

Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

CHAPTER 3

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.

Definitions

- **without** - we think of this word usually in a slightly different way to how Owen uses it in the principle; there he means without reference to, in connection with, dependent upon the Holy Spirit.
- **thing of not**- something which is useless, as good as if they actually did not exist, have no power
- **efficient**- Owen uses a noun here, this is not very common...but means someone who is the efficient cause, the source, author or actor in something. in this case mortification of sin'
- **expedients** - means by which some purpose, plan or end may be achieved - e.g. an aeroplane is an expedient by which we may fly to foreign climes on holiday
- **discover** - we would use the word uncover, or reveal
- **virtue** - a quality considered morally good or desirable in a person
- **work wrought**- a task done, performed, carried out by effort
- **sundry** - various

Owen now turns in this chapter to consider a second great principle that must be kept in mind whenever we turn our minds to killing sin. Having stated (the first principle) that all believers though freed from the condemning power of sin must make it their business all through life mortify remaining sin he now states that the Holy Spirit,

'only is sufficient for this work; all ways and means without him are as a thing of nought; and he is the great efficient of it,—he works in us as he pleases'.

He opens this up in this chapter under two sections 1) that all ways apart from the Spirit are useless and 2) by showing how it is indeed the work of the Spirit.

1) In vain do men seek other remedies; they shall not be healed by them.

Owen pictures sin as a disease, demanding a cure—the cure is mortification, but mortification cannot be done apart from the Spirit. Owen then explains that all actual or possible means of mortifying sin that are not vitally connected to the Spirit are useless.

He highlights the means suggested and prescribed by popish religion - that is Roman Catholicism; such things as they prescribe to the end of mortification such as rough garments, vows, orders, fastings, penances, supererogation etc. are supposedly designed for this purpose. Owen contends they will not work. However he also says closely related

means are being suggested by those under the name of Protestantism and these also are equally useless.

What is it that all these suggested means whether by Roman Catholicism or Protestantism are lacking that makes them useless. Owen puts it this way,

‘Such outside endeavours such bodily exercises, such self-performances, such merely legal duties, without the least mention of Christ or his Spirit, are varnished over with swelling words of vanity, for the only means and expedients for the mortification of sin, as discover a deep-rooted unacquaintedness with the power of God and the mystery of the Gospel.’

Why are these methods so useless at mortifying even one sin? Owen gives two reasons;

- Because many of the ways and means they use and insist upon were never appointed of God for the purpose of mortification - and since everything necessary is appointed for God, nothing not appointed will be of any use! To them God will say, Isaiah 1:12 "When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? and to those who require and impose such, Mark 7:7-8 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."
- Because those things which **are** appointed by God ‘are not used by them in their due place and order’. Things such as prayers and fasting are to be viewed as streams, not as fountains which Rome and confused Protestants view them as.

‘Whereas they effect and accomplish the end as means only [i.e streams], subordinate to to the Spirit and faith, they look on them to do it by virtue of the work wrought [ie. fountains] if they they fast so much, and pray so much, and keep their hours and times, the work is done.....in a word, they have sundry means to mortify the natural man, as to the natural life we lead; none to mortify lust or corruption.’

He then describes what may be an all too familiar pattern of mortification, that ultimately fails.

‘Men are galled with the guilt of a sin that has prevailed over them; they instantly promise to themselves and God that they will do so no more; they watch over themselves, and pray for a season, until this heat waxes cold, and the

sense of sin is worn off; and so mortification goes also, and sin returns to its former dominion.'

Duties he says, are excellent **food** for an unhealthy soul; but no **medicine** [physic] for the for sick soul.

'He that turns his meat into his medicine must expect no great operation. Spiritually sick men cannot sweat out their distemper with working.'

2) Mortification is, then the work of the Spirit, For 2 reasons

- The Spirit is promised to us to do this work of mortification
 - See Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26
 - See also Isaiah 57:18,19
- We have all our mortification from the gift of Christ, and all the gifts of Christ [this one included] are communicated to us by the Spirit of Christ.
 - John 15:5; Acts 5:31; Acts 2:33

He then poses and answers 2 questions that we may get a better hold of his meaning.

First, How does the Spirit mortify sin?

Second. If this is the work of the Holy Spirit, how is it that we are exhorted to do it?

First then, How does the Spirit mortify sin?

Owen gives three answers;

- **By causing our hearts to abound in grace and the fruits that are contrary to the flesh** [i.e. indwelling sin etc.], and the fruits thereof [actual sin of thought and word and deed] and the principles of them. See Galatians 5:19-25 for the Apostle Paul's contrasting of the fruit of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit and their opposition to each other. Also see verse 17 to see how the grace of the Spirit is vital in overcoming indwelling sin — Galatians 5:17 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. Cf. Titus 3:5
- **By a real physical efficiency** i.e by a real active, efficient, successful power against the root of sin, withering and destroying the remnants of the old man.
- **By bringing the cross of Christ into the heart of the sinner by faith**, thereby giving us communion (fellowship) with Christ in his death, fellowship in his sufferings (which he will expand upon later in the book)

Secondly Owen asks and answers a question that we all must have had or have, and that may confuse us. If this is the work of the Holy Spirit, how is it that we are exhorted to do it?

Well we are! Roman's 8:13 and so I would say whether we understand the answer or not we should do it, but Owen answers in two ways.

- The work of mortification is just like every other grace and good works that are expected of us as believers, there is always a dynamic of grace working in us, but also a expectation that we will do out duty, it is the time-long question of how God is sovereign and yet we are responsible. See Philippians 2:13; Isaiah 26:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:11; Colossians 2:12; Romans 8:26; Zechariah 12:10.
- The Spirit does not so work in us in such a way that we need ignore our duty and be obedient. He does not work against us, or without us [that is without us being involved], rather he works in us, and with us. Thus **we cannot mortify sin without the Spirit**, but the **Spirit will not** mortify us if we will not engage in our duty to mortify.

Questions for thought and discussion.

- What ways to people try in order to kill sin and eradicate their guilt? What means are you tempted to rely upon and use or have been to do the same?
- Why do these methods and application not work? Think about this beyond what Owen says, think in terms of our limits as well as the limits of the methods themselves.
- How do we often us the right things, such as reading the Bible, prayer and fasting etc. in the wrong way to accomplish mortification?
- Is it possible to get tough with sin and accomplish mortification? Why or why not? If not what does getting tough on sin accomplish at best?
- Why must mortification be a work of the Spirit?
- How does the Spirit mortify sin?
- How do we harmonise the our duty to kill sin with the fact that it is the Spirit's work?