

Licensed to Kill: Strategies for Killing the Sin Within (Part 1 of 5)

“Temptation vs. Mortification – Drawing the Lines of Battle”

Colossians 3:1-6

Mark Vroegop

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming (Colossians 3:1–6).

As a child, one of my favorite black and white TV programs was one with which many of you are probably familiar. I only need to say a short phrase, and you’ll know exactly what I’m talking about:

“A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty, ‘Hi-Yo Silver!’”

The Lone Ranger! It was a great show. You had a beautiful white horse that could always catch the horses of the bad guys. You had the trusty companion, Tonto, who always called the Lone Ranger “Kemosabe,” and through his “broken English,” always came up with great ideas. The Lone Ranger fired silver bullets, and he was such a superior marksman that he would shoot to disarm people. He had a superior ability to shoot guns right out of the hands of bad guys. The Lone Ranger always spoke with perfect grammar, was never captured during the entire program, and always was victorious over the forces of evil.

I loved the show because the good guys wore white and the bad guys black. Good always won and evil always lost. The lines of battle were clear, and the Lone Ranger always “got his man” by the last commercial break.

Then it was time to get on the school bus. And everything changed.

The good guys and bad guys didn’t wear color-coded hats. Good didn’t seem to win all the time. And there were many days that lots of issues were left unresolved. To make matters worse, I wasn’t sure whether I was one of the good guys or the bad guys. Some days I seemed to be pretty good. But on other days, not so much. It didn’t take long to learn that the world of the Lone Ranger wasn’t very realistic, and that the battle lines of good and evil were actually inside of me.

I came to realize that I was capable of wearing the white hat of goodness and the black hat of evil deeds. I was struggling with the fundamental problem of indwelling sin. As a child, I didn’t have words or categories for it, but I knew one thing very well: there was evil in my heart, and sometimes I didn’t know how to stop it, disarm it, or kill it.

Kill Sin or It Will Kill You

John Owen, a 17th Century Puritan pastor and theologian, preached a series of sermons on the mortification of sin which became a book in 1685. It became a classic book about how to deal with sin in your life, and the most famous line of the book is “**be killing sin or it will be killing you.**” The book, *Mortification of Sin*, is a fabulous book, but it is written in very challenging English. So Brian Hedges has greatly helped the church by writing a more contemporary and easy to understand book on this vital subject of how to win the battle with sin.

During the month of August we are going to dive into this subject of killing sin through a series of sermons, offering Brian’s book, *Licensed to Kill*, and running a video series in our small groups that we call LIVE|12. Our goals for this month are 1) to talk about a very relevant and practical subject on Sundays and in small groups so you can really go deep, 2) to engage some new people into our small groups, and 3) to whet your appetite for more learning and growth, specifically as we move in the fall and launch some new soul care training sessions under Pastor Andrew Roger’s leadership. We want you to **get connected, get deep, get free, and get trained**, so you can experience a new level of freedom from the power and presence of sin in your life.

Over the next five weeks we will be looking at the following:

- The Lines of Battle – Colossians 3:1-6
- The Battle on the Inside – Romans 7:14-25
- Sin the Cross-Hairs – Romans 6
- Empowered by the Spirit – Galatians 5:16-24
- The Weapons of Warfare – Ephesians 6:10-18

As I’ve thought and prayed over this series, there is one over-arching theme that I hope to press into your soul. It goes like this:

*The battle is within;
Daily I must fight;
Death comes from sin,
Killed only by Christ’s might.*

Just think – no, dream! – with me of what could happen in your life, in the lives of people you love, and in the life our church if we lived under the banner of that theme.

Where It All Starts: “In Christ”

Our text today is Colossians 3:1-6, and it helps us greatly by setting the framework for this battle with sin. It serves as a great overview of what we are dealing with. In order to deal with sin effectively, we need to understand the spiritual landscape, “lay of the land,” or the battle-lines. Verses 1-3 help us see something very foundational when it comes to this battle: our position. When you are in battle, you need to know where you are, and this text helps us with this issue immensely.

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:1-3).

These first few verses highlight the first issue that every human being must address. The question is whether or not you are “in Christ.” In other words, you need to know whose side you are really on. From a theological perspective, this is called justification – a legal declaration by which you are forgiven and made righteous through the work of Jesus Christ.

According to the Bible, the problem with this world, and the problem with your heart, is the issue of sin. Romans 3:23 tells us that every human being has “sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.” So every human being shares this common battle with sin. It is part of who we are.

The Good News of the Bible is that God has made a way for people to be forgiven of their internal and external rebellion against His holiness, which is expressed through His laws and rules. The Bible tells us that Jesus came to the earth, lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and rose again from the dead so that He could pay the just demands of God’s holiness for our sins. The Good News is that for those who acknowledge their sin and put their faith in Christ’s atoning work, God counts Jesus’ death as their own. Listen to the hope of John 1:12-13:

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12–13).

Those who receive Christ Jesus as their savior are forgiven and declared righteous because they are “in Christ.” From a spiritual perspective, when Jesus died, they died. And when He rose from the dead, they rose from the dead through Him. That is why Colossians 3 says things like “you have died and your life is hidden in Christ” (3:3) and “if you have been raised with Christ” (3:1). To be “in Christ” or “with Christ” means that you have forgiveness through Jesus Christ. He did what you could never do.

This is the starting point in dealing with sin. A person begins to deal with sin by first dealing with the fundamental problem of his relationship with God. Sin separates us from God, and it is only through repentance and faith in Jesus that a person is able to have a relationship with God and wage the battle with sin.

We must start here because some people mistakenly try to defeat sin in their own strength. Trying to mortify sin without being converted will never work. Brian Hedges stated it this way in the first chapter of his book:

The most important thing to understand in this first chapter is this: before you can kill sin, you have to look to the Lord who was lifted up on the cross for you. You cannot fight sin unless you have found rest in the inexhaustible sufficiency of doing and dying of Jesus Christ in your place. You cannot mortify sin unless that sin has been already nailed to the cross of Christ. There is no death of sin without the death of Christ.¹

Killing sin starts with being “in Christ.”

¹ Brian Hedges, [Licensed to Kill – A Field Manual for Mortifying Sin](#), (Adelphi, Maryland: Cruciform Press, 2011), 17-18.

Where it All Ends: “Glorification”

Knowing where to start is helpful but so is knowing what the end looks like. The battle we face now is not all that there is, nor will it go on forever. There is a coming day when the struggle with sin will be ended once and for all. The mission of God is to redeem the earth and its inhabitants from the presence and the power of sin.

Theologically this is called glorification. It is the final step in the plan of redemption. We hear this expressed in Colossians 3:4 – “*When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*” Paul is talking about the second return of Christ here, the moment when the risen Christ conquers the devil and all those who follow him and banishes them to the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10-15). Part of beauty of this event is the fact that Jesus also raises the dead and removes all the remaining presence of sin in his followers by giving them new resurrected bodies – a body like His. The effect of this glorious moment is that they will be like him and eternally changed.

*² Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears **we shall be like him**, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).*

*⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but **we shall all be changed**,⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51–52)*

Glorification is important because 1) it shows God’s ultimate redemptive goal of sinless perfection, 2) it explains how God will accomplish that goal, and 3) it highlights the present struggle with sin that is tied to our earthly existence.

Justification, God’s declaration of legal righteousness, is where the Christian’s battle with sin begins. Glorification, God’s recreation of everything touched by sin, is where the Christian’s battle with sin ends.

Where We Live Now: “Progressive Sanctification”

Between justification and glorification is where the followers of Jesus live now. Next week we will look more fully at the issue of indwelling and remaining sin – often called the sin nature. But today I simply want to introduce the dynamics connected with our present life. Like justification and glorification, it is a part of God’s redemptive plan.

Theologically it is called sanctification. Wayne Grudem gives us a simple and helpful definition of sanctification: “*a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives.*”² There are a number of things to note in that definition.

1. It is a progressive work, which means that there are seasons of success, struggle, and failure.
2. While justification and glorification are a work that God alone accomplishes, sanctification involves our direct activity and cooperation.

² Wayne Grudem (edited by Jeff Purswell), *Bible Doctrine – Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 326.

3. The goal is a practical Christ-likeness, a growing spiritual maturity whereby a person becomes more and more like Jesus.
4. But it is also a work that involves greater freedom from sin, a lessening of sin's control and mastery.

We see this lessening of sin's control specifically mentioned in Colossians 3:5 – *“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”* Notice that Paul says “therefore.” This command is given in light of the other positional realities that he had previously talked about. In other words if a person really understands his or her position in Christ and his or her future in Christ, then there will be an ongoing battle to put sin to death. The new birth means that a person has a love for God and a hatred for sin. There is a God-created longing to become like Jesus which results in a practical change of a person's life. The position of “in Christ” leads to a practice of less sin.

Colossians is not the only place that we see this framework. Romans 8 says the same thing.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. ¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Romans 8:9–13).

I hope you heard similar themes of justification (v 10) and glorification (v 11). And I also hope you heard the implication of this glorious spiritual position – “put to death the deeds of the body” (v 13). The battle-lines with sin are marked out by justification and glorification.

But there is something more to hear in Romans 8:13. Let's look at it again: *¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom 8:13).* Do you see the contrast? Living by the flesh equals death. Living by the Spirit equals life. But what does “living by the Spirit” involve? It is a life in which you put to death the deeds of the body. In other words the proof that you are living by the Spirit, are spiritually alive, and that you are not dead, is the activity of “putting to death the deeds of the body.” Don't miss this! It is really important. Putting to death the deeds of the body is not optional. It is the normal and natural activity of those who live by the Spirit.

Is this how you think and live? One of the many desires that I have for this series is to recalibrate your understanding of what your goal is every day of your life. For many reasons our understanding as to our purpose, our passion, and our priorities in this life does not reflect the urgency of this mindset. I want to shift your thinking and get “putting sin to death” back in the place where it should be in your life. The enemy wants us to not take sin seriously; he wants you to coast, to let down your guard, and to find any number of excuses as to why you don't need to approach this battle with blood earnestness.

C.S. Lewis reflected this in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, when he put the following words into the mouth of a demon that is strategizing about the spiritual destruction of human beings:

“Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts . . .”

The apostle Peter, using the back-drop of the beauty of God’s mercy, reminds his readers that there is a war with in the soul.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul (1 Peter 2:9–11).

Sinful passions war against the soul. Did you hear that? They *war* against the soul. Sin is a destroyer. It wrecks everything. Think back with me on the issues that Paul listed in Colossians 3:5 – “*sexual immorality, impurity, evil desire, and covetousness.*” Surely you’ve seen what these sins do to people, to marriages, to relationships, to churches, and to our culture. One of the hardest things about being a pastor is that you get a front row seat to the destruction of sin. You are close enough that you can smell the putrid odor of broken covenants, destroyed trust, pathological selfishness, and self-destroying addictions.

To make matters worse, we know what we are doing when we sin. It is not that we are ignorant to the fact that these things are bad. The problem is not our lack of knowledge; the issue is our negligence. We know what sin is; we just don’t take it seriously. Or we only take it seriously when we feel the real and immediate consequences. I’ve seen it play out many, many times that a person doesn’t really take sin seriously until he is trapped in it, until the putrid stench of it is overwhelming, or it has cost him dearly. It is amazing how seriously a person takes his sin after it has created damage.

The heart behind this series and this message today is to raise your awareness level when it comes to the priority of battling sin. Be killing sin or it will be killing you! Justification sets the framework, glorification is the goal, but now – every single day – be killing sin.

What It Means to Kill Sin

Now that I’ve hopefully set the context, the end goal, and the tone of what we are dealing with here, let me talk specifically about what the mortification of sin involves. What does it mean to “kill sin?” Part of the challenge is that our understanding of the English word “kill” is very definitive. You don’t “kind of kill” something. Further, even how Paul describes this in Colossians 3 is somewhat confusing because he says “put to death.” That sounds very specific and quite permanent. But we all know that sin is not fully dealt with until glorification. So what does this mean?

1. Intentional weakening

When we were studying Colossians 3 in 2008, I stumbled across something that was really helpful.³ While it was helpful to know that the phrase “put to death” was an aorist active imperative (a completed event to which we must actively respond), it was even more meaningful to know the nuance of the Greek word. It is the word *nekroo*, and it was used by physicians to denote the atrophy of the body through sickness.⁴ When I saw this, it made sense. Atrophy means that a part of the body becomes weaker and weaker because of disuse. The arm or leg is still alive and present, but it becomes less functional, less powerful; it is as good as dead. Interestingly, the same word is used in Romans 4:19 in reference to Abraham’s inability to conceive a child. He considered his body “as good as dead.”

This shed great light on how to battle sin for me. It helped me to see that killing sin doesn’t mean that there is a once-for-all decision that renders sin powerless. On the contrary, sin is very much alive in me; I can feel its presence. Therefore “killing sin” never fully removes the presence of sin; it weakens the power of sin by removing the things that would make it stronger. A muscle gets stronger by use, and so does sin. That is why sin is never static; it grows. Putting sin to death means intentionally weakening the hold of sin, the practice of sin, and the power of sin.

So what is in your life right now that is “feeding the beast”? What sinful “weights” are you lifting? What are you doing to intentionally weaken sin in your life? Be killing sin or it will be killing you!

2. Gradual progress

The mortification of sin is directly connected to sanctification. You cannot grow in sanctification without growing in mortification. Both are required. But it is important to remember that you will never achieve perfection or sinlessness until Jesus comes. Sanctification is a gradual process; mortification is as well.

Putting sin to death is the gradual weakening of the power of sin in life of the believer. Sometimes it happens quickly and intensely, but more often than not, it is a slow and gradual work as bad desires, thoughts, actions, and habits are replaced with new desires, new thoughts, new actions, and new habits. It is a rugged and patient journey. There are some temptations that you will battle for the rest of your life, and the hope of mortification is that it becomes easier and easier to win the battle as you develop a track record of God-oriented success.

So can you look back on your life and see progress? Can you see sins that are less a part of your life now? Do you have new sin targets? What are your progress points? Be killing sin or it will be killing you!

3. External and internal activity

Mortification is certainly about what we do and the actions that we take. God’s aim is to change what we actually do; obedience is supremely important. However, mortification is much more

³ See “Live By Dying – Colossians 3:5-7” in the series *The Core* – September 14, 2008.

⁴ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Frierich, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: νεκροω*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

than changing our behavior; putting sin to death must get to the heart, motive, and desire level. The only way to truly mortify sin is to kill the roots of sin in the motives, desires, and drives of the heart.⁵ We have to starve the flesh, wrong motives, and evil desires. And we do that, not only by not acting on what is sinful and not feeding this dark part of our soul but by applying the purifying antidote of the spiritual disciplines through the power of the Holy Spirit. We'll look at this aspect in week five.

Is your heart on your spiritual radar? Do you see that sin is more than just what you do? Do you take seriously the development of your soul, feeding your heart with the right food? Be killing sin or it will be killing you!

4. A daily, serious battle

There is more to be said on all of this, but let me conclude with a last point that serves as a warning and a challenge. Mortification is not an easy task because it is a daily, serious battle. Owen says "the life, vigor and comfort of our spiritual life depend much our mortification of sin."⁶ In other words, your spiritual life is on the line here. What's more, mortification must be a daily pursuit. *"{Those} who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, out to make it their business, all their days, to mortify the indwelling presence of sin."*⁷ It must be the primary goal for all who claim to follow Jesus, and it must be pursued every single day. The battle is serious, and you fight it daily. *"Do make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work...there is not the best saint in the world but, if he should give over this duty, would fall into as many cursed sins as ever any did of his kind."*⁸

One of the most significant things about this battle is the fact that it is something you must fight every day of your life. Is that how you view your Christian life? Is that how you approach every day? Do you take sin seriously? Do you realize the importance of what it means to kill sin? You must be killing sin or it will be killing you.

*The battle is within;
Daily I must fight;
Death comes from sin,
Killed only by Christ's might.*

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⁵ Hedges, 13.

⁶ John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin – A Puritan's View of How to Deal with Sin in Your Life*, (Geanies House: Scotland, Reprinted 2002), 51.

⁷ Owen, 27.

⁸ Owen, 28-33