

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



Volume 26, Number 20
2010

May 16,

A Godly Death

Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. (Colossians 3:5-7)

I find it consistently gratifying in my Bible study to resolve apparent tension between Bible passages. One of the Ten Commandments forbids murder. In this verse, Paul commands us to commit a form of murder, "to mortify." However, the objects of murder in this passage are not other people, but sinful desires, inclinations, or actions in our own lives. In this setting to "mortify" does not mean to bruise or to cripple. It means to put to death. We can hardly miss the similarity of the word with a word that we see in our contemporary society, "mortician." A mortician deals with dead bodies. If you convert "mortician" into a verb, you have the precise word that Paul uses in our lesson, "Mortify." In our last study, I dealt with the permanent and significant impact the new birth makes on an individual. Although the new birth adds a new nature and with it a new moral outlook or set of values, it does not remove our old nature. Scripture does not support the idea that the new birth removes all of our old nature except for "a few faint vestiges of that old nature." Before the new birth, we possessed only one nature, decisively hostile toward God and toward His moral character. In the new birth, God adds a new life and with it a new nature, a spiritual nature that embraces God's moral code and character. Scripture describes this work as God's law written in our hearts and minds.

What is the nature of this state? What might we expect to see in others or experience in ourselves because of the new birth? I believe Paul clearly describes this state in the seventh chapter of Romans. We constantly live with a moral tension between these two natures. We cannot perfectly live out our convictions to serve and honor God because "...when I would do good, evil is present with me." (Romans 7:21) Paul states this principle as a "law," an abiding rule that explains his--and our--behavior as regenerated children of God. Look in the mirror of your own life. Reflect on the daily struggle you encounter between the desire to devote every

moment and action to the glory of God and the intense contradictory desires to please yourself.

Scripture never teaches the regenerated or "born-again" child of God to accept this conflict from a moral posture of neutrality or of passivity. Paul's teaching in our study lesson reflects Scripture's consistent teaching on this question. His teaching requires decisive action from us. We cannot reasonably construe the command to "mortify" as either neutral or passive. It requires a decisive action wholly friendly to our spiritual nature and wholly hostile to our sinful nature. Paul's description of this conflict in the seventh chapter of Romans appears in the context of his description of a moral warfare in the sixth chapter of Romans. Paul warns us in that chapter to avoid "yielding" our members "as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin...." First, he directs us to view ourselves as "...dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:11) He commands us to "...yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." (Romans 7:13) No soldier can enter into a battle against the enemy with a passive, neutral mindset.

Notice the list of hostile forces within us that Paul directs us to "mortify."

1. *Fornication.* First century use of the word referred to sexual immorality of any kind, including, but not limited to prostitution.
2. *Uncleanness.* This word refers to any form of moral impurity.
3. *Inordinate affection.* The idea with this term identifies any strong passion whose object is immoral. Not only does the fallen human appetite desire prohibited sexual objects, but it often seeks many other forms of gratification, such as money, power over other people, etc.
4. *Evil concupiscence.* Sinful longings or desires. Paul elsewhere describes people controlled by this sinful outlook,

"...whose god is their belly..."
(Philippians 3:19)

5. *And covetousness, which is idolatry.* A passionate desire to possess what belongs to someone else. Paul singles out this sinful passion as equivalent to idolatry, an object of worship.

Paul never rationalizes or justifies our indulgence in any of these passions. He rather directs us to "mortify" them, to kill them. In life experience, we may "kill" one of these desires and for the moment think we've won the battle, but, since these sinful passions reside in our sinful nature, they revive and lurk out of sight, ever seeking a new occasion to leap out of the dark into our conscious minds and thereby compromise our thoughts and actions.

For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience.... We should distinguish between "disobedient children" and "children of disobedience." A "disobedient child" of God is in fact a child of God, though one who has wandered from the fold, a lost sheep. "Children of disobedience" are people who so follow their sinful nature that this pursuit identifies them, who they are. One belongs to the family of God. The other does not. Paul commands that we as God's children live like our Father and Savior. Remember your true family identity, the family of God. Take your eternal family identity with you always. Never so compromise your convictions of conscience that you act like you have no knowledge of God or relationship to Him.

In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. There was a time when the Colossians knew nothing else. These sins defined every waking moment of their life.

John Newton left home and joined the crew of a slave ship at an early age. Over time he became so successful that he became a ship's captain. He made his living directing the ship between Africa and North America. His biography describes a period of his career when he continued in the slave trade, but conscience increasingly convicted him for his sinful pursuits and career. Eventually the conviction became so strong that he forsook all, left his career, and became a minister of the gospel. If you had observed Newton during that intermediate time when he struggled with his conscience, you might well have concluded that he was yet a "child of disobedience." His behavior did not reveal his deep conviction of conscience. However, over time he chose to follow those convictions. He "mortified" his old way of life, and with it, the various passions that had formerly driven his whole life.

Newton's experience convicts us and instructs us. We cannot know other people so intimately as to know all the struggles of conscience they live with. We can only observe what they actually do. Our contemporary Christian culture attempts to supplant God's own judgment of who is and who is not a "real child of God." Disciples of this intrusively judgmental attitude will use their perspective to demean and to control others; "How can I give you any assurance that you are really a child of God unless you...?" Tell me; had you observed Newton during his intermediate season, during the time he continued as captain of his slave ship, but deeply struggled with convictions of the black sins that accompanied that career, what would have been your judgment? No doubt, if you subscribe to this surrogate-God attitude of telling people they either are or are not "really saved," you would have told Newton that he was hell-bound. You would have no way of knowing the convictions with which he struggled. Jesus' parable of the Wheat and the Tares reminds us to avoid such arrogance in our judgment of others. Every time people try to supplant God as the exclusive Judge of the heart, they invariably will damage a child of God who lives close to the person so judged. God leaves us with no excuse for such judgments. Shame on us for seeking to do what God alone is capable of doing righteously.

The more a person seeks to judge others the less time that person has to "mortify" his/her own sinful passions. We never honor God when we exalt ourselves by demeaning those around us. We honor God when we follow Paul's exhortations in our study lesson, when we focus on "mortifying" our own sinful passions and actions.

If we each carefully assessed the time and energies we invest in each day, how much of that time do we devote to one of the sinful passions that Paul here names? We may react with disgust at the leading item on the list, proudly claiming that we have risen above all those base sexual sins and our society's constant barrage of sexual images and ideas from "Helly-wood." But have we also succeeded at not simply curbing, but killing all of the other passions that Paul identifies in his list? Our divine assignment requires that we equally mortify all of these passions, and, when they rise from the dead tomorrow, that we mortify them again. How is our battle going--really?

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor