

# Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

## CHAPTER 6

‘What it is to mortify a sin in general’

### **Definitions**

- **habitual** — adjective; done or doing constantly or as a habit:
- **distemper** — an old-fashioned word for disease
- **impetuousness** — the tendency in this context for sin and list to act quickly and without warning etc.
- **tumultuate** — to raise a disturbance, to create a tumult, kick up a storm!
- **accidental** — incidental; subsidiary: e.g. the location is accidental and contributes nothing to the tension between the characters in the poem.
- **stratagems** — noun; a plan or scheme, esp. one used to outwit an opponent or achieve an end: a series of devious stratagems.
- **alacrity** — noun; a brisk and cheerful readiness: she accepted the invitation with alacrity.

Owen in this chapter begins to define and describe what mortification of a particular sin consists in, having outlined some erroneous conceptions of what it is in chapter 5. He is going to describe for us three things that mortification consists of 1. An habitual weakening of it, 2. A constant fighting and contending against sin, and 3. Success over it.

### **1. Mortification consists firstly in a habitual weakening of it.**

He begins by describing the nature of any given lust as a strong inclination to sin and therefore suggests that the first key to successful mortification is taking action against those inclinations.

We will suppose, then, the lust or distemper whose mortification is inquired after to be in itself a strong, deeply-rooted, habitual inclination and bent of will and affections unto some actual sin, as to the matter of it, though not, under formal consideration, always stirring up imaginations, thoughts, and contrivances about the object of it.

He then usefully describes the results of such inclinations, and sets out the first component of mortification, a habitual weakening of habitual inclination to sin.

Now, the first thing in mortification is the weakening of this habit of sin or lust, that it shall not, with that violence, earnestness, frequency, rise up, conceive, tumultuate, provoke, entice, disquiet, as naturally it is apt to do, James 1:14-15.

He gives a couple of points, the first being about how sin works in us, how our lusts work. This is very useful to take note of in relation to a later point (that we need to be acquainted with the ways and wiles of sin).

First he notes a number of situations where some sins explode with greater power than others and in some people and not others,

When a lust falls in with the natural constitutions and temper, ..... then the steams of it darken the mind so, that though a man knows the same things as formerly, yet they have no power nor influence on the will, but corrupt affections and passions are set by it at liberty.

But especially, lust gets strength by temptation. When a suitable temptation falls in with a lust, it gives it a new life, vigour, power violence, and rage, which it seemed not before to have or to be capable of.

Secondly he warns us again, as he did in chapter 5 that we are more aware of some sin and their power than others, yet all sin must be mortified.

And on this account some men may go in their own thoughts and in the eyes of the world for mortified men, who yet have in them no less predominancy of lust than those who cry out with astonishment upon the account of its perplexing tumultuatings, yea, than those who have by the power of it been hurried into scandalous sins; only their lusts are in and about things which raise not such a tumult in the soul, about which they are exercised with a calmer frame of spirit, the very fabric of nature being not so nearly concerned in them as in some other.

He summarizes then this first thing in which mortification consists

I say, then, that the first thing in mortification is the weakening of this habit, that it shall not impel and tumultuate as formerly; that it shall not entice and draw aside; that it shall not disquiet and perplex the killing of its life, vigour, promptness, and readiness to be stirring. This is called "crucifying the flesh with the lusts thereof," Gal. 5:24; that is, taking away its blood and spirits that give it strength and power, -- the wasting of the body of death "day by day," 2 Cor. 4:16.

Owen paints an interesting and helpful picture of how sin dies in us as we mortify by comparing it to the death of Christ on the cross. This is well worth thinking upon as it will correct many misunderstandings about mortification and particularly about the speed at which we can kill sin.

## **2. Mortification consists secondly in a constant fighting and contending against sin**

Three things are required unto and comprised in this fighting against sin,

- a. **To be aware that sin is a killing enemy attacking you.** The great danger is for us to be naive about the power, danger and strength of our indwelling sin, we need to realise just how much danger we are in, how dishonouring to God sin is and we will not even begin to mortify never mind find success in it until we do.
- b. **‘To labour to be acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions of its success, is the beginning of this warfare.** So do men deal with enemies. They inquire out their counsels and designs, ponder their ends, consider how and by what means they have formerly prevailed, that they may be prevented. In this consists the greatest skill in conduct.’

And, indeed, one of the choicest and most eminent parts of practically spiritual wisdom consists in finding out the subtleties, policies, and depths of any indwelling sin; to consider and know wherein its greatest strength lies, -- what advantage it uses to make of occasions, opportunities, temptations, -- what are its pleas, pretences, reasonings, -- what its stratagems, colours, excuses; to set the wisdom of the Spirit against the craft of the old man; to trace this serpent in all its turnings and windings; to be able to say, at its most secret and (to a common frame of heart) imperceptible actings, "This is your old way and course; I know what you aim at;" -- and so to be always in readiness is a good part of our warfare.

- c. **To load it daily with all the things which shall after be mentioned, that are grievous, killing, and destructive to it, is the height of this contest.** Such a one never thinks his lust dead because it is quiet, but labours still to give it new wounds, new blows every day. So the apostle, Col. 3:5.

## **3. Mortification consists in success in weakening and fighting it.**

Frequent success against any lust is another part and evidence of mortification. By success I understand not a mere disappointment of sin, that is be not brought forth nor accomplished, but a victory over it, and pursuit of it to a complete conquest. For instance, when the heart finds sin at any time at work, seducing, forming imaginations to make provision for the flesh, to fulfill that lusts thereof, it instantly apprehends sin, and brings it to the law of God and love of Christ, condemns it, follows it with execution to the uttermost.

So what is mortification then? Owen concludes this chapter in two ways. First by describing a man who has and is mortifying sin and the advantages he enjoys.

Now, I say, when a man comes to this state and condition, that lust is weakened in the root and principle, that its motions and actions are fewer and weaker than formerly, so that they are not able to hinder his duty nor interrupt his peace, -- when he can, in a quiet, sedate frame of spirit, find out and fight against sin, and have success against it, -- then sin is mortified in some considerable measure, and, notwithstanding all its opposition, a man may have peace with God all his days.

And then lastly he summarises all the ‘actions’ and parts of the duty and discipline of mortification he notes in this chapter.

‘First, The weakening of its indwelling disposition, whereby it inclines, entices, impels to evil, rebels, opposes, fights against God, by the implanting, habitual residence, and cherishing of a principle of grace that stands in direct opposition to it and is destructive of it, is the foundation of it. So, by the implanting and growth of humility is pride weakened, passion by patience, uncleanness by purity of mind and conscience, love of this world by heavenly-mindedness: which are graces of the Spirit, or the same habitual grace variously acting itself by the Holy Ghost, according to the variety or diversity of the objects about which it is exercised; as the other are several lusts, or the same natural corruption variously acting itself, according to the various advantages and occasions that it meets withal. -- The promptness, alacrity, vigour of the Spirit, or new man, in contending with, cheerful fighting against the lust spoken of, by all the ways and with all the means that are appointed thereunto, constantly using the succours provided against its motions and actings, is a second thing hereunto required. -- Success unto several degrees attends these two. Now this, if the distemper hath not an unconquerable advantage from its natural situation, may possibly be to such a universal conquest as the soul may never more sensibly feel its opposition, and shall, however, assuredly arise to an allowance of peace to the conscience, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace.’

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

- In relation to the habitual weakening of a lust, we may mistakenly take comfort in that particular sins in our lives seem occasional rather than constant. Why is this deceptive?
- How can we make sense out of the varying experience individuals may have in their struggle with lusts? How might this create a false sense of mortification?
- Relate the death of Christ on the cross to mortification, in reality and as a picture.
- What must you know before you can effectively engage in mortification (2 things at least)?
- What strategies must we develop in order to effectively engage in mortification (general not specific answers at this stage)?
- What does success in this battle look like?