

# Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

## CHAPTER 7

### 'General Rules and Principles in Relation to Mortification Part 1'

#### Definitions

- **inveigh** — to protest or complain bitterly or vehemently
- **peccant** — sin, sinfulness, or guilt

Owen's purpose in this chapter is to discuss one general principle that we must be aware of in the battle for true mortification and it is this, as he states it in its fullest form in the middle of the chapter.

'This is that I aim at: unless a man be regenerate, unless he be a believer, all attempts that he can make for mortification, be they never so specious and promising, -- all means he can use, let him follow them with never so much diligence, earnestness, watchfulness, and intention of mind and spirit, -- are to no purpose. In vain shall he use many remedies; he shall not be healed.'

He then develops that principle by explaining how on one hand mortification is a duty for believers only and that only they can expect and hope for success in it, and on the other hand that whatever the merits and benefits of unbelievers being ashamed of sin and taking action against it, it will not result in actual mortification, and indeed brings with it certain very real spiritual dangers to the unbeliever themselves.

This chapter is fairly clear and reasonably able to understand, though it will require careful thought to answer the questions at the end.

1. **Unless a man be a believer, -- that is, one that is truly ingrafted into Christ, -- he can never mortify any one sin; I do not say, unless he know himself to be so, but unless indeed he be so.**
  - a. 'Mortification is the work of believers: Rom. 8:13, "If ye through the Spirit," etc., -- ye believers, to whom there is no condemnation, verse 1. They alone are exhorted to it: Col. 3:5, "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth." Who should mortify? You who "are risen with Christ," verse 1; whose "life is hid with Christ in God," verse 3; who "shall appear with him in glory," verse 4. An unregenerate man may do something like it; by the work itself, so as it may be acceptable with God, he can never perform.'

Now Owen is careful here to state that mortification is the duty even of unbelievers in some sense, but with important qualifications,

It is true, it is, it will be, required of every person whatever that hears the law or gospel preached, that he mortify sin. It is his duty, but it is not his immediate duty; it is his duty to do it, but to do it in God's way.

### Why is this?

I have proved that it is the Spirit alone that can mortify sin; he is promised to do it, and all other means without him are empty and vain. how shall he, then, mortify sin that hath not the Spirit?

### How then should the unbeliever relate to mortification? And what kind of counsel should we give such?

I say, then, mortification is not the present business of unregenerate men. God calls them not to it as yet; conversion is their work, the conversion of the whole soul, not the mortification of this or that particular lust.

He then repeats his principle but in addition points out that there are very real dangers that present themselves to the unconverted in pursuing mortification, I give just the summary headings,

(1.) The mind and soul is taken up about that which is not the man's proper business, and so he is diverted from that which is so.

(2.) This duty being a thing good in itself, in its proper place, a duty evidencing sincerity, bringing home peace to the conscience; a man finding himself really engaged in it, his mind and heart set against this or that sin, with purpose and resolution to have no more to do with it, -- he is ready to conclude that his state and condition is good, and so to delude his own soul. For,

[1.] When his conscience hath been made sick with sin, and he could find no rest, when he should go to the great Physician of souls, and get healing in his blood, then man by this engagement against sin pacifies and quiets his conscience, and sits down without going to Christ at all.

[2.] By this means men satisfy themselves that their state and condition is good, seeing they do that which is a work good in itself, and they do not do it to be seen. They know they would have the work done in sincerity, and so are hardened in a kind of self-righteousness.

(3.) When a man hath thus for a season been deluded, and hath deceived his own soul, and finds in a long course of life that indeed his sin is not mortified, or if he hath changed one he hath gotten another, he begins at length to think that all contending is in vain, he shall never be able to prevail; he is making a dam against water that increaseth on him. Hereupon he gives over, as one

despairing of any success, and yields up himself to the power of sin and that habit of formality that he hath gotten.

**2. Mortification is the work of faith, the peculiar work of faith.** Now, if there be a work to be done that will be effected by one only instrument, it is the greatest madness for any to attempt the doing of it that hath not that instrument. Now, it is faith that purifies the heart, Acts 15:9; or, as Peter speaks, we "purify our souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit," 1 Pet. 1:22; and without it, it will not be done.

Owen then handles an objection — since his point is that mortification cannot be effective in unbelievers some may ask, ‘ought we not to bother then urging them to hate sin and stop sinning?’, as Owen puts it,

Obj. You will say, "What, then, would you have unregenerate men that are convinced of the evil of sin do? Shall they cease striving against sin, live dissolutely, give their lusts their swing, and be as bad as the worst of men? This were a way to set the whole world into confusion, to bring all things into darkness, to set upon the flood-gates of lust, and lay the reins upon the necks of men to rush into all sin with delight and greediness, like the horse into the battle."

He gives 4 reasons why we still should urge mortification of sin on unbelievers but in a certain way.

1. Mortification and being urged to mortify is graciously used by God to restrain sin in any given society and community.
2. Such preaching and admonition humbles sinners and restrains their sin somewhat.
3. Mortification in itself is a good work, all Owen is saying is that it cannot be successfully carried out successfully by unbelievers, they are still in darkness.
4. As regards to how it should be preached,

Let men know it is their duty, but in its proper place; I take not men from mortification, but put them upon conversion. He that shall call a man from mending a hole in the wall of his house, to quench a fire that is consuming the whole building, is not his enemy. Poor soul! it is not thy sore finger but thy hectic fever that thou art to apply thyself to the consideration of. Thou settest thyself against a particular sin, and dost not consider that thou art nothing but sin.

He addresses those who preach or might preach, and indeed all of us who might have opportunity to speak to unbelievers about sin, what ought we to say to them?

Let me add this to them who are preachers of the word, or intend, through the good hand of God, that employment: It is their duty to plead with men about their sins, to lay load on particular sins, but always remember that it be done with that which is the proper end of law and gospel;— that is, that they make use of the sin they speak against to the discovery of the state and condition wherein the sinner is; otherwise,

happily, they may work men to formality and hypocrisy, but little of the true end of preaching the gospel will be brought about.

He concludes by considering the false methods of mortification that are all too frequently urged upon unbelievers. This we must avoid, not just by way of counselling others, we must also ask ourselves if here also lies our false hopes of mortification?

Can sin be killed without an interest in the death of Christ, or mortified without the Spirit? If such directions should prevail to change men's lives, as seldom they do, yet they never reach to the change of their hearts or conditions. They may make men self-justificaries or hypocrites, not Christians. It grieves me oftentimes to see poor souls, that have a zeal for God and a desire of eternal welfare, kept by such directors and directions under a hard, burdensome, outside worship and service of God, with many specious endeavours for mortification, in an utter ignorance of the righteousness of Christ, and unacquaintedness with his Spirit, all their days. Persons and things of this kind I know too many. If ever God shine into their hearts, to give them the knowledge of his glory in the face of his Son Jesus Christ, they will see the folly of their present way.

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

- What is it about the discipline of mortification that makes it an impossible task for the unregenerate, no matter how much they desire it, and how sincerely they apply themselves to it?
- What clues, incidentally, does this section of the book give to us as to how Owen will proceed to explain how we actually must go about mortification?
- What do unbelievers do that may look remarkably like mortification, and why do they engage in it?
- Owen writes that the unbeliever's attempts at mortification are different from true mortification 'as the sun which is painted on a fence differs from the sun itself; it has neither light nor heat'. What light and heat are essential components in mortification and from where do they come?
- Should we encourage or discourage the unregenerate to engage in mortifying sin, or what has the appearance of mortification?
- What are the very real dangers of unbelievers engaging in attempts to mortify apart from the more wide-ranging and deeper soul work of the Spirit having been prayed for and sincerely sought?
- Owen writes to preachers and prospective preachers about the need for care when emphasising the sinfulness of sin and the need to mortify it. What are the dangers of which we must be aware as we talk to individuals (perhaps especially our own children) about particular sins in their lives?
- What is the difference between 'breaking men's hearts' and 'breaking men off from particular sins'? and what are the outward signs of each and how do they differ?