Where the holy demands of God be not maintained there will be the absence of its effects on the heart and life.

Thus may we judge and determine the Truth of preaching: “Whatsoever doctrine both depress and humble man and advance the glory of God, is true. It answers the design of the Gospel, which all centres in this: that man is to be laid low, and God to be exalted as the chief cause. It pulls man down from his own bottom, and transfers all the glory man would challenge, into the hands of God: it lays man in the dust at God’s footstool. That doctrine which crosses the main design of the Gospel, and encourages pride in man, is not a spark from heaven. No flesh must glory in God’s presence (1 Cor. 1:29). The doctrine of justification by works is thrown down by the apostle with this very argument as a thunderbolt: ‘Where is boasting then? It is excluded. . .by the law of faith’ (Rom. 3:27), that is by the doctrine of the Gospel. Boasting would be introduced by ascribing regeneration to nature, as much as it is excluded by denying justification by works. The doctrine of the Gospel would contradict itself to usher in boasting with one hand whilst it thrust it out with the other. Our Saviour gave this rule long ago, that the glorifying of God is the evidence of truth in persons: ‘he that seeketh His glory that sent him, the same is true’ (John 7:18). By the same reason also in things and doctrines” (Charnock, 1660).

Turning from the general to the particular. In taking up our present subject we shall endeavour to make good a half-promise given by us seventeen years ago, for we stated at that time that if

we were spared we hoped to devote a series of articles to this important truth. Some of our readers may be inclined to challenge the accuracy of our present title, considering that the duty of mortification pertains far more to the practical side of things than to the doctrinal. The objection would be well taken if the popular distinction were valid, but like so many of the expressions now in vogue this one will not stand the test of Scripture. The term “doctrine” has a much wider meaning in the Word of God than is usually accorded it today. It includes very much more than the “five points” of Calvinism. Thus we read of “the doctrine which is *according to godliness*” (1 Tim. 6:3), which is very much more than a species of intellectual proposition intended for the instructing of our brains, namely the enunciation of spiritual facts and holy principles, for the warming of the heart and the regulating of our lives.

“The doctrine which is according to godliness” at once defines the *nature* of Divine doctrine, intimating as it does that its design or end is to inculcate a right temper of mind and deportment of life Godwards: it is pure and purifying. The objects which are revealed to faith are not bare abstractions which are to be accepted as true, nor even sublime and lofty concepts to be admired: they are to have a powerful effect upon our daily walk. There is no doctrine revealed in Scripture for a merely speculative knowledge, but all is to exert a powerful influence upon conduct. God’s design in all that He has revealed to us is to the purifying of our affections and the transforming of our characters. The doctrine of grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world (Titus 2:11, 12). By far the greater part of the doctrine (John 7:16) taught by Christ consisted not of the explication of mysteries, but rather that which corrected men’s lusts and reformed their lives. Everything in Scripture has in view the promotion of *holiness*.

If it be an absurdity to affirm that it matters not what a man believes so long as he does that which is right, equally erroneous is it to conclude that if my creed be sound it matters little how I act. “If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1

Tim. 5:8), for he shows himself to be devoid of natural affection. Thus it is possible to deny the Faith *by conduct* as well as by words. A neglect of performing our duty is as real a repudiation of the Truth as is an open renunciation of it, for the Gospel, equally with the Law, requires children to honour their parents. Observe how that awful list of reprehensible characters mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:9, 10, are said to be “contrary to sound doctrine”—opposed to its salutary nature and spiritual tendency: i.e. that conduct which the standard of God enjoins. Observe too how that the spirit of covetousness or love of money is designated an *erring* “*from the faith*” (1 Tim. 6:10): it is a species of heresy, a departure from the doctrine which is according to godliness—an awful example of which we have in the case of Judas. Mortification, then, is clearly one of the practical doctrines of Holy Writ, as we hope to show abundantly in what follows.

2. An Outline

Romans 8:13 supplies the most comprehensive description of our subject to be found in any single verse of the Bible, setting forth as it does the greatest number of its principal features: “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.” This is a most solemn and searching verse, and one which has little place in modern ministry, be it oral or written. If Arminians have sadly wrested it, many Calvinists have refused to face its plain affirmations and implications. Five things in it claim our best attention. First, the persons addressed. Second, the awful warning here set before them. Third, the duty enjoined upon them. Fourth, the effectual Helper provided. Fifth, the promise made to them. The better to focus our minds, and to enable us to grapple with the difficulties which not a few have found in the verse, ere seeking to fill in our outline we will ask a number of pertinent questions.

What is the relation between our text and the context? Why are both of its members in the hypothetical form—“if?” Does the “ye” in each half of the verse have reference to the same persons, or are there two entirely different classes in view? If the latter be the case, then by what valid principle of exegesis can we account for such?

Why not change one of them to “any” or “they?” What is meant by “live after the flesh?” Is it possible for a real Christian to do so? If not, and it is unregenerate persons who are mentioned, then why say they “shall die,” seeing that they are dead already spiritually? Are the terms “die” and “live” here used figuratively and relatively, or literally and absolutely? What is imported by “mortify” and why “the deeds of the body” rather than “the lusts of the flesh?” If the “ye” perform that task, then how “through the Spirit?” If He be the prime Worker, then why is the mortifying predicated of them? If there be conjoint action, then how are the two factors to be adjusted? In what manner will the promise “ye shall live” be made good, seeing they already be alive spiritually? We know of no commentator who has made any real attempt to grapple with these problems.

The whole context makes it quite evident *what* particular classes of people are here addressed. First, it is those who are in Christ Jesus, upon whom there is now no condemnation (verse 1). Second, it is those who have been made free from the law of sin and death, and had the righteousness of Christ imputed to them (verses 2-4). Third, it is those who give proof that they are the beneficiaries of Christ, by walking not after the flesh, but after the spirit (verse 4). In what immediately follows a description is given of two radically different classes: they who are after the flesh, carnally minded; they whose legal standing is not in the flesh, but in the spirit, who are spiritually minded because indwelt by the Spirit of God (verses 5-11). Fourth, concerning the latter—“we” as opposed to the “they” of verse 8—the apostle draws a plain and practical conclusion: “Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh” (verse 12)—the endearing appellation there used by Paul leaves us in no doubt as to the particular type of characters he was addressing. Manton had a most able sermon on this verse, and we will, mostly in our own language, epitomize his exposition.

Man would fain be at his own disposal. The language of his heart is “our lips are our own: who is lord over us?” (Psa. 12:4). He affects supremacy and claims the right of dominion over his own actions. But his claim is invalid, He was made by Another and for Another, and therefore he is a “debtor.” Negatively, not to the flesh,

which is mentioned because that corrupt principle is ever demanding subjection to it. Positively, he is debtor to the One who gave him being. Christians are debtors both as creatures and as new creatures, being entirely dependent upon God alike for their being and their well-being, for their existence and preservation. As our Maker, God is our Owner, and being our Owner He is therefore our Governor, and by consequence our Judge. He has an absolute propriety in us, an unchallengeable power over us, to command and dispose of us as He pleases. We have nothing but what we receive from Him. We are accountable to Him for our time and our talents. Every benefit we receive increases our obligation to Him. We have no right to please ourselves in anything. This debt is indissoluble: as long as we are dependent upon God for being and support, so long as we are bound to Him. Sin has in no wise cancelled our obligation, for though fallen man has lost his power to obey, the Lord has not lost His power to command.

By virtue of his spiritual being, the saint is still more a debtor to God. First, because of his redemption by Christ, for he is not his own, but bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:9). The state *from which* he was redeemed was one of woeful bondage, for he was a slave of Satan. Now when a captive was ransomed he became the absolute property of the purchaser (Lev. 25:45, 46). The *end* which Christ had in view proves the same thing: He has “redeemed us to God” (Rev. 5:9). Second, because of his regeneration. The new nature then received inclines to God: we are created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Eph. 2:10). Having brought us from death unto life, renewed us in His image, bestowed upon us the status and privileges of sonship, we owe ourselves, our strength and our service unto God as His beneficiaries. The new creature is diverted from its proper use if we live after the flesh. Third, because of our own dedication (Rom. 12:1). A genuine conversion involves the renunciation of the world, the flesh and the devil, and the giving up of ourselves unto the Lord (2 Cor. 8:5). Since our obedience to God is a *debt*, there can be no merit in it (Luke 17:10); but if we pay it not, we incur the debt of punishment (Matt. 6:12, 15). Since the flesh has no right to command, the gratification of it is the yielding to a tyrannous usurper (Rom. 6:12, 14). When solicited by the

flesh, the believer should reply, "I am the Lord's."

"For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live." Here are two sharply contrasted propositions, each one being expressed conditionally. Two eventualities are plainly set forth. Two suppositions are mentioned, and the inevitable outcome of each clearly stated. Both parts of the verse affirm that if a certain course of conduct be steadily followed (for it is far from being isolated actions which are referred to) a certain result would inevitably follow. This hypothetical form of presenting the Truth is quite a common one in the Scriptures. Servants of Christ are informed that "*If* any man's [literally "any one's," i.e. of the "ministers" of verse 5, the "labourers" of verse 9] work abide which he hath built thereon, he shall receive a reward. *If* any man's ["one's," "minister's"] work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss" (1 Cor. 3:14, 15). Other well-known examples are, "for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ," and "For if I build again the things which I destroyed [renounced], I make myself a transgressor" (Gal. 1:10; 2:18). "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3, and cf. 10:26). Our text, then, is parallel with, "For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption: but he that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting" (Gal. 6:8).

There are two things which the people of God are ever in need of: faithful warnings, kindly encouragement—the one to curb their sinful propensities, the other to animate their spiritual graces to the performing of duty, especially when they be cast down by the difficulties of the way or are mourning over their failures. Here too a balance needs to be carefully preserved. Inexperienced believers have little realization of the difficulties and perils before them, and the hearts of older ones are so deceitful that each alike needs to be plainly and frequently corrected, and exhorted to pay attention to the danger-signals which God has set up along our way. It is both striking and solemn to note how often the Saviour sounded the note of warning, not only unto the wicked, but more especially unto His disciples. He bade them, "Take heed what ye hear" (Mark 4:24); "Beware of false prophets" (Matt. 7:15); "Take heed therefore that

the light which is in thee be not darkness” (Luke 11:35); “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32); “Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life” (Luke 21:34). To one He had healed, “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee” (John 5:14).

The word “flesh” is used in Scripture in a number of senses, but throughout Romans 8 it signifies that corrupt and depraved nature which is in us when we enter this world. That evil nature or principle is variously designated. It is termed sin (Rom. 7:8), “warring against the law of my mind” (verse 23). In James 4:5, “the *spirit* that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy,” to indicate that it is not a tangible or material entity. But more commonly it is called “the flesh” (John 3:6; Rom. 7:25; Gal. 5:17). It is so termed because it is transmitted from parent to child as the body is, because it is propagated by natural generation, because it is strengthened and drawn forth by carnal objects, because of its base character and degeneracy. It was not in man when he left the hand of his Creator and was pronounced by Him “very good.” Rather was it something that he acquired by the fall. The principle of sin as a foreign element, as a thing *ab extra*, as an invading agent, entered into him, vitiating the whole of his natural being—as frost enters into and ruins vegetables, and as blight seizes and mars fruit.

The “flesh” is the open, implacable, inveterate, irreconcilable enemy of holiness, yea, it is “enmity against God” (Romans 8:7)—an “enemy” may be reconciled, not so “enmity” itself. Then what an evil and abominable thing is the flesh: at variance with the Holy One, a rebel against His Law! It is therefore our enemy, yea, it is far and away the worst one the believer has. The Devil and the world without do all their mischief to the souls of men by the flesh within them. “The flesh is the womb where all sin is conceived and formed, the anvil upon which all is wrought, the false Judas that betrays us, the secret enemy within that is ready on all occasions to open the gates to the besiegers” (Thomas Jacomb, 1622-87). We must distinguish sharply between *being* in the flesh and *living after* the flesh. Thus, “For when we were in the flesh” (Rom. 7:5) has reference to Christians in their unregenerate condition, as “they that

are in the flesh cannot please God” speaks of the unsaved; whereas “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the spirit” (8:8,9) is predicated of believers. “In the flesh” imports a person’s standing and state before God; living after the flesh describes his course and conversation. The one inevitably follows and corresponds to the other: a person’s character and conduct agree with his condition and case.

The flesh is radically and wholly evil: as Romans 7:18, declares, there is “no good thing” in it. It is beyond reclamation, being incapable of any improvement. It may indeed put on a religious garb, as did the Pharisees, but beneath is nothing but rottenness. Fire may as soon be struck out of ice as holy dispositions and motions be produced by indwelling sin. As the “flesh” continually opposes that which is good, so it ever disposes the soul unto what is evil. To “walk after” or to “live after the flesh” (both terms have the same force) is for a person to conduct himself as do all the unregenerate, who are dominated, motivated and actuated by nothing but their fallen nature. To “live after the flesh” refers not to a single act, nor even to a habit or a series of acts in one direction; but rather to the whole man being governed and guided by this vile principle. That is the case with all who are out of Christ: their desires, thoughts, speech and deeds all proceed from this corrupt fount. It is by the flesh that the whole of their souls are set in motion and their entire course steered. All is directed by some fleshly consideration. They act *from* self, or base principle; they act *for* self, or base end. The glory of God is nothing to them, the flesh is all in all.

The flesh is a dynamical, active, ambitious principle, and therefore it is spoken of as a *lusting* thing. Thus we read of “the lusts of the flesh,” yea, of “the wills of the flesh” (Eph. 2:3—margin) for its desires are vehement and imperious. “But [indwelling] sin, taking occasion [being aggravated] by the commandment [“thou shalt not covet”], wrought in me all manner of concupiscence” [or “lust”] (Rom. 7:8). Education and culture may result in a refined exterior; family training and other influences may lead to an espousal of religion, as is the case with the great majority of the heathen; selfish considerations may even issue in

voluntarily undergoing great austerities and deprivations, as the Buddhist to attain unto Nirvana, the Mohammedan to gain paradise, the Romanist to merit heaven—but the love of God prompts none of them, nor is His glory their aim. Though the Christian be “not in the flesh” as to his status and state, yet the flesh as an evil principle (unchanged) is still in him, and it “lusteth against the spirit” (Gal. 5:17) or new nature, and therefore are we exhorted, “Let not sin [i.e. the flesh] therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof” (Rom. 6:12).

It requires to be pointed out that there is a *twofold* walking or living after the flesh: the one more gross and manifest, the other more indiscernible. The first breaks forth into open and bodily lusts and acts, such as gluttony, drunkenness, moral uncleanness: this is “the filthiness of the flesh.” The second is when the flesh exerts itself in internal heart lusts, which are more or less concealed from our fellows, which lie smouldering and festering within our soul, such as pride, unbelief, self-love, envy, covetousness; this is the filthiness “of the spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1). In Galatians 5:18, 19, the apostle gives a catalogue of the lustings of the flesh in *both* of these respects. He does so to expose a common fallacy. It is generally assumed that walking or living “according to the flesh” is limited to the first form mentioned, and the second one is little considered or regarded. So long as men abstain from gross intemperance, open profanity, brutish sensuality, they think that all is well with them, whereas they may be quite free from all gross practices and still be guilty of living after the flesh. Yea, such *is* the case with all in whose hearts there are inordinate affections after the world, a spirit of self-exaltation, covetousness, malice, hatred, uncharitableness, and many other reprehensible lusts.

Our text makes crystal clear to us the fundamental and vital importance of the duty here enjoined, for our performance or non-performance thereof is literally a matter of life and death. Mortification is not optional, but imperative. The solemn alternatives are plainly stated: neglect ensures everlasting misery, compliance therewith is assured eternal felicity. The whole verse is manifestly addressed unto saints, and they are faithfully warned, “If ye live after the flesh ye shall die:” that is, die eternally, for as in

5:12, 21; 7:23; 8:6, “death” includes all the penal consequences of sin both here and hereafter; so in our text “die” manifestly signifies “shall suffer the second death,” which is “the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone” (Rev. 21:8). The express reason is here advanced why Christians should not live after the flesh: they are not debtors to it to do so (verse 12): if they surrender to its dominion, the wages of sin will most certainly be paid them. “The flesh belongs to the world, and the man who is yielding to its promptings is in the world, living like the world, and must perish with the world” (J. Stifler).

It was by yielding to the lusts of the flesh that Adam brought death upon himself and all his posterity. And if I live after the flesh, that is, am governed and guided by my old nature, acting habitually according to its inclinations—for it is a persistent and continuous course of conduct which is here mentioned—then, no matter what be my profession, I shall perish in my sin. It is the gratifying and serving of the flesh, instead of the will of God, which eternally ruins souls. “It may be asked whether one who has received the grace of God in truth can live after the flesh. To live in a continued course of sin is contrary to the grace of God; but flesh may prevail and greatly influence the life and conversation for a while. How long this may be the case of a true believer under backsliding, through the power of corruptions and temptations, cannot be known; but certain it is that it shall not be always thus with him” (John Gill).

The whole of our verse pertains to professing Christians, and at the present moment. The Apostle did not simply say, “If ye have lived after the flesh,” for that is the case with every unregenerate soul. But if ye now live after the flesh, “ye shall die”—in the full meaning of that word. It is a general statement of a universal truth. We fully agree with the explanation furnished by B.W. Newton, who was a decided Calvinist. “An expression of this kind is addressed to us for two reasons. First, because in the professing church the apostle knew there were and would be false professors. So whenever collective bodies are addressed, he always uses words implying uncertainty and doubt, for tares will be among the wheat. And second, true believers themselves (though grace can preserve

them) have now nevertheless always a tendency in them to the same paths. Therefore descriptions like this, which are true to the full of those who merely profess, may yet be rightly applied to all who are wandering into those paths.” Examples of the one are found in such passages as Galatians 4:20, and 6:8; Ephesians 5:5-7; Colossians 3:5, 6. Of the second it must be borne in mind that a backsliding Christian had turned aside from the narrow way of denying self, and that if he follows the course of self-pleasing to the bitter end, destruction awaits him.”

See here the *faithfulness* of God in so plainly warning of the terrible doom awaiting all who live after the flesh. Instead of thinking hardly of God for His threatenings, we should be grateful for them. See the *justice* of God. To be pleasing self is to continue in the apostasy of mankind, and therefore the original sentence (Gen. 2:17) is in force against them. It is contempt of God, and the heinousness of the sin is measured by the greatness of Him who is affronted (1 Sam. 2:25). Moreover, they refuse the remedy, and therefore are doubly guilty. See here the *wisdom* of God in appointing the greater punishment to curb the greatness of the temptation. The pleasures of sin are but for a season, but the paths of sin are for evermore: if the latter were soundly believed and seriously considered, the former would not so easily prevail with us. Behold the *holiness* of God: a unmortified soul is unfit for His presence. Vessels of glory must first be seasoned with grace. Conformity to Christ fits for heaven, and where that be lacking there can be no entrance.

“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom. 8:13). The whole of this verse pertains and belongs to believers, who are “debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh” (verse 12); but, instead, debtors to Christ who redeemed them, and therefore to live unto His glory; debtors to the Holy Spirit who regenerated and indwells them, and therefore to live in subjection to His absolute control.

On this occasion we will state very briefly what is signified by “mortify,” leaving till later a fuller explanation of the precise nature of this duty. First, from its being here placed in apposition with

“live after the flesh,” its negative sense is more or less obvious. To “live after the flesh” is to be completely controlled by indwelling sin, to be thoroughly under the dominion of our inbred corruptions. Hence, mortification consists in a course of conduct which is just the reverse. It imports: Comply not with the demands of your old nature, but rather subdue them. Serve not, cherish not your lusts, but starve them: “make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14). The natural desires and appetites of the physical body require to be disciplined, so that they are our servants and not our masters; it is our responsibility to moderate, regulate and subordinate them unto the higher parts of our being. But the cravings of the body of sin are to be promptly refused and sternly denied. The spiritual life is retarded just in proportion as we yield subservience to our evil passions.

The imperative necessity for this work of mortification arises from the continued presence of the evil nature in the Christian. Upon his believing in Christ unto salvation he was at once delivered from the condemnation of the Divine law, and freed from the reigning power of sin; but “the flesh” was not eradicated from his being, nor were its vile propensities purged or even modified. That fount of filthiness still remains unchanged unto the end of his earthly career. Not only so, but it is ever active in its hostility to God and holiness: “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit [or new nature], and the Spirit against the flesh” (Gal. 5:17). Thus there is a ceaseless conflict in the saint between indwelling sin and inherent grace. Consequently there is a perpetual need for him to mortify or put to death not only the actings of indwelling corruption but also the principle itself. He is called upon to engage in ceaseless warfare and not suffer temptation to bring him into captivity to his lusts. The Divine prohibition is “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness [enter into no truce, form no alliance with], but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). Say with Ephraim of old, “What have I to do any more with idols?” (Hosea 14:8).

No real communion with God is possible while sinful lusts remain unmortified. Allowed evil draws the heart away from God, and tangles the affections, discomposes the soul, and provokes the Holy One to close His ears against our prayers: “Son of man, these

men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face: should I be inquired of at all by them?" (Ezek. 14:3). God cannot in any wise delight in an unmortified soul: for Him to do so would be denying Himself or acting contrary to His own nature. He has no pleasure in wickedness, and cannot look with the slightest approval on evil. Sin is a mire, and the more miry we are the less fit for His eyes (Psa. 40:2). Sin is leprosy (Isa. 1:6), and the more it spreads the less converse will the Lord have with us. Deliberately to keep sin alive is to defend it against the will of God, and to challenge combat with the Most High. Unmortified sin is against the whole design of the Gospel—as though Christ's sacrifice was intended to indulge us in sin, rather than redeem us from it. The very end of Christ's dying was the death of sin: rather than sin should not die, He laid down His life.

Though risen with Christ, their life hid with Him in God, and they certain to appear with Christ in glory, the saints are nevertheless exhorted to mortify their members which are upon the earth (Col. 3:1-5). It may appear strange when we note what particular members the apostle specified. It was not vain thoughts, coldness of heart, unwary walking, but the visible and most repulsive members of the old man: "fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence;" and in verse 8 he bids them again, "put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication" and lying. Startling and solemn it is to find that believers require calling upon to mortify such gross and foul sins as those: yet it is no more than is necessary. The best Christians on earth have so much corruption within them, which habitually disposes them unto these iniquities (great and heinous as they are), and the Devil will so suit his temptations as will certainly draw their corruptions into open acts, unless they keep a tight hand and close watch over themselves in the constant exercise of mortification. None but the Holy One of God could truthfully aver, "the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me" (John 14:30) which could be enkindled by his fiery darts.

As the servants of God urge upon the wicked that they slight not any sin because in their judgment it is but a trivial matter, saying,

“Is it not a little one? and my soul shall live” (Gen. 19:20); so the faithful minister will press it upon all of God’s people that they must not disregard any sin because it is great and grievous, and say within themselves, “Is it not a great one? and my soul shall never commit it.” As we presume upon the pardoning mercy of God to preserve us from the committing of great and crying sins. It is because of their self-confidence and carelessness that sometimes the most gracious and experienced suddenly find themselves surprised by the most awful lapses. When the preacher bids his hearers beware that they murder not, blaspheme not, turn not apostates from their profession of the faith, none but the self-righteous will say with Hazael, “But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?” (2 Kings 8:13). There is no crime, however enormous, no abomination, however vile, but what any of us are capable of committing, if we do not bring the cross of Christ into our hearts by a daily mortification.

But why “mortify the deeds of *the body*?” In view of the studied balancing of the several clauses in this antithetical sentence, we had expected it to read “mortify the flesh.” In the seventh chapter and the opening verses of the eighth the apostle had treated of indwelling sin as the fount of all evil actions; and here he insists on the mortifying of both the root and the branches of corruption, referring to the duty under the name of the fruits it bears. The “deeds of the body” must not be restricted to mere outward works, but be understood as including also the springs from which they issue. As Owen rightly said, “The axe must be laid to the root of the tree.” In our judgment “the body” here has a twofold reference. First, to the evil nature or indwelling sin, which in Romans 6:6, and 7:24, is likened unto a body, namely “the body of the sins of the flesh” (Col. 2:11). It is a body of corruption which compasses the soul: hence we read of “your members which are upon the earth” (Col. 3:5). The “deeds of the body” are the works which corrupt nature produces, namely our sins. Thus the “body” is here used objectively of “the flesh.”

Second, the “body” here includes the house in which the soul now dwells. *It* is specified to denote the degrading malignity which there is in sin, reducing its slaves to live as though they had no

souls. It is mentioned to import the tendency of indwelling sin, namely to please and pamper the baser part of our being, the soul being made the drudge of the outward man. The body is here referred to for the purpose of informing us that though the soul be the original abode of “the flesh” the physical frame is the main instrument of its actions. Our corruptions are principally manifested in our external members: it is *there* that indwelling sin is chiefly found and felt. Sins are denominated “the deeds of the body” not only because they are what the lusts of the flesh tend to produce, but also because they are executed by the body (Romans 6:12). Our task then is not to transform and transmute “the flesh,” but to slay it: to refuse its impulses, to deny its aspirations, to put to death its appetites.

But who is sufficient for such a task—a task which is not a work of nature but wholly a spiritual one? It is far beyond the unaided powers of the believer. Means and ordinances cannot of themselves effect it. It is beyond the province and ability of the preacher: omnipotence must have the main share in the work. “If ye through the Spirit do mortify,” that is “the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ” of Romans 8:9—the Holy Spirit; for He is not only the Spirit of holiness in His nature, but in His operations too. He is the principal efficient cause of mortification. Let us marvel at and adore the Divine grace which has provided such a Helper for us! Let us recognize and realize that we are as truly indebted to and dependent upon the Spirit’s operations as we are upon the Father’s electing and the Son’s redeeming us. Though grace be wrought in the hearts of the regenerate, yet it lies not in their power to act it. He who imparted the grace must renew, excite, and direct it.

Believers may employ the aids of inward discipline and rigor, and practice outward moderation and abstinence, and while they may for a time check and suppress their evil habits, unless the Spirit puts forth His power in them there will be no true mortification. And *how* does He operate in this particular work? In many different ways. First, at the new birth He gives us a new nature. Then by nourishing and preserving that nature. In strengthening us with His might in the inner man. In granting fresh supplies of grace from day to day. By working in us a loathing of

sin, a mourning over it, a turning from it. By pressing upon us the claims of Christ, making us willing to take up our cross and follow Him. By bringing some precept or warning to our mind. By sealing a promise upon the heart. By moving us to pray.

Yet let it be carefully noted that our text does not say, “If the Spirit do mortify,” or even “If the Spirit through you do mortify,” but, instead, “If ye through the Spirit:” the believer is not passive in this work, but active. It must not be supposed that the Spirit will help us without our concurrence, as well while we are asleep as waking, whether or not we maintain a close watch over our thoughts and works, and exercise nothing but a slight wish or sluggish prayer for the mortification of our sins. Believers are required to set themselves seriously to the task. If on the one hand we cannot discharge this duty without the Spirit’s enablement, on the other hand He will not assist if we be too indolent to put forth earnest endeavours. Then let not the lazy Christian imagine he will ever get the victory over his lusts.

The Spirit’s grace and power afford no license to idleness, but rather call upon us to the diligent use of means and looking to Him for His blessing upon the same. We are expressly exhorted, “let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1), and that makes it plain that the believer is not a cipher in this work. The gracious operations of the Spirit were never designed to be a substitute for the Christian’s discharge of duty. Though His help be indispensable, yet it releases us not from our obligations. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (John 5:21) emphasizes our accountability and evinces that God requires much more than our waiting upon Him to stir us unto action. Our hearts are terribly deceitful, and we need to be much upon our guard against cloaking a spirit of apathy under an apparent jealous regard for the glory of the Spirit. Is no self-effort required to escape the snares of Satan by refusing to walk in those paths which God has prohibited? Is no self-effort called for in separating ourselves from the companionship of the wicked?

Mortification is a task to which every Christian must apply himself with prayerful diligence and resolute earnestness. The

regenerate have a spiritual nature within that fits them for holy action, otherwise there would be no difference between them and the unregenerate. They are required to improve the death of Christ, to embitter sin to them by His sufferings. They are to use the grace received in bringing forth the fruits of righteousness. Nevertheless, it is a task which far transcends our feeble powers. It is only “through the Spirit” that any of us can acceptably or effectually (in any degree) “mortify the deeds of the body.” He it is who presses upon us the claims of Christ: reminding us that inasmuch as He died *for* sin, we must spare no efforts in dying *to* sin—striving against it (Heb. 11:4), confessing it (1 John 1:9), forsaking it (Prov. 28:13). He it is who preserves us from giving way to despair, and encourages us to renew the conflict. He it is who deepens our longings after holiness, and moves us to cry, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psa. 51:10).

“If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body.” Mark, my reader, the lovely balance of truth which is here so carefully preserved: while the Christian’s responsibility is strictly enforced, the honour of the Spirit is as definitely maintained and Divine grace is magnified. Believers are the agents in this work, yet they perform it by the strength of Another. The duty is theirs, but the success and the glory are His. The Spirit’s operations are carried on in accordance with the constitution which God has given us, working within and upon us as moral agents. The same work is, in one point of view, God’s; and in another ours. He illumines the understanding, and makes us more sensible of indwelling sin. He makes the conscience more sensitive. He deepens our yearnings after purity. He works in us both to will and to do of God’s good pleasure. Our business is to heed His convictions, to respond to His holy impulses, to implore His aid, to count upon His grace.

“If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, *ye shall live.*” Here is the encouraging promise set before the sorely tried contestant. God will be no man’s debtor: yea, He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). If then, by grace, we concur with the Spirit, denying the flesh, striving after holiness, richly shall we be recompensed. The promise unto this duty is opposed unto the death threatened in the clause foregoing: as “die”

there includes all the penal consequences of sin, so “shall live” comprehends all the spiritual blessings of grace. If by the Spirit’s enablement and our diligent use of the Divinely appointed means we sincerely and constantly oppose and refuse the solicitations of indwelling sin, then—but only then—we shall live a life of grace and comfort here, and a life of eternal glory and bliss hereafter. We have shown elsewhere that “eternal life” (1 John 2:25) is the believer’s present possession (John 3:36; 10:28) and also his future goal (Mark 10:30; Gal. 6:8; Titus 1:2). He now has a title and right to it; he has it by faith, and in hope; he has the seed of it in his new nature. But he has it not yet in full possession and fruition.

“The promises of the Gospel are not made to the work, but to the worker; and to the worker not for his work, but according to his work, for the sake of Christ’s work. The promise of life, then, is not made to the work of mortification, but to him that mortifies his flesh; and that not for his mortification, but because he is in Christ, of which this mortification is the evidence. That they who mortify the flesh shall live is quite consistent with the truth that eternal life is the free gift of God; and in the giving of it, there is no respect to the merit of the receiver. This describes the character of all who receive eternal life; and it is of great importance. It takes away all ground of hope from those who profess to know God and in works deny Him” (Robert Haldane). The conditionality of the promise, then, is neither that of causation nor uncertainty, but of coherence and connection. A life of glory proceeds not from mortification as the effect from the cause, but follows merely upon it as the end does the use of means. The highway of holiness is the only path which leads to heaven.

