

# Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

## CHAPTER 5

### ‘What Mortification is not’

#### Definitions

- **dissimulation** — the practice of to hiding under a false appearance, or pretence (a very purposeful form of hypocrisy, acting in a certain way which does not truly reflect who we are in secret or such like.
- **abhorrency**— hate, and disgust of something, we use the word abhorrence today.
- **relinquishment**— the forsaking or leaving, or giving up of something.

Having dealt with the three underlying principles on which he is building this discourse, in this chapter Owen now comes to deal directly with the nuts and bolts of the subject of mortification. This is a fairly short, and straightforward chapter so you won't need much by way of help or guidance in it.

He basic aim in the chapter is to negatively describe what mortification is **not**.

He begins by outlining a fairly reasonable statement of the problem of our indwelling sin,

‘Suppose that a man is a true believer, and yet finds in himself a powerful indwelling sin, leading him captive to the law of it, consuming his heart with trouble, perplexing his thoughts, weakening his soul as to duties of communion with God, disquieting him as to peace, perhaps defiling his conscience and exposing him to hardening through the deceitfulness of sin. What shall he do? What course shall he take and insist on, for the mortification of this sin, lust, distemper, or corruption, so such a degree as that, though it not be utterly destroyed, yet in his contest with it he may be enabled to keep up power, strength and peace, in communion with God?’

A number of things to note:

First, note that Owen operates on the assumption that the true Christian will experience temptation to sin, from inside.

Second, note that Owen operates on the assumption that the strength of indwelling sin can be very great.

Third, note that Owen assumes that the true believers will be troubled and perplexed and disquieted by sin. This is the other side of the coin we considered in the previous chapter; that peace and so forth are ordinarily the result of mortification.

Owen proceeds to open up **five** negative descriptions or definitions of mortification. Some of these are things which can be and often enough are taken as mortification which in reality are not.

**1) While it ought to be our aim in mortification, mortifying sin is not the utterly killing of it, its total destruction so that it no more hold on us in any way ever again.**

This is indeed what we should aim at, work towards, but ‘this is not in this life to be accomplished.

‘There is no man that truly sets himself to mortify any sin, but he aims at, intends, desires, its utter destruction, that it should lead neither root nor fruit in the heart or life. He would so kill it that it should never more, cry or call, seduce of tempt, to eternity.’

Now, he says doubtless by the Spirit and grace of Christ, ‘a wonderful success may result in faithful mortification, but perfect and utter destruction is not possible in this life. He points to the example of Paul in Phil. 3:12. He muses why in God’s plan this is the case,

‘This we would have; but God sees it best for us that we should be complete in nothing in ourselves; that in all things we might be complete in Christ.’

**2) Mortification is not mere external reformation for the sake of appearances and reputation etc.**

The state of such who act in this way Owen rather pointedly describes.

‘He [the one who merely stops doing something externally] hath got another heart than he had, that is more cunning; not a new heart, that is more holy.’

**3) Mortification is not the improvement of a naturally quiet, sedate, personalty and nature.**

‘Some men have an advantage by their natural constitution, so far as they are not exposed to such violence of unruly passions and tumultuous affections as many others are. Let now these men cultivate and improve their natural frame and temper by discipline, consideration and prudence, and they may seem to

themselves and others very mortified men, when perhaps their hearts are a standing sink of all abominations.'

He helpfully gives a scenario to help us think of this teaching us that you really ought to judge a book by its cover!

'One man, perhaps, is never too much troubled all his life with anger and passion, nor doth trouble others, as another is almost every day; and yet the latter may have done more to mortification of the sin than the former.'

How does such a mild person proceed in mortification, or know that they are proceeding?

'...let them bring themselves to self-denial, unbelief, or envy or some such spiritual sin, and they will have a better view of themselves.'

#### **4) A sin is not mortified when it is only diverted.**

Owen gives us the example of Simon Magus, he mortified his sorceries and magic for a season, he mortified them if you want, but he did not mortify his covetousness and ambition, they were the sins that set him to work his magic, and they are merely acting in a different way as he seeks even the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8).

'A man may be sensible of a lust, set himself against the eruption of it, take care that it shall not break forth as it hath done; but in the mean time may suffer the same corrupted habit to vent itself in some other way; as he who heals and skins a running sore thinks himself cured, but in the mean time his flesh festereth by the corruption of the same humour breaks out in another place.'

'He that changes pride for worldliness, sensuality for pharisaism, vanity in himself to the contempt of others: let him not think that he hath mortified the sin he seems to have left.. He hath changed his master, but is a servant still.'

#### **5) Occasional conquests over sin do not amount to mortifying the sin.**

There are two times when a man fighting with some particular sin may seem to himself to have mortified, but in fact has not.

- 1) When that sin has had some sad eruption, to the disturbance of his peace, terror to his conscience and evident provocation of God. This awakens and stirs up all that is in the man; it amazes him, fills him with the abhorrency of sin and himself for it, sends him to God, makes him cry out for his life, abhor his lust as hell, and set himself against it.'

When this happens Owen says, sin 'shrinks its head, appears not by lies dead before him.

- 2) 'In a time of some judgement, calamity or pressing affliction, the heart is then taken up with the thoughts and contrivances of flying from the present troubles, fears and dangers; this, as a convinced person concludes, is to be done only by the relinquishment of sin, which gives peace with God. ....Accordingly, sin is quiet, stirs not, seems to be mortified.'

Owen expounds on Psalm 73 as an example of a record of such kind of 'apparent mortification'.

So at these two times, mortification may indeed appear to have taken place, have been seriously engaged in, and perhaps there has indeed been sincerity—but the inner, core sin is not dead but merely lying dormant, awaiting a more acceptable time to attack.

### **Questions for thought and discussion.**

- Owen says that mortification is not the utter death of a sin, he says this cannot be achieved in this life. Why? Provide textual evidence if possible.
- Mortification is not merely dealing with the outward manifestations of sin, or outward sins. What is the danger of thinking you can, or assuming you have already, completely mortified sin in your life?
- Why is it impossible to get a sense of your own or someone else's practice of mortification simply by looking at them? Can you think of a text or texts that would explain why we must go deeper, and in connection with ourselves pray that we might engage accurately in mortification?
- What role do difference in temperament, personality, and shaping influences play in sin and mortification. Think about your own personality, how will mortification and sin work in you?
- Have you thought about how a certain sin in your life manifests itself in different ways at different times? Why do you think our sinful expressions may vary without real mortification?