

The Obligation to put Sin to Death (Rom 8.13)

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Introduction

Romans 8:13 is a passage that speaks to the sovereignty of the Spirit in spiritual renewal. It precisely expresses both divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the renewal process of the new man in Christ (specifically: "by the *Spirit you* put to death the misdeeds of the body"). Arising out of v. 12 and in context, the theme of the text is "the obligation to put sin to death."

1A. Note how the obligation is presented

The duty of those who are bound for resurrection glory is presented in a strikingly *indirect* manner. This is a call to duty that is found within the section of the book of Romans that addresses God's gracious provision (chapters 4-11) regarding our need (chapters 1-3). There are very few explicit exhortations in chapters 4-11 (the duty section of the book comes in 12-16). Chapters 4-11 lay out what God has done for us; they explain justification by faith and the new life in the Spirit. They tell us what we have, what is provided in the gospel. They give indicatives (statements of fact) with few imperatives or commands (but cf. 6:11-13, count ...do not let...do not offer...but rather offer yourselves to God).

This indirectness of 8:12-13 does not lessen, but increases, the impact of how the obligation is presented. The exhortation is given indirectly in three ways. 1) First, it is stated in general: "we have an obligation" (instead of "your obligation is such and such"). 2) Second, it is stated in the negative. Paul tells us what the duty is not. "We have an obligation, he says, and it is "not to the flesh." This is a great blessing. We are not duty bound to the flesh. However, he does not state what the duty is. Of course, we can easily follow the logic, since what it is not implies what it is. If it is *not* to the flesh then it *is* to the Spirit. 3) Third, the obligation is implied in the language of verse 13 where we have two conditional statements ("if...then"). In logic and grammar, the "if" part of a conditional is called the antecedent and the "then" part is called the consequent. In the antecedent of 13b, we pick up the duty (put sin to death). In effect, we have this in vs.12-13: Therefore we have the obligation to live according to the Spirit and to put sin to death, and if we do so we will live, if we do not fulfill this obligation then we will die. The duty is very real and the consequences are very heavy.

2A. Note how the obligation is grounded (supported)

The reason for this duty to the Spirit and not the flesh takes us back to two claims: the marvelous contrast and the awesome promise stated in verses 10-11. If Christ is in you and if the Spirit is living in you then *the contrast holds for you and the promise is yours*. The *contrast* is that though your physical body is subject to death, still your Holy Spirit is life (v. 10). The first is because of sin and the latter is because of righteousness secured by the life and death of Christ. His holy and righteous life is given to you, and His death took away your punishment. So, because of the work of Christ, you have the Holy Spirit living in you and He indwells you as life, as life giver that brought you out of death in sin and from your darkness, bondage, and enmity. The *promise* that follows is that though your body is subject to dying and death the Holy Spirit living in you will *certainly* give life to your mortal body: you are bound for glory (v. 11). What a marvelous promise of fatherly care. The Lord works on our behalf for our happiness, but it is on the way out from sin and forward in holiness to be consummated finally in glory.

Therefore, since you have Christ living in you, and though history unfolds and you face aging and death, since you already have the life giving Holy Spirit, and since you are bound for the promised land, to be at home with God in glorious resurrection life, *then you have an obligation and it is not to the flesh*.

3A. Note how this obligation is fulfilled

It is fulfilled by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit *in connection with Christian effort*. This is part of the larger paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in spiritual renewal. There are things here that appear contradictory but they are threads woven by the Spirit into the fabric of Scripture without contradiction (theological paradox is part of the diet provided by the Spirit for our meditation and nurture).

What does this passage of scripture mean (Rom. 8:13)? It means that the fulfillment of our duty is certain because of the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. *And* (stress on this “and”) it means that this duty is fulfilled by means of painstaking effort on our part. But it is not a cooperative venture where the Spirit does His part if we do our part. This would remove the power and certainty of the Spirit's work; it would remove its efficacy. The connection is that the Spirit efficaciously inworks our obedience. Our obedient effort is not a matter of cooperation with His work but the fruit of His work. We do not allow the Holy Spirit to do His part, such that if we allow Him to bless us then we will be blessed. He allows us to do the effort required in His command; and even better than that, He enables us to do the effort required. When we falter, that does not mean that we failed to do our part so it blocked, we blocked, His part. Rather, when we fail, He has allowed this, but in full loving control to teach us many lessons on the road of renewal, weaning us from our sin and preparing us for heaven. It is His sovereign watch-care over us as His children; in His loving-care, He secured our salvation by the death of Christ in accord with His eternal plan.

Let's try to keep both threads of truth in focus. It is "by the *Spirit*" that "*you*" put the misdeeds of the body to death. Scripture guides us by speaking to one or the other

thread of this paradox, or by putting both together in the same context. a) On one hand, we need to ponder the effectual nature of the Holy Spirit's work. It is revealed truth. We are to know and believe it. *We are set free by the Spirit* so that the law may be fully met in us (Rom. 8:2, 4). b) On the other hand, Scripture commands that we put sin to death in our members (Col. 3:2, 5). c) Both His working and our duty are found woven together (Rom. 8:13; Phil. 2:12-13). So when we find ourselves or others obeying the Lord we must thank God and acknowledge that this is the fruit of the effectual work of the Spirit (See Paul's thanksgiving for obedience, Rom. 6:17-18).

Why does this not lead to hand sitting? Why is it that this teaching, grasped by faith, does not lead the saint to sit on his hands? Why is it that the doctrine of the sovereignty of the Spirit at the precise point of our duty does not lead to passivity and negligence? a) First, a Sovereign God commands us via paradoxical teaching. If you grasp the sovereignty of God, if you know the sovereign Holy Spirit, then you know that obedience is your one and only proper response. One does not believe in the sovereign God when he or she folds the hands in disobedience. b) But the positive side of this is quite deep and remarkable. Knowing the sovereign and thus efficacious working of the Spirit in precise relation to our duties is an encouragement to not depend on ourselves in the very effort we put forth. Knowledge of His effectual working is an encouragement to worship with gratitude in the very work we put forth. There is great encouragement here because it is awesome to know God is working in us. That is the point of "work in fear and trembling" in Philippians 2:12. So we are comforted to know that our working is by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). It gives a spring to our step as we walk in the steps of, and in step with, the Spirit (Gal.5:25).

This is warfare to the death. The war lasts all our days to the very end. It is serious business. How do you weed a garden, especially one that is alive with vigorous, thorny, tough, and relentless weeds that spoil the fruit? *You have to get vigorous, thorny, tough, and relentless yourself in your pursuit of holiness, in using all the means that God has appointed to take hold of, learn, and wield the sword of the Spirit!* What is this sword of the Spirit that we are to take up and use in our battle with sin? The sword is the word of God, all the glorious words of the sixty-six books of the Bible.

This is at times a painful process. A person must walk in the Spirit and put to death the deeds of the body to make it to glory, *and if he has the Spirit, he will through a process*. It is his duty, but the Spirit will see to it that this duty is fulfilled (Rom. 8:1-4).

It will not be fulfilled perfectly. Tension and battle must ensue. In the process, failures to be diligent yield *painful consequences along the way*, but the Spirit will continue to counter our sinful flesh and prompt us to this battle to the death with sin. If we get tripped up because we look down, then we will face the consequences of our sin, and the Spirit will chasten us. How do we get tripped up? We trip and stumble because we do not weed our gardens, because we do not take up the appointed means of grace, and because we do not attend regularly to preaching, teaching, and prayer. If we are stubborn, what will we do? We will lie there in the mud in defeat on the battlefield, complaining against others and pitying ourselves. Having this attitude, we ask for more

severe the chastening; and it will come until what the Spirit intends is performed. He will allow us varying degrees of disobedience and stubbornness; then, graciously, He will set the limit. If he did not set the limit, we would perish of our own will and accord.

Point of focus: we concentrate on our duties and on this path of faith we wait, trusting the Holy Spirit to do His work. We do not just wait, sit back, and fold our hands. Why not? That is disobedience; it is sin. In other words, it is a contradiction of our calling in Christ, a dishonor to our Savior. It shows only perversion of the words of the Spirit woven in paradoxical form for our meditation and spiritual growth. These thoughts, the truths, these meditations help us orient and reorient our lives in the day to day challenges of the pathway of holiness that God put us on in His grace and sovereignty.

If we sit back and fold our hands, even with some kind of faith in sovereignty, we manifest a lack of blessing in our lives that the Spirit allows to us on our journey. It will lead to serious consequences if we continue on this path. If we simply live according to the sinful nature, then we show we do not have the Spirit, and the end of such living is death. However, Scripture teaches that if by the Spirit, through His working in us and trusting in His grace, we put the deeds of the body to death, we will live. The tie between condition and consequence is unbreakable and sure.

Will the Christian walk in the Spirit and reap the fruit of eternal life (Rom. 2:5-10)? Yes. Must he do this with great effort, study, and faith? Yes. Is it automatic and mechanistic? No. Is it dynamic, awe inspiring, encouraging and fruitful? Yes!

There are only two categories of people in the world. Those without the Holy Spirit and those with the Spirit; those who do not have the Spirit and those who have the Spirit; those in bondage to sin and those set free from sin by the Spirit. Again, that our obligation is "not to the flesh" means not to the remnants of sin remaining in us. We do not have obligation to our corrupt sinful natures that we inherited from our first parents and that we still have as God's people with Christ living in us. Why is there no debt to the flesh, no duty, no obligation? Because the Holy Spirit has set us free if we belong to Christ, if Christ lives in us, if we have the Holy Spirit living in us as life, as our personal life giver.

Being set free from sin by the Spirit, you have no obligation to the flesh, to live after the flesh. This is a cloaked exhortation to live after the Spirit. You have the Spirit. You have been set free. You are no longer blind. Now you have spiritual eyesight. You are no longer dead in sin; you have been made alive by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, it is silly, illogical, and ungrateful to think for a moment that you have any obligation to the flesh. This must translate into a sense of obligation to the Spirit, to mind the things of the Spirit, to take up the word of the Spirit in the sixty-six books of the Bible for dear life, as bread, as sustenance to thus walk in His steps (Gal. 5:22-26).