

KILLING SIN

Before It Kills You

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KILLING SIN BEFORE IT KILLS YOU

Christians are in a spiritual warfare. One of the greatest enemies we face is sin. What makes sin more deadly and powerful is that it dwells within us. It sometimes causes us to do the very things we do not want to do. Think - for a moment - how deadly sin is. It hardens the heart; it sears the conscience; it blinds the mind; it captivates the affections; it succumbs the will; and it deceives the soul. Sin robs of peace; it threatens your assurance; it breaks your communion with God; and it makes you useless and fruitless in the kingdom of God. Sin is out to destroy you, this is why we must learn to destroy it. We must learn to put sin to death.

HOW TO PUT SIN TO DEATH

For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom 8:13). Paul is commanding Christians in this verse to put to death the deeds of

the body. He contrasts putting to death the deeds of the body with living according to the flesh and the outcome of both. In one case you will die and in the other you will live.

A Person Is Not To Live According To The Flesh

If you are living in the flesh, you are destined to die. *Living* is in the present tense. In other words, Paul is talking about someone who is continually living in the flesh. This is their bent. This is their way of life. The person who lives this way proves and reveals that they do not have the Spirit and they do not have Christ. If a person habitually lives in sin and shows no concern for repentance, forgiveness, worship, or fellowship with other believers, he proves that he claims the name of Christ in vain. They are revealing that they are spiritual dead.

Notice the result of living according to the flesh: you must die. This is the outcome of someone living in the flesh. They *must* die. This is what is sure to happen. This is something that will come to pass - They will die. Death is eternal and final separation from God. Those who continue to follow the dictates of the flesh will be damned. This is a serious warning and calls for us to examine ourselves. He is not talking about losing reward or fellowship, he is talking about losing your soul. He is not saying that this person loses their salvation. (There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.) What he is saying is that this

lifestyle demonstrates they never had salvation. They never had Christ and therefore they are subject to death.

The Christian Is To Live By The Power Of The Spirit

This is in contrast to living in the flesh and how we put sin to death. It is by the power of the Spirit. We want to note two things about how to put sin to death. First, the responsibility of putting sin to death; and then the resources of putting sin to death.

The Responsibility Of Killing Sin (Rom 8:13).

Paul is addressing this for all believers. He is addressing “you.” The “you” is the “brethren.” *So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh* (Rom 8:12). All believers must kill sin. There is not some elite group of believers that are super saints who are exempt from this. This is a duty that all of us must put into practice. As long as we live, if we desire to remain free from the power of sin’s corruptions, we need to continually kill the indwelling power of sin. All believers reading this need to heed these words and put them to practice.

But this is only for believers. Unbelievers cannot put sin to death. They have no power. Some people attempt to kill sin by becoming religious. They attend church. They discipline themselves. They make vows,

promises, and may even memorize scripture. They attempt to kill sin, but are never able to because they do not seek it by faith, but by works. It is a man’s duty to kill sin, but not in his own way. We are to kill sin by the power of the Holy Spirit. But if the Spirit is not in you, you cannot kill sin. There is no death of sin without the death of Christ.¹ If a person does not have the Spirit, he does not belong to Christ (Rom 8:9b). Those in the flesh cannot please God (Rom 8:8). A person needs to come to Christ and be converted before he can ever kill sin. A person in the flesh simply cannot please God.

You would laugh at a builder if he attempted to build a structure without first laying the foundation. Someone once told me of a couple who went to look at a fixer-upper. It had a detached garage which was falling over because it had no foundation. It stood for a while, but now it was falling over. In the same way, you cannot truly help people overcome sin unless you first point them to Christ because it is only through Him that sin can be defeated.

When the Jews were convicted about their sins in Acts 2, and they asked, “What shall we do?” What did Peter tell them? Did he tell them to mortify pride, anger, malice, immorality, murder and the like? No, he knew their condition and called them to repent and

¹ *Sin and Temptation - From the Works of John Owen*, Dr. James M. Houston, ed., (Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 163

believe in Christ. Humiliation under the cross comes first, then putting sin to death follows.² Unless a man is born again, all attempts to killing sin will fail.

Without being born again, a man will focus his attention on those things which are not essential for his soul. He thinks he needs to quit his drugs, or his immorality, or his anger. So he becomes distracted from coming to Christ by practicing some spiritual discipline. He starts practicing spiritual disciplines for a while and one of two things happens: first the practicing of the spiritual discipline begins to help him for a time have a measure of victory over sin. This results in peace of conscience. He is now satisfied with his state before God and he becomes hardened in self-righteousness. He has become a Pharisee and he is twice as much the son of hell as he was before. Or the other thing that happens is that his practice of spiritual disciplines does not help him at all and in his despair, he forsakes Christ. "I tried Christianity but it didn't help me." This is the consequence for those who attempt to kill sin without first receiving Christ. To put sin to death, you must be born again. You must come to Christ. Only men who are alive in Christ can kill sin. When men are dead, and that is what unbelievers are - they are dead in their sins, sin is still

² Ibid., 164

alive in them and it will continue to flourish.³ Only believers can put sin to death.

Not only is this for all believers, but believers also are responsible to kill sin (Rom 8:13). We are to be putting to death the deeds of the body. This is what the believer does. This is our responsibility. Even though as believers we have once for all died to sin, this does not free us from the necessity of mortifying sin in our body.

Putting to death is in the present tense, which means we must continually put to death the deeds of the body. Indwelling sin is a powerful force that must constantly be put to death. This is not done overnight, nor is it done all at once. This will take the rest of your life. It is something that must be done daily, even hourly. We are to be killing sin or it will be killing us. This is because sin is always acting; it is always seducing; it is always tempting. If we stand still we will lose the battle against sin. Sin sets its strength against every act of holiness and every step of faith. When Paul wanted to do good, this is when he found the principle of evil in him. *I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good* (Rom 7:21). He found it the moment he wanted to do good. Sin opposes the good we attempt to do. This is why we must continually be killing sin.

Paul tells us specifically that believers are to kill the deeds of the body (Rom 8:13). The body is not just

³ Ibid., 165

the physical body because there are many deeds that we do in our bodies that our good. He is comparing the body with the flesh in the first part of the verse. The body is all the corruption and depravity of our natures, which the body literally shares in large part. Much of the sin we do is through our bodies. *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts* (Rom 6:12). Sin reigns in our bodies. Sin works itself out in our bodies. So when Paul speaks of the body he means indwelling sin, the corrupted flesh, or lusts of the flesh. The deeds of the body are the evil deeds that we do in the body.

In Colossians 3:9 the apostle says, *Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices*. Evil deeds or practices are part of the old self. Paul mentions the deeds of the flesh in Galatians. These deeds are evident, and it is clear what they are. *“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these”* (Gal 5:19-21). It is not an exhaustive list. These are the deeds that must be put to death. In verse 24 he says that the flesh has passions and desires. And since it has these passions and desires it produces fruit, so we must learn to put them to death. Instead of feeding the lusts of the flesh, we must put them to death. This is our responsibility. Now notice how we do this.

The Resources Of Putting Sin To Death By The Spirit (Rom 8:13).

We are to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit. The NASB puts the phrase “by the Spirit” at the beginning of this clause. If you were to translate this into better English it would read “but if you are putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit, you will live.” *By the Spirit* should come last. But it is put first for emphasis because you can only put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit of God. All other ways of discipline are in vain. In vain will you seek for other remedies. All other helps really leave us helpless. Putting sin to death based on human strength and carried out with manmade schemes always fails and leads to self-righteousness. This is what happened to the Pharisees. They put sin to death based on human strength and manmade schemes. The end result was self-righteousness. They did not think they needed repentance because their works blinded them to their sin. The same is true in the church today. There are many different teachings that claim to have the answer to living a holy life, but if it is devoid of the Spirit it will only ultimately lead to bondage. It will simply produce Phariseism. You can make vows: “I will never do this again;” you can memorize scripture; you can try fasting; all these spiritual disciplines - without the Holy Spirit - will be of little help. No other power can accomplish putting to death the deeds of the body. The Spirit is the means to do this.

What sins do you struggle with? Is it being controlled by drugs, or immorality? You say, "I don't have those problems." Well, what about your thought life? How about your tongue? Do you gossip, or slander? Are you filled with pride, envy, covetousness, unforgiveness, lying, laziness? The only way you will be able to defeat these is by the Spirit. You do not need to go to a Christian Psychologist. You need to go to Christ. You need to depend upon the Spirit. It is only by the Spirit that we can put sin to death. True putting sin to death is the work of the Spirit as we trust Christ.⁴ This is why Paul tells us to "*Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh*" (Gal 5:16). We are to walk by the Spirit. As we live in dependence upon Him, He will work through us to kill sin.

What we see in Romans 8:13 is that the believer is responsible to put to death the deeds of the body, but he can only do this in the power of the *Spirit*. There is a balance in this verse. We are responsible to act but we can only have success with the aid of the Spirit. Some people simply act. This is the error of legalists. They try to achieve holiness without God's power. It ends up being all externals, a cleaning up of the outside. Others attempt to achieve holiness by the Spirit apart from their participation. Some claim we must surrender, let go and let God. They think God will do everything and they do not have to do

⁴ Ibid., p. 162

anything. But this is not what this verse is teaching. Human activity in the process of sanctification is necessary but that activity is never apart from the work of God's Spirit. There needs to be a balance. As we put sin to death by the Spirit, the question becomes: What does putting sin to death mean and how do we do this?

A BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF WHAT IT MEANS TO KILL SIN

What Killing Sin Is Not

First of all, killing sin is not the complete elimination of sin. John tells us, *If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us*" (1 John 1:8). The person who does not think he sins is deceiving himself and the truth is not in him. He is not a Christian. A Christian recognizes that he still sins. He hates his sin; he abhors it and he therefore confesses it (1 John 1:9). The confessing of sin is in the present tense. The Christian has to continually confess his sin. John pictures the Christian as one who will never be completely free from sin. Sin is still in the Christian.

Second, putting sin to death is not pretending sin is removed. It is amazing how we tend to rationalize sin away. We will convince ourselves that sin is not

really sin or it is not really that bad of a sin. Or we will excuse our sin by renaming it something else. We will call it a bad habit, or we will call it a natural disposition or a weakness. "I just blow up at people; that is how I am. It is the way God made me. I can't help it. I have a sweet tooth. I can't help stuffing my face with donuts, especially if they are Krispy Creme. This is my weakness." Isn't this how we talk? We have a pet sin that we like and we will excuse it away. We will say things like this to rationalize or minimize our sin. Or we will ignore sin altogether as if it does not exist. By ignoring sin we think it will go away. But by excusing sin or ignoring it, our hearts deceive us. *The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?* (Jer 17:9). Do not be deceived. Your sin is not going away because you pretend it does not exist or you call it something besides sin.

We see an example of this in Genesis 4. God warned Cain to master his sin but Cain ignored God's warning; he paid no attention to his sin. *Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it'* (Gen 4:6-7). Because he ignored his sin, his sin mastered him and he murdered his brother (Gen 4:8). He pretended he had no sin. He left his sin unchecked and it did him in. So killing sin is not ignoring sin; it is not pretending that it does not exist.

Third, putting sin to death is not merely the improvement of natural qualities. Some people seem

to think that putting sin to death means that we need to develop self-control, or prudence or some other quality. "I just need to learn not to be rash and manage my time better. I need to learn to have self-control, or patience or be humble." Then when we develop these qualities we think we have really changed.

Let me give you an example. Some people are naturally reserved, others are naturally outspoken, always putting their foot in their mouth. It is tempting to think that the reserved person has learned to put sin to death, while the outspoken person has not. Yet in reality, the person who struggles with always putting his foot in his mouth may know more about putting sin to death than the naturally reserved person, and the naturally reserved person might still have a heart filled with corruption. You simply do not see it. Or let's say someone knows they need to lose weight so they go on a strict diet. They exercise self-control. They are very careful what they eat. They lose the weight they want to lose. Then they go off the diet, and gain all the weight back. What happened. Didn't they exercise self-control? Yes, but did it help them? No, why? Because they did not deal with the heart. You can develop natural qualities while your heart is still filled with corruption. Putting sin to death is not achieved by refining those temperaments that come natural to us.

Finally, putting sin to death is not simply the diversion of sin. Sin is not killed if it is only diverted. In Acts we read of Philip going city of Samaria and

begin proclaiming Christ to them (Acts 8:5). In that city there was a man named Simon who was practicing magic (Acts 8:9-11). He had the whole city following him. He was astonishing them, and claiming to be someone great. He claimed his power came from God (Acts 8:10). He had deceived the people of Samaria - all of them from the smallest to the greatest - for a long time with his magic arts (Acts 8:11). Then Philip comes to town preaching the gospel, and even Simon himself believed and was baptized (Acts 8:13). Simon begins to follow Philip and was amazed as he observed the signs and great miracles taking place (Acts 8:13). It seems as if a remarkable conversion had occurred in Simon. He quit practicing his sorcery and publically began to follow Christ.

When the apostles hear that the Samaritans received the word of God, they sent Peter and John (Acts 8:14-17). When Simon saw how the Holy Spirit came upon people when they laid their hands on them, he offered the apostles money so he too could have this authority (Acts 8:18-19). He was only interested in having this power so he could continue to astonish the people and claim to be someone great. Simon had not changed. Peter rebuked him (Acts 8:20), warning him that his heart was not right with God (Acts 8:21), and called on Simon to repent of his sin (Acts 8:22). In spite of all of Simon's efforts to reform, he was still the same old Simon (Acts 8:23). He was in the gall of bitterness and the bondage of sin. He had simply diverted his sorcery for covetousness.

To exchange one lust for another is not putting sin to death.

This is what many of the so called twelve step programs do. They will give you twelve steps to overcome your problem, when in reality what they are doing many times is simply diverting you from one sin to another. For example, it is not socially acceptable in our culture to smoke, or take drugs or be a drunk. So to cure you of your drinking problem or drug problem, the twelve steps will divert you from that sin to one which is culturally more acceptable. It is simply replacing one sin for another. It is replacing one bondage of sin to one that is culturally acceptable. "We don't care if you practice this sin, as long as you don't blow smoke in my face or you don't drink and drive." So some people will exchange pride for worldliness, or they will exchange drunkenness for Pharisaism, or smoking for gluttony. Diverting sin is not killing sin.

What Killing Sin Is

What does it mean to kill sin? It consists of at least three things. First, killing sin is the habitual weakening of sin. We develop habits of sin. We have a disposition toward pleasing self, toward pleasing our lusts. Men are continually making provision for the flesh (Rom 13:14). The primary task of putting sin

to death is to weaken the habit of sin so that its power to express itself is subdued.⁵

All of us have different areas in our lives where we struggle with sin. We have developed bad habits of sin, and we need to learn to weaken these habits. *“Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”* (Gal 5:24). If you belong to Christ, if you are a Christian, the flesh with its passions and desires has been crucified. Notice, it is past tense. The flesh has been crucified. In Romans 6, Paul says, *Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin* (Rom 6:6). Our old self was crucified, again past tense. You might be wondering, *“If this is true as Paul says, that the flesh with its passions and desires have been crucified, and our old self was crucified, then how come I still struggle with sin?”* Think of the graphic picture of a man being crucified. The man would struggle to stay alive, sometimes for days. At first, the struggle to stay alive would be more intense because he still had strength, but as his blood and strength begin to waste away, the man would weaken and eventually die. Such it is with indwelling sin. When a person becomes a Christian the flesh with its passions and desires has been crucified, but it is still strong. As the Christian continues to grow in grace, the flesh with its desires continues to weaken, unless of course

⁵ Ibid., 156

you feed it. This is the problem with many Christians. Our flesh with its passions and desires has been crucified, but we continually assist it. Instead of killing it and putting it to death, we feed our lusts, then we wonder why we struggle with sin. Putting sin to death is the habitual weakening of sin.

Second, putting sin to death is a constant fight and contention against sin. The battle against sin is a daily struggle. We must learn to fight against sin. To do this we must take sin seriously. Sin is a powerful force out to do us in. When you have a foe who is out to do you in, you take him seriously. You are always on the look out. You watch his every move.

There is warfare going on within the Christian. *I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good ... but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members* (Rom 7:21, 23). Paul tells us that there is a law of sin in us that directs us to do evil. The purpose of laws is to direct and command. Most people do not commit murder because they know that there is a law which directs and commands us not to do that or there will be consequences. There is a law of sin in the Christian that directs us to do evil, the very things we do not want to do. Though it is a law *in* the Christian, it is not a law *to* the Christian, because he has died to that law. If you are dead the law has no jurisdiction over you. So the Christian does not have to obey the law of sin, but it is still a powerful force within us

directing us to do evil, the very things we do not want to do.

Now, even though this is true, many Christians do not take sin seriously, and because of this they are not motivated to put sin to death. They do not see the danger of indwelling sin. They do not see how it will affect their walk with God or their fruitfulness or their peace or their joy. We must take sin seriously and fight against it.

In this battle against sin we need to know sin's tactics. If you want to have victory over your enemies, you need to know how your enemy operates. We need to gather intelligence about the designs and strategies of the enemy. When I played football in high school our coach would have someone scout the other teams. Then in preparing for the game he would tell us what their strengths and weaknesses were. We would learn how they like to attack, and what they like to do. The coach would point out the person we needed to key on. He would tell us to look out for certain plays. Then during half time we would reevaluate what took place in the first half. This was not working; it was killing us. We needed to come up with a new strategy. This is what we needed to do with sin. What are sin's tactics? How does it operate? If you are continually failing in one area then you need to reevaluate your strategy. We need to learn to recognize sin's typical excuses, pleas, rationalizations and pretenses. We need to anticipate its sly tricks and stay on guard.

Once we do this, then we need to severely attack sin. Load against sin all the firepower that is most destructive to its survival. Colossians 3:5 literally says, *Put to death the members which are upon the earth.* We need to put sin to death. Never think of sin or lust as dead. It is only lying dormant. It is just looking for opportunity to rear its head. So inflict wounds daily and often against sin.

Third, putting sin to death is evidenced by frequent success against sin. You begin to have conquest over sin. Sin that used to master you, you begin to master it. When sin is no longer hindering your service, and it is no longer interrupting your peace, and it is no longer hindering your fellowship with God, then putting sin to death has succeeded to some extent. Killing sin, then, is the weakening of sin's indwelling disposition by fighting against it and experiencing some success over its power. Pride is weakened by humility; selfishness is weakened by love; passion is neutralized by self-control; impurity is washed away by holiness; love of this world is checked by heavenly mindedness. This is what putting sin to death is.

Putting Sin To Death By The Spirit

Now we want to discuss more specifically how we put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit. This is not some big secret. The Scriptures present this quite simply. First, we need to pray. Prayer shows

dependence upon God and His Spirit. One of the things to pray for is to ask God to show you your sin. It is easy to see sin in others - they are gossips, slanderers, filled with pride - but hard to see it in ourselves. David prayed, *Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way* (Ps 139:23-24). David wanted God to show him his sin. When God shows you sin, confess it and turn from it (1 John 1:8). We need to pray and ask God not to lead us into temptation and to keep us from evil (Matt 6:13). We are to be watchful and pray that we do not enter into temptation (Matt 26:41). We need to ask God to fill us with His Spirit to empower us to overcome sin. When we pray we are living in dependence upon the Spirit.

Second, to put sin to death by the Spirit we need to fill our minds with the word of God by reading, meditating, and memorizing so that when temptation comes, the Spirit can use His word to help us put sin to death. The Psalmist tells us, *Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against you* (Ps 119:11). The Spirit uses the word of God treasured in the heart to fight off temptation when it comes. The word of God is called the sword of the Spirit. It is what the Spirit uses to kill sin, but it must be in your heart.

We must recognize the connection between being filled with the Spirit and letting the word of Christ richly dwell within us. Paul in Ephesians commands us to, *Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in*

psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Eph 5:18-19). In Colossians Paul says, *Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God* (Col 3:16).

Notice the two verses are almost identical. To be filled with the Spirit means to have the word of Christ richly dwell within you. To be filled with the Spirit is to have one's mind completely under His divine control. This requires the word to dwell richly in the believer.

In connection with having your mind filled with the word of God we must live in obedience to God's word. Again Psalm 119 says very appropriately, *How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word* (Ps 119:9). To be pure, undefiled by sin, we need to keep the word. We need to obey what God has said. Being controlled by the Spirit comes from being obedient to His word. It comes from studying and submitting oneself to Scripture.

We must do these three things - pray, fill our mind with the word, and live in obedience to the word - in the power of the Spirit. When you are walking by the Spirit you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. Apart from His power we cannot overcome sin.

Finally, we have the result or promise of putting sin to death by the Spirit (Rom 8:13). The promise is you will live. Paul is addressing this to the brethren, to Christians (Rom 8:12). So when Paul promises that we will live, he is not talking about the life we receive

at salvation. The promise that we will live is the joy, comfort, vigor of life in Christ, which we can always experience to a greater degree. Paul said something similar to the Thessalonians. He said, *For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord* (1 The 3:8). Knowing that the Thessalonians were standing firm in the Lord gave Paul life. It brought Paul great joy and comfort knowing they were standing firm in the Lord. When we are putting sin to death by the Spirit we will experience the life of Christ fuller. We will experience more joy, more comfort, more pleasure, more peace, and more power. The promise is life, and isn't this what you want? This is why we must put sin to death.

But there is a condition to this promise. The promise is only realized if we do what Paul says. He says if you do this, *then* you will live. We must put sin to death a certain way. Sin must be put to death by the Spirit. If we attempt to put sin to death any other way, we will fail. But, if we carry out the conditions that are set forth here, then we will get the desired results. There is a certainty to get the desired results if we keep the conditions.

A doctor may give you medicine for your child's ear infection. He will say that if you give your child this medicine then he will get better. There is a certainty between the remedy and the cure. The same is true of putting sin to death. If you use God's remedy then there is a certainty of getting the desired results. God has provided the means to achieve the end. So if you are sick of the sin you are living in, and

you want to really live, then you must learn to put sin to death by the power of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom 8:13). Notice the contrast in this verse between life and death. Those who *live* according to the flesh, must *die*, but those who put sin to *death* will *live*. To live you must die. To live is the opposite of what sin does. At the beginning I said that sin hardens the heart, sears the conscience, blinds the mind, captivates the affections, succumbs the will, deceives the soul, robs of peace, threatens your assurance, breaks your communion with God, and makes you useless and fruitless in the kingdom of God. But if you put sin to death, you will live. To live means to have a heart that is soft toward God, to have a conscience that is sensitive to the prodding of the Spirit, to have a mind that can see the truth, to have affections warmed by Christ, to have a will in tune with God's. To live means to have real peace, joy, and assurance. To live means to have fellowship with God and fruitfulness in the kingdom of God. Life only comes when we are putting sin to death. This is when you will really live. This is why we need to kill sin.

