

The Mortification of Sin, John Owen

Abridged by Richard Rushing

Chapter 1 – Introduction. ‘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 8:13

1. To whom it is directed: ‘You believers.’
 2. The condition: ‘If you.’
 3. The means of accomplishment: ‘The Spirit.’
 4. A duty; ‘Put to death the deeds of the body.’
 5. A promise: ‘You will live.’
- I. The exhortation is directed toward believers.
 - II. The condition expresses the certainty of the relationship.
 - III. Our strength in the performance of this duty comes through the Spirit.
 - IV. The duty itself.
 - V. The promise is life.

Chapter 2 – Why the Flesh Must Be Mortified. ‘Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.’ Colossians 3:5

1. Indwelling sin always abides while we are in the world.
2. Sin is still acting and laboring to bring forth the deeds of the flesh.
3. Sin, if not continually mortified, will bring forth great, cursed, scandalous, and soul-destroying sins. (Galations 5:19-20).
4. The Holy Spirit and our new nature are given to us to oppose sin and lust. (Galations 5:17; 2 Peter 1:4).
5. Neglect of this duty makes the inner man decay instead of renewing him. (2 Corinthians 4:16).
6. Our spiritual growth is our daily duty. (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Two evils that are a part of every unbeliever.

1. First, in himself.
2. With respect to others.

Chapter 3 – The Work of the Spirit in Mortification

1. Vain methods of mortification
 - i. Many of the ways and means used were never appointed by God for this purpose.
 - ii. Even if some are not neglecting the things appointed by God to lead to mortification, they may not be using them in their proper place and order.
2. Mortification is accomplished by the Spirit, Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26; Isaiah 57:17-18.
3. How does the Spirit mortify sin?
 - i. By causing our hearts to abound in grace and the fruits that are contrary to the flesh.

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- ii. By the effective destruction of the root and habit of sin, to weaken, destroy, and take it away,
- iii. He brings the cross of Christ into the life of the believer by faith, and gives communion with Christ in his death, and fellowship in his sufferings.

4. The work of the Spirit and our responsibility

- i. Other graces and good works which are in us are His working also.
- ii. He does not so work in us that it is not still an act of our obedience.

Chapter 4 – How Life and Comfort Depend on Mortification

1. I do not say they proceed from it, as though they were necessarily tied to it.
2. Mortification is not the immediate means that God has instituted to give us life, vigor, courage, and consolation.
3. In our ordinary walking with God, and in the ordinary course of His dealing with us, the vigor and comfort of our spiritual lives depend much on our mortification.

Every unmortified sin will certainly do two things:

1. It will weaken the soul, and deprive it of its vigor.
 - i. Sin untunes and unframes the heart itself, by entangling its affections.
 - ii. Sin fills the thoughts with its enticements.
 - iii. Sin breaks out and actually hinders duty.
2. Sin will also darken the soul and deprive it of its comfort and peace.

Chapter 5 – What Mortification is Not

1. To mortify a sin is not to utterly root it out and destroy it.
 - i. It is good to aim for this however...
 - ii. We will not be able to accomplish it in this life.
 - iii. We are complete only in Christ, not in ourselves. Col. 2:10
2. Mortification is not just the changing of some outward aspects of a sin.
 - i. Some may change an obvious sin for a hidden one.
 - ii. Mortification is not simply substituting one sin for another.
 - iii. One may have a different heart than before, one which is more cunning; not a new heart, which is more holy!
3. Mortification is not just the improvement of our natural constitution.
 - i. Our natural temperaments are not the same, and some have an advantage.

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ii. Those without unruly passions may by natural temper and discipline seem to themselves and others to be very mortified men, yet their hearts are full of abominations.

iii. Our natural temperaments are not a good test for true mortification.

4. A sin is not mortified when it is only diverted.

i. Simon Magus left his sorceries for a while, but then he turned to covetousness and ambition.

ii. A man may be aware of a lust and set himself against the outbreaking of it, but meanwhile suffer the same corrupted habit to vent itself in some other way.

iii. One may not leave one lust for another, i.e., changes pride for worldliness, or sensuality for legalism, this does damage to himself and others.

5. Occasional victories over sin are not mortification. There are two occasions in which a man who is fighting with a particular sin may seem to have mortified it but has not in reality.

i. When that sin breaks out sadly and seriously in a way that greatly disturbs his peace, terrifies his conscience, brings the dread of scandal, and clearly provokes the Lord to judgment.

ii. In a time of some great trial, calamity, or pressing affliction, when the heart is taken up with escaping the present troubles, fears, and dangers, a person may resolve to relinquish his sin and so gain peace with God.

Psalms 78: 32-37. Days spent in affliction and humiliation can be a great deception to believers.

Chapter 6 – What Mortification Is.

1. A habitual weakening of the lust.

i. Every lust is a depraved habit or inclination pushing the heart toward evil.

ii. Even though lust is not always exerting an influence on our imagination and thoughts, we should consider that lust that we seek to mortify a strong and deeply rooted habitual inclination and bent of the will and affections.

iii. Our moral and holy habits exert themselves differently from lust

iv. Lust darkens the mind, extinguishes convictions, dethrones reason, interrupts the power and influences that resist it, and then breaks out into an open flame.

v. Important distinctions about the nature of lust:

a. One lust in a man may prove to be much stronger than another lust might be in the same man.

b. Satan has thousands of ways to support a lust.

c. Lust gets its strength by temptation. Lust in line with a suitable temptation will obtain a life of its own with power, violence, and rage that didn't seem possible before.

d. Paul distinguishes sexual immorality from other sins. 1 Cor. 6:18

vi. The first thing in mortification is the weakening of habit of sin or lust. This is called crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires. Gal. 5:24. We aim at the killing of the body of death 'day by day'. 2 Cor. 4:16.

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2. A constant fight and contention against sin.

i. We need to recognize the enemy we are dealing with and resolve that it must be destroyed by all means possible.

ii. We need to be intimately acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions which give lust its success.

iii. We need to continue to attach our lusts daily with the spiritual weapons that are most detrimental to it. Col. 3: 5.

3. A degree of success in the battle.

i. Frequent success against any lust strengthens us and gives the evidence of mortification.

ii. The heart at any time recognizes sin and temptation in action, it must immediately see what is happening, bring the sin to the law of God and the love of Christ, condemn it, and follow it to execute it to the uttermost.

iii. We must implant, promote the continual residence of, and cherish of those graces that stand in direct opposition to the lust.

iv. For example, by the implanting and growth of humility, pride is weakened. Passion is weakened by patience, uncleanness by purity of mind and conscience, and love of this world by heavenly-mindedness.

Chapter 7 – Only Believers Can Mortify Sin

What are the ways and means in which a soul might proceed to mortify any particular lust or sin?

1st Rule: Unless a man is a true believer, and grafted into Christ, he can never mortify a single sin. Mortification is the work of believers: “If by the Spirit you...” Romans 8:13

Put to death what is earthly in you. Col. 3:5

Who should mortify? You who have been raised with Christ and whose life is hidden with Christ in God.

There is no death of sin without the death of Christ.

You realize how the Papists in their vows and penances seek mortification according to the principles of their church, yet they are like Israel who, seeking for their own righteousness, have not attained it! Why? Because they seek it by works of the law and not by faith. Romans 9:31-32.

It is the duty of every person, whoever hears the gospel or law preached, to mortify sin.

Mortification is not the present duty of unregenerate men. God calls them to conversion first.

Seeking mortification without regeneration presents serious problems.

i. The mind and the soul are diverted from that which is the most important.

ii. This duty, being a good thing in itself and in its proper place, tends to bring a false peace to the conscience.

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iii. When a man has for a season such soul deception, and then finds out after the long course of his life that his sin was not truly mortified, or that he has just changed one sin for another, he begins to believe that victory over sin is impossible.

Chapter 8 – God Requires Universal Obedience

2nd Rule: You cannot mortify a specific lust that is troubling you, unless you are seeking to obey the Lord from a heart in all areas!

Example: A man finds a certain lust to be powerful, strong, and violent. It takes him captive. He is not able to bear it: and sets himself against it, groans under it, and sighs to be delivered. BUT, in the meantime, in other duties, in constant communication with God in reading, prayer, and meditation, and in other ways, he is loose and negligent. He will not then be able to gain the victory over that troubling sin. This is a common sin.

1. This endeavor for mortification has a bad foundation.

We must hate all sin, as sin, and not just that which troubles us.

Love for Christ, because He went to the cross, and hate for sin that sent him there, is the solid foundation for true spiritual mortification.

To seek mortification only because a sin troubles us proceeds from self-love.

2. Maybe God has allowed this troubling lust to have power over you to draw your attention to other failures and your lukewarmness in walking before him.

Why is the troubling of a particular lust a common fruit and outcome of a careless and negligent course in general? For two reasons:

1. This is a natural effect. Lust lies in the heart of everyone, even the best while he lives.

2. God often suffers a particular lust to chasten our other negligences.

He who truly and thoroughly seeks to mortify any disquieting sin, must be equally diligent in all parts of obedience. We must see that every lust and every omission of duty is a burden to God. If we do not seek to obey in every area of our lives, our soul becomes weak.

Chapter 9 – The Dangerous Symptoms of Sin

Specific directions for the soul seeking to gain victory over disquieting lusts:

Preparatory Direction 1: Consider the symptoms that accompany a lust.

1. Firm establishment over a long period of time and settlement as a habitual practice.

2. Another dangerous symptom is when the heart pleads to be thought in a good state, yet all the while allows the continuance of a lust without any attempt at its mortification.

3. When sin frequently succeeds in obtaining the consent of the will.

4. When a man fights against a sin only because of the consequences or penalty of that sin.

5. When it is probable that trouble over a sin or lust is a punishment from God.

6. Your lust has already withstood particular dealings from God against it.

Chapter 10 – Seeing Sin for What It Is

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Preparatory Direction 2: Get a clear and abiding sense upon your mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of the sin with which you are troubled.

There are many ways in which sin diverts the mind from an appropriate sense of guilt.

Consider the following: 1. For a believer, even though the power of sin is weakened by the grace that is in him, and he is not under the authority of sin as others are, the guilt that arises from unmortified sin is aggravated and heightened by the fact that he has received grace.

2. God delights in the abundance of beauty and excellencies in the hearts of His children more than in the most glorious works of other men.

May there be no room in your heart to justify any sin or lust, or allow it to gain strength and prevail.

Danger 1 – Being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Danger 2 – Coming under a great chastisement.

Danger 3 – The loss of peace and strength all a man's days.

Danger 4 – The danger of eternal destruction

3.. Consider the present evils of unmortified lust.

i. It grieves the holy and blessed Spirit, Ephesians 4:30.

ii. The Lord Jesus Christ is wounded afresh by it.

iii. It will take away a man's usefulness in this generation.

Chapter 11 – A Tender Conscience and a Watchful Heart

Preparatory Direction 3: Charge your conscience with the guilt of indwelling sin.

1. Consider indwelling sin in relation to the law of God. Lay your particular corruption next to the law and let its pressure weigh heavily on your conscience. Consider the law in its holiness, spirituality, severity, and see if you can stand before it in your corruption. Allow the terror of the Lord as displayed in the law to affect you greatly.

i. Tell your conscience that it cannot be assured that you are free from the condemning power of sin while your unmortified lust dwells in your heart.

ii. The law was commissioned by God to judge sin wherever it finds it, and bring it before His throne.

2. Let us consider sin in relation to the gospel. Bring your lust to the gospel. Not for relief, but for further conviction of your guilt. Look on Him whom you have pierced, and let it trouble you. Say to your soul, "what have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this how I pay back the Father for His love? Is this how I thank the Son for His blood? If these questions do not cause your conscience to sink and melt, I fear that your case is very dangerous.

Consider these instructions and that we should love and consider all the benefits we have under the gospel.

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1. The infinite patience and forbearance of God towards us.
2. How many times you have been at the door of being hardened by sin, and then the infinite and rich grace of God has recovered you to fellowship with Him again?
3. It is important now to consider all God's gracious dealings with you?

Preparatory Direction 4: Seek a constant longing and thirsting to be delivered from the power of sin. Do not let your heart be happy with your present condition, even for a moment.

Preparatory Direction 5: Consider whether the trouble that you are perplexed with is related to your particular make-up and nature. Does your personal constitution heighten and cherish some particular sin?

- i. This is not in the least a just excuse for the guilt of your sin.
- ii. If your constitution is particularly prone to give way to a particular lust, then Satan and sin have a special advantage, and you must, with extraordinary watchfulness, care, and diligence, fight to overcome these attacks against your soul.
- iii. For the mortification of any sin so rooted in the nature of man, there is one expedient particularly suited for him: "I discipline my body and keep it under control."

Preparatory Direction 6: Consider what occasions your sin has taken advantage of to exert itself in the past, and watch carefully at such times. Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation. Luke 21:34

Preparatory Direction 7: Rise mightily against the first sign of sin. Do not let it gain the smallest ground. James teaches that sin is progressive. James 1:14-15. "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

Chapter 12 – Humility

Preparatory Direction 8: We need to be exercised with such meditations as will fill us at all times with self-abasement and thoughts of our own weaknesses.

1. Meditate upon the excellence and the majesty of God and our infinite, inconceivable distance from Him. These meditations will fill us with our own vileness and strike deep at the root of our indwelling sin.

"I hear, and my body trembles;

My lips quiver at the sound:

Rottenness enters into my bones;

My legs tremble beneath me." Hab. 3:16.

2. Consider often how unacquainted you really are with God. Certainly you know enough to keep you low and humble, but how little we really know of Him!

Labor to limit your pride by asking, What do you know about God? How little a portion of His majesty! How immense He is in His nature! Can you look without terror into the abyss of eternity? Can you bear the rays of His glorious Being?

Chapter 13 – Wait for the Verdict of God

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Preparatory Direction 9: When God stirs your heart about the guilt of your sin, concerning either its root and indwelling, or its breaking out, be careful you do not speak peace to yourself before God speaks it. Listen closely to what He says to your soul.

Without careful observation of this direction, your heart will be very exposed to the deceitfulness of sin.

Observation 1: It is the great prerogative of God in His sovereignty to give grace to whom He pleases, "He has mercy on whom he wills." Romans 9:18.

Observation 2: Just as God creates peace for whom he pleases, it is the prerogative of Christ to apply it to the conscience.

Five rules by which men may know whether or not God speaks peace to them or whether they speak peace to themselves only.

Rule 1: Men certainly speak peace to themselves when they do not view their sin, from the guilt of which they seek relief, with the greatest hatred imaginable.

Rule 2: Men also speak peace to themselves when they reason from the gracious promises of God and claim them in a purely rational and natural way.

Rule 3: Speaking peace to ourselves can be detected by the fact that we do it superficially. "They have healed the wound of my people lightly." Jeremiah 6:14.

Rule 4: A person speaks peace to himself when he is concerned about one sin, while at the same time there is another evil of no less importance lying upon his spirit, about which he has had no dealings with God.

Rule 5: When men speak peace to themselves, it is seldom the case that God at the same time speaks humiliation to their souls. But God's peace is a humbling peace.

Chapter 14 – The Work of Christ and the Power of the Spirit

Direction 1: Set your faith upon Christ for the killing of your sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in the light of Christ's great work, and you will die a conquerer. You will, through the good providence of God, live to see your lust dead at your feet.

How can we look by faith to Christ for this great purpose?

1. By faith fill your heart with a right consideration of the provision that God has made in the work of Christ for the mortification of your sins.
2. Raise up your heart in faith with an expectation of relief from Christ.

Two additional reasons for expectation of relief:

- i. Consider His mercy, tenderness, and kindness as He represents us as our great High Priest at the right hand of God.
- ii. Consider also the faithfulness of Him who has promised.

Two advantages that always come with this expectation of help from Jesus Christ

- a. It engages the Lord to give a full and speedy assistance.
- b. It encourages the heart to make diligent use of every means by which Christ may reveal Himself to the soul.

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Particulars relating to the direction for the mortification of a prevailing disorder in the soul.

1. Place your faith particularly upon the death, blood, and cross of Christ; that is, on Christ as crucified and slain.

2. When you meditate upon the death of Christ, keep in mind the power available to us, and your desire to be conformed to Christ. Phil. 3:10; Col. 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:18-19.

Direction 2: Consider the part that the Holy Spirit plays in mortification and the effects that are particularly ascribed to Him.

1. He clearly and fully convinces the heart of the evil, guilt, and danger of the corruption, lust or sin that is to be mortified.

2. The Spirit alone reveals to us the fullness of Christ for our relief.

3. The Spirit alone establishes the heart in the expectation of relief from Christ.

4. The Spirit alone brings the cross of Christ into our hearts with its sin-killing power.

5. The Spirit is the Author and Finisher of our sanctification.

6. All of our soul's prayers to God in our need are supported by the Spirit.

John Owen's life was incredibly difficult.

Born in 1616 and dying in 1683, Owen lived through the deaths of his first wife and all of his children, several of whom died in very early childhood. He supported his last surviving daughter when her marriage broke down. He contributed to a political revolution, watched it fail, saw the monarchy restored and wreak a terrible revenge on republicans, and lived in and around London during the persecution that followed. For twenty years he would have seen the decapitated heads of his friends on display around the city. He died fearing that the dissenting churches had largely abandoned the doctrine of the Trinity and justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; and, with Charles II about to be replaced by his openly Catholic brother James, believing that the English Reformation was almost over.

2. Owen was one of the most published writers in the seventeenth century.

He published around 8 million words. These writings included books on theology and spirituality, politics and economics, and ranged in length from the largest commentary ever published on the epistle to the Hebrews to a short Latin poem that has never been reprinted. For not all of Owen's works have been kept in print. The most widely circulating nineteenth-century edition, most of which is published by the Banner of Truth, did not include Owen's sermon manuscripts that are kept in various English libraries, nor the book for children that Owen published in 1652.