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Obedience— Not Victory

FOR IF YOU LIVE ACCORDING
TO THE SINFUL NATURE, YOU
WILL DIE; BUT IF BY THE SPIRIT
YOU PUT TO DEATH THE
MISDEEDS OF THE BODY, YOU
WILL LIVE.

Romans 8:13

God has made provision for our holiness and He has also given us a responsibility for it. As we saw in Chapters 5 and 7, God's provision for us consists in delivering us from the reign of sin, uniting us with Christ, and giving us the indwelling Holy Spirit to reveal sin, to create a desire for holiness, and to strengthen us in our pursuit of holiness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and according to the new nature He gives, we are to put to death the misdeeds of the body (Romans 8:13).

Though it is the Spirit who enables us to put to death our corruptions, yet Paul says this is our action as well. The very same work is from one point of view the work of the Spirit, and from another the work of man.

In the previous chapter we emphasized the "by the Spirit" part of this verse. In this chapter we want to look at our responsibility — "you put to death the misdeeds of the body."

It is clear from this passage that God puts responsibility for living a holy life squarely on us. We are to do something. We are not to "stop trying and start trusting"; we are to put to death the misdeeds of the body. Over and over again in the epistles — not only Paul's, but the other apostles' as well — we are commanded to assume our responsibility for a holy walk. Paul exhorted, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature" (Colossians 3:5). This is something we are told to do.

The writer of Hebrews said, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1). He says *let us* throw off the sin and *let us* run with perseverance. Clearly he expects us to assume responsibility for running the Christian race. James said, "Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). It is we who are to submit to God and resist the devil. This is our responsibility. Peter said, "Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him" (2 Peter 3:14). The clause *make every effort* addresses itself to our wills. It is something we must decide to do.

During a certain period in my Christian life I thought that any effort on my part to live a holy life

was "of the flesh" and that "the flesh profits for nothing." I thought God would not bless any effort on my part to live the Christian life, just as He would not bless any effort on my part to become a Christian by good works. Just as I received Christ Jesus by faith, so I was to seek a holy life only by faith. Any effort on my part was just getting in God's way. I misapplied the statement, "Ye shall not need to fight in this battle; set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 20:17, KJV), to mean that I was just to turn it all over to the Lord and He would fight the sin in my life. In fact, in the margin of the Bible I was using during that period I wrote alongside the verse these words: "Illustration of walking in the Spirit."

How foolish I was. I misconstrued dependence on the Holy Spirit to mean I was to make no effort, that I had no responsibility. I mistakenly thought if I turned it all over to the Lord, He would make my choices for me and would choose obedience over disobedience. All I needed was to look to Him for holiness. But this is not God's way. He makes provision for our holiness, but He gives us the responsibility of using those provisions.

The Holy Spirit has been given to all Christians. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The Holy Spirit is in us; He is working in us, and empowering us, giving us the ability . . . This is the New Testament teaching — 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.' We have to do so. But note the accompaniment — 'Because it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of

His good pleasure'! The Holy Spirit is working in us 'both to will and to do.' It is because I am not left to myself, it is because I am not 'absolutely hopeless,' since the Spirit is in me, that I am exhorted to work out my own salvation with fear and trembling."¹

We must rely on the Spirit in our putting to death the deeds of the body. As Lloyd-Jones observes in his exposition of Romans 8:13, it is the Holy Spirit who "differentiates Christianity from morality, from 'legalism' and false Puritanism."² But our reliance on the Spirit is not intended to foster an attitude of "I can't do it," but one of "I can do it through Him who strengthens me." The Christian should never complain of want of ability and power. If we sin, it is because we choose to sin, not because we lack the ability to say no to temptation.

It is time for us Christians to face up to our responsibility for holiness. Too often we say we are "defeated" by this or that sin. No, we are not defeated; we are simply disobedient! It might be well if we stopped using the terms "victory" and "defeat" to describe our progress in holiness. Rather we should use the terms "obedience" and "disobedience." When I say I am defeated by some sin, I am unconsciously slipping out from under my responsibility. I am saying something outside of me has defeated me. But when I say I am disobedient, that places the responsibility for my sin squarely on me. We may, in fact, be defeated, but the reason we are defeated is because we have chosen to disobey. We have chosen to entertain lustful thoughts, or to harbor resentment, or to shade the truth a little.

We need to brace ourselves up, and to realize that we are responsible for our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We need to reckon on the fact that we died to sin's reign, that it no longer has any dominion over us, that God has united us with the risen Christ in all His power, and has given us the Holy Spirit to work in us. Only as we accept our responsibility and appropriate God's provisions will we make any progress in our pursuit of holiness.

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- NOTES: 1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Sons of God — Exposition of Romans 8:5-17* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), page 124.
2. Lloyd-Jones, *The Sons of God*, page 136.