

Of the Mortification of Sin in  
Believers;  
The Necessity, Nature and Means of  
it;  
with  
A Resolution of Sundry Cases of Conscience Thereunto  
Belonging  
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As usual, let me encourage you all to invest time in this study. If you do not take the time to read the relevant chapter of the book, and think about the questions and write down answers, you will find the class challenging and/or dull. However, if you do invest the time and effort, it will be lively and beneficial for you and for us all. It ought not to be the same 5 or 6 voices that are heard answering the questions.

## CHAPTER 1

ESV Romans 8:13 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

1. **perspicuity - the clearness/clarity of something - he wishes to make clear what it is he is writing about, the direction he is going to take his subject.**
2. **recapitulation - an act or instance of summarising and restating the main points of something - in this case the Apostle Paul summarises and restates the doctrine of justification by faith.**

3. The Conditional Clause - Owen writes of two possible ways this (and indeed many) conditional clauses can be understood. This is important. When Paul writes 'But if' (in the text 'but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live' he could mean;
  - a. that the results are possible but not certain, that is that if we do the duty of putting to death the deeds of the body we will [probably or possibly] live. We use conditionals this way too 'if it is a nice day we will go to the beach' OR
  - b. that the results are certain, that is if we do the duty of putting to death the deeds of the body we will [definitely] live.
  - c. Owen contends that it cannot be a. and must be b. because of the same people it is said in verse 1 of the chapter 'ESV Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' - no uncertainty. Rather as we say to a sick man 'if you take the medicine you will be well' if the duty is carried out the stated result will indeed happen. There is a certain connection between the mortifying of the deeds of the body and the living intimated in the conditional 'if'.
4. The next point Owen makes is a little harder to understand but is also important. He is asking the question of this mortification is a cause of life (i.e a cause and effect relationship - as medicine is of a cure to illness, or is it a means to an end. Now why does he make this difference? Because he is very keen to guard the great central truth of Scripture that eternal life, salvation are the gift of God through Jesus Christ. He will not permit to us to think that our actions of mortification (important as they are unto eternal life) are **not** the ultimate and formal cause of eternal life - God's grace is! Thus he says that mortification is not the cause of 'life' but rather 'God hath appointed this means for the attaining that end which he hath freely promised.' - nevertheless 'there is a certain infallible connection and coherence between true mortification and eternal life: if you use this means, you shall obtain that end; if you mortify you shall live.'
5. Next Owen makes sure we know that this is a duty and task and means for believers, for those for whom there is no condemnation etc....it is not a task than can be performed by, nor should it be urged upon the unconverted, and to do so is one of the roots of superstition and self-righteousness he mentions in the preface. He then proposes a thesis which is one of his first and most basic applications of the text;

'The choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.'

6. The principal efficient cause (def. an agent that brings a thing into being or initiates a change) of the performance of this duty lies not in ourselves but rather is the

Holy Spirit. Paul's words are 'But if by the Spirit'. The Greek construction used here is called a 'dative of agency', or instrument - in this case since it refers to a person the Holy Spirit it is agency. The agent, the one acting primarily and efficiently unto the end of life is the Spirit (though of course as we'll see we also are active. He points out that men can, have done, and do pursue mortification by other means than here specified, or without the Holy Spirit - yet such a programme always ends in failure;

Romans 9:30-31 30 'What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; 31 but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. '

Owen gives us then a second fundamental application of the text; this one is worth memorising!

'Mortification from a self-strength carried on by ways of self-invention , unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world'.

**7. He then turns his pen to the duty itself - 'mortify the deeds of the body' and makes three observations;**

**a. what is meant by the body?**

- i. it is the same as the flesh at the beginning of the verse, they are two different words but refer to the same things....κατὰ σάρκα 'according to flesh' and then at the end τοῦ σώματος 'of the body'. 'The body, then, here is taken for that corruption and depravity of our natures whereof the body, in great part, is the seat and instrument, the very members of the body being made servants unto unrighteousness thereby, cf. Romans 6:19. It is indwelling sin, the corrupted flesh or lust, that is intended.
- ii. He goes on to explain some other parallel expressions; the 'old man' the 'body of sin' Romans 6:6

**b. what are meant by the deeds of the body?**

- i. the word Paul uses is the same word that gives us the title of the book of Acts - so they denote the actions, works, or things done 'of the body'.
- ii. They are those 'works of the flesh' of Gal. 5:19 - and since they are connected to the aforementioned 'of the body' they denote those actions, works, that behaviour that flows out of our remaining sin.

**c. what does it mean 'to mortify'?**

- i. it means to put to death, to kill.
- ii. 'to kill a man, or any other living thing, is to take away the principle of all his strength, vigour and power, so that he cannot act or exert or put forth any proper actings of his own; so it is in this case.'
- iii. Important note; 'It is [the old nature, the old man etc.] meritoriously, and by way of example, utterly mortified and slain by the cross of Christ; and the 'old man' is thence said to be 'crucified with Christ,' Rom 6:6, and ourselves to be 'dead' with him, verse 8, and really initially in regeneration, Rom 6:3-5, when a principle contrary to it, and destructive of it, Gal. 5:17, is planted in our hearts; ***but the whole work is by degrees to be carried out towards perfection all our days.***

8. **What is the promise attached to the duty?**

- a. 'You shall live' (if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body)
- b. The life promised is in opposition to the death threatened in the first clause of the verse. Cf. Gal 6:8.
- c. Now perhaps the life spoken of here is not only 'eternal life' but even here and now the spiritual life we have in Christ, or rather the experiencing of the joy and peace of it. Every believer has life in its essence through union with Christ, but the Apostle may here mean that the joy, comfort and vigour of that life cannot be experienced without a committed pursuit of mortification by the Spirit. 'The vigour, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh.'

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

- Why is it so important to know who this verse/instruction is addressed to?
- Is our 'life' dependent upon our work here or not?
- Where is grace present in this verse?
- Study the remainder of Romans 8. Note down all the 'activities' that the Spirit does in us and for us. How do these observations help us understand the Spirit's role in mortification?
- What is the result of attempting mortification apart from the Holy Spirit?
- What is the relationship of the body to sin?
- In summary what are aiming to do when we mortify the deeds of the body?
- Discuss the 'life' that is promised. Owen notes two probable meanings we should attach to the word in this text.