

## Mortification

*“Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature . . .” (Colossians 3:5)*

The newspaper recently carried a long article reporting how “confessions” have disappeared in the American Roman Catholic Church. In some dioceses, confessionals are open for one hour on Saturday and by appointment. When I was young, I heard that there would be lines of people waiting their turn to enter the confessional booth and received absolution. No more. Now, no one goes. What happened? The answer is easy: No one anymore has any concept of sin nor any fear of God. The author of that newspaper article said that he had just done a confession to a priest and thought it was so helpful he’s looking forward to the next time. And I thought, “Strange. Why doesn’t he just resolve not to sin?” That thought never occurred to him.

It’s no different in the Protestant churches (including so-called evangelical ones). We’re indifferent to sin, to God’s remedy for it, and to the offense it causes God. We’re so complacent with our Sunday church-attendance religion that the concept of sin has no power and no meaning. It has become a theoretical concept, something for our doctrinal statements. Listen to our attitudes: “God loves me just as I am.” “Jesus paid it all.” “The Son sets us free.” “I don’t smoke or drink, ‘n I don’t cuss. I’m good.” Or this: “I’ve got the assurance of being in heaven when I die, so don’t try to load me up now with guilt.” But the matter of personal (and even societal or community) sin is of *exceeding* importance to us. Why? Because Jesus stated, **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”** I am not discussing abstract theology here.

We’ve been commanded to put to death our sin nature (“mortification”), in other words, to stop sinning. Colossians 3:5 in the Jerusalem Bible reads, “You must kill everything in you that belongs only to earthly life.” Death is not a natural process (as secular people suppose); rather, it’s a deliberate act by God as punishment for sin. Likewise, if we believe in Jesus, our sin nature is not automatically, naturally, dead. We must *deliberately* kill it.

The “beatific vision,” the desire to know God, to see God and to be with him, is the goal of the Gospel, the purpose of or reason for salvation. But only those who are righteous will have that experience. So, here’s a question for my readers, Does “pure in heart” mean really, actually pure? Or does it refer to the fictive, imputed righteousness of Jesus?

If the “pure in heart” is imputed, not actual, then a passive life, indifferent to sanctification and obedience is OK because such effort is irrelevant. Trusting Christ (whatever that means) – and that alone – is salvific. But if that’s the case, Why the rest of the Sermon on the Mount? Why all the instruction in righteousness everywhere in the Bible? Why do we need to obey anything, or to mortify sin, or to put on the new man, to be Christ-like?

But if it’s *real* purity, will anyone who today claims to be a Christian see God? The Holy Spirit empowers us to be sanctified, but what if a believer quenches the Spirit for an entire life-time, so that there is no real righteousness, was the belief in Christ (whatever that means) in vain? And if we have to really, actually be righteous by obedience to the Word, with/without the Spirit’s enablement, in order to experience the vision, is that works salvation? Or have we misunderstood what “works salvation” is?

Sin is comprehensive. We miss that. It controls our values, thoughts, desires, words, motives and choices in life. It’s the wrong things we do and the right things we fail (or refuse) to do. It’s personal yet it’s also social, that is, it’s also the sins that corrupt us by our participation in a society that’s drenched in sin. Sins can be overt acts yet also godless presuppositions and assumptions hidden in the deep recesses of our soul. There are willful, defiant sins, for which we refuse to repent, that express rebellion against God, against His goodness and wisdom; and there are those that we deem trivial, inconsequential, and ignore. Our character flaws, such

as pride and the inability to control ourselves, are sins. And every sin, large or small, personal or communal, is a slap in the face of a holy God who burns with fiery indignation at all that offends. Our un-confessed sins, sins we never repent of, quench and grieve the indwelling Holy Spirit, so that the power we need to overcome sin is never experienced. Sin is deadly.

The substitutionary, atoning death of Christ on the cross paid the penalty for sin, all sin. And Jesus in heaven constantly intercedes for us when we fail. Yet, the Scriptures demand that we believers also stop sinning and actually do righteousness. Yes, we participated with Jesus in that atonement. We died with Him. We rose with Him. And we've been justified by faith. Nevertheless—*get this!*—we're still also responsible for being actually pure in heart. *Both truths obtain.* We dare not presume upon God for the one truth, the one in which we're passive recipients of grace, and so ignore or be indifferent to the other truth, which is our responsibility and for which Christ holds us accountable. The doctrine of justification by faith is no license to sin nor does it excuse our being oblivious to the gravity of sin.

We dare not ignore the commands to mortify the sinful nature. **“For if you live according to the sin nature, you will die; but if through the Spirit you mortify the misdeeds of the body, you will live”** (Romans 8:13). Mortification is essential for experiencing the beatific vision. We must know what sin is, despise it, and refuse to practice it. This is not “works salvation.” It's Scripture. We must repudiate sin in this life in the same way we must practice righteousness.

In 1 Timothy Chapter 1, Paul does something strategic. He states that the Law of Moses is for us today, not to try to obey it for salvation, but to know what sin is! Believers are not to pursue lives of sin. In verses 8-11, Paul draws on the Ten Commandments to illustrate how the Law reveals sin. We should be doing the same, studying the Law to know what pleases God and what offends Him. That way, we can deliberately and consciously mortify the sinful nature, and we do it as unto the Lord. We are to pursue a life that conforms to the Gospel, a life that conforms to a dangerously holy God.

Allow me now to indulge in some (hopefully sanctified) theological reflection on *why* we must be holy. Several thoughts: (i) We must be holy because God is infinitely holy and so, to be with Him, we must be like Him or be burned to a crisp. Yes, by imputation Christ makes us holy, but we must demonstrate holiness in real life for it to be real and not merely a fiction, in the same way that Jesus had to demonstrate in real life God's obedience and righteousness. (ii) Our active pursuit of holiness is how we reveal gratitude, creaturely humility, and love for God—and not indifference. Jesus came into this world to change us; how we live reveals if we've been changed, or not. The greater our pursuit, the more we honor Jesus. (iii) Our sins necessitated the unimaginable humiliation, suffering and agonizing death of our glorious God. We therefore, in perfect justice, must take responsibility for those sins by repenting of them, which is what mortification does. Refusing to do that shows that we don't really care about sin or God's gracious remedy for sin, the appalling abasement of the Son. (iv) In the future Messianic Kingdom, Israel will actually be holy, so in this interim era we anticipate the Kingdom by showcasing that radically different aspect of it by our own holiness. The Church is proleptic of the coming Kingdom. Too, when we're glorified, we will be perfectly holy, and our pursuit of holiness now in this life makes real – if only anticipatory – our glorious future. We may not do it perfectly in this life, but by yielding to the Spirit, we do it. Paul follows Romans 7 with chapter 8.

Dear Reader, a warning: A veneer of religiosity on a corrupt earthly being is like a coat of paint on rotten wood, unacceptable to God who knows exactly what's inside. Following Christ is demanding! God really expects us to be totally transformed persons with radically different kinds of lives. If we ignore His will and are indifferent to His expectations, we declare ourselves unfit for glory, unfit for the coming Kingdom, unfit to be in His presence. So, let's be worthy of our calling. We have only this one life to be faithful, so . . . let's be faithful.