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# The Epistle of Romans

The Justification of the Ungodly

Chapter 8 Verses 12-17

The author Don Matzat in his book, "Christ Esteem," once said something to the effect: If you try to educate a person, you will get a smarter sinner. If you try to get a person to be confident, you will get a self-assured sinner. If you try to get a person to think big, you will get a big-headed sinner. If you try to get a person to tap into power, you will get a power-hungry sinner. If you try to get a person to be rich, you will get a greedy sinner. If you tell someone that they are okay and that there is nothing wrong with them, you will get a satisfied and slothful sinner. The point being, we mustn't ignore the main problem, which is that the old Adam cannot be improved or fixed.

So, if the old Adam cannot be improved or fixed, what course of action should the Christian take? In verse 13, Paul tells us that if we are alive by the Spirit that we are putting to death the practices of the body. But what does this mean? What does this look like?

Perhaps there is no more significant divide in American pulpits than what Paul is addressing in verses 12-17. For example, how we understand the problem of mankind's sin is going to drastically change how a pastor will preach.

So, let us take a moment and flesh this out a bit.

The majority of pastors in America are against sin, which is good. Sin is considered bad. However, many of these same pastors will see their goal, and the goal of the church, to remove sin from the Christian. They perceive sin as a foreign object that needs to not only be avoided in the world but removed from the Christian. Like a sliver underneath the skin, they see sin as something that needs to be worked out of a Christian. This results in sermons that are all about 'avoiding' sin in the world (which we would agree) and sermons on how to purge sin from the Christian (which we agree with their sentiments but lament that they are not quite understanding this topic correctly.)

You see, the Apostle Paul stresses in Romans 8, as well as in Colossians 3, that we do not remove sin from the human being but that the human being needs to be removed from sin. Confused? Think of it this way. If the goal is to remove sin from the Christian, then the goal is not death but reform and, perhaps, renovation.

Let's use a metaphor. Think of a family that is living in a structurally sound house with 1970s wallpaper, shag carpet, old cupboards, and pink tiled walls in the bathroom. The problem with this house is not the house but the out-dated decorations and interior. All that is needed for the family is for the wallpaper, shag carpet, old cupboards, and pink tiles to be removed from the house. But the house? It is fine.

Now, consider a different house. The same family is living in this second house that has a cracked foundation, leaking roof, rotting floors, and is infested with mold. Oh, and this house also has the same 1970s wallpaper, shag carpet, old cupboards, and pink tiled walls in the bathroom. What does this family need? Sure the decorations and interior are horrific. However, even if the interior and decorations were removed, does that solve anything for the family! No, it doesn't. So, what needs to happen? The answer, the family needs to be removed from the house. And the house? It needs to be destroyed so that a new house can be built!

As you can see, if you were a carpenter, the goal in each of the houses is drastically different. In the first house, the goal is to get the bad decorations out – to renovate the house. In the second house, the goal is to convince the family to get out of the house because the house needs to be destroyed.

To the point, the Apostle Paul advocates death: that the Christian life consists of our "putting to death" our old Adam by the new man. This is what theologians call "mortification."

But how do we mortify? We mortify our old Adam by daily repenting of our sins and hearing the absolution of Jesus. The old Adam is slain when we repent, "I, a poor miserable sinner... (e.g., *the whole house needs to be condemned and destroyed*)," and when we hear the absolution, "I forgive you... (e.g., *come home again into a new house*)."

When preachers spend all their time trying to remove sin from human beings, rather than removing human beings from sin – through mortification and arising anew in Jesus – they are essentially spending all of their time redecorating condemned houses. They are polishing tombs with dead bones on the inside! They are cleaning the outside of a dirty cup! They look busy and spiritually alive – perhaps even on fire – but in reality, are accomplishing absolutely nothing!

The Christian life is 'not' a renovation of the old Adam. It is 'death' of the old Adam and new 'life' in Christ. Daily the old Adam must be mortified in repentance; daily, we must arise anew in Jesus by faith. The condemned house must be bulldozed to be built once more; the dead bones need to be buried to rise again; the dirty clay cup needs to be shattered to be shaped again. We are daily mortified and raised anew via the Law, Gospel, and Sacrament of Baptism.

