

Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

CHAPTER 8

‘General Rules and Principles in Relation to Mortification Part 2’

In my opinion this short chapter is one of the most thought-provoking of the whole book. He proposes a second general principle or rule ‘without which no lust will be mortified’.

Without sincerity and diligence in a universality of obedience, there is no mortification of any one perplexing lust to be obtained.

He elaborates

A man finds any lust to bring him into the condition formerly described; it is powerful, strong, tumultuating, leads captive, vexes, disquiets, takes away peace; he is not able to bear it; wherefore he sets himself against it, prays against it, groans under it, sighs to be delivered: but in the meantime, perhaps, in other duties, -- in constant communion with God, -- in reading, prayer, and meditation, -- in other ways that are not of the same kind with the lust wherewith he is troubled, -- he is loose and negligent. Let not that man think that ever he shall arrive to the mortification of the lust he is perplexed withal.

In essence what he means, which is seen from his analogy from the conduct of Israel in Isaiah 58, is that if we just give our attention to the mortification of one sin, be we ever so sincere we will not mortify it. If there is a lack of sincerity for universal obedience we cannot deal with individual sins. Rather if any Christian would hope to progress in mortifying a sin they must also give great attention to his overall, universal spiritual temperature and constitution. He must not give attention to one aspect while neglecting the whole.

Why is this?

(1.) First, Owen writes, this kind of mortification (which merely focuses on one sin and not the whole, proceeds from a wrong principle, ground or foundation. The faulty ground he identifies is that of self-love.

Thou settest thyself with all diligence and earnestness to mortify such a lust or sin; what is the reason of it? It disquiets thee, it hath taken away thy peace, it fills thy heart

with sorrow, and trouble, and fear; thou hast no rest because of it. Yea; but, friend, thou hast neglected prayer or reading; thou hast been vain and loose in thy conversation in other things, that have not been of the same nature with that lust wherewith thou art perplexed. These are no less sins and evils than those under which thou groanest. Jesus Christ bled for them also. Why dost thou not set thyself against them also? If thou hatest sin as sin, every evil way, thou wouldst be no less watchful against every thing that grieves and disquiets thine own soul. It is evident that thou contendest against sin merely because of thy own trouble by it.

He contends that such a person would not bother with a sin at all unless it bothered them! Such things as hate of sin, regret at dishonouring Christ are the true grounds.

Let not any man think to do his own work that will not do God's. God's work consists in universal obedience; to be freed of the present perplexity is their own only. Hence is that of the apostle, 2 Cor. 7:1, "Cleanse yourselves from all pollution of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." If we will do any thing, we must do all things. So, then, it is not only an intense opposition to this or that peculiar lust, but a universal humble frame and temper of heart, with watchfulness over every evil and for the performance of every duty, that is accepted.

(2.) Second, Owen writes, if I can rephrase him, that it is highly possible that the very lust and sin that causes such bother has been given by God to expose your other more general lacks in discipline and faithfulness. In other words so that we will 'make a more thorough work and change in [our] course of walking with him.' So God would have you check your whole life, not just this sin.

He gives two additional explanation of this point. A particular;y troublesome sin is commonly the fruit of a careless negligent course of life in general because;

[1.] This is it natural effect. Lust is subtle and crafty, it entices, and unless we keep a very diligent watch over our hearts it will grow, and develop and may in time explode. However a diligent watch kept; lust withers and dies. He urges us therefore to examine ourselves. **We ought to just look at besetting and obvious sins, but consider whether we are in fact struggling in these ways because of a more general lack of spiritual health, devotions to the public and private means of grace etc.**

But if, through negligence, it makes an eruption any particular way, gets a passage to the thoughts by the affections, and from them and by them perhaps breaks out into open sin in the conversation, the strength of it bears that way it hath found out, and that way mainly it urgeth, until, having got a passage, it then vexes and disquiets, and is

not easily to be restrained: thus, perhaps, a man may be put to wrestle all his days in sorrow with that which, by a strict and universal watch, might easily have been prevented.

[2.] Sometimes God will leave us to struggle with some such sin to chasten/control us and keep us from other evils. Therefore we ought not to just focus on one sin, but look at our overall spiritual state. Thus Paul's thorn was to expose to him his pride, and Peter's denial was to expose his vain self-confidence, and teach him to depend on grace.

.....so even with his own, he may, he doth, leave them sometimes to some vexatious distempers, ether to prevent or cure some other evil. So was the messenger of Satan let loose on Paul, that he "might not be lifted up through the abundance of spiritual revelations." Was it not a correction to Peter's vain confidence, that he was left to deny his Master? Now, if this be the state and condition of lust in its prevalancy, that God oftentimes suffers it so to prevail, at least to admonish us, and to humble us, perhaps to chasten and correct us for our general loose and careless walking, is it possible that the effect should be removed and the cause continued,-- that the particular lust should be mortified and the general course be unreformed?

He concludes the chapter with exhortation and warning,

He, then, that would really, thoroughly, and acceptably mortify any disquieting lust, let him take care to be equally diligent in all parts of obedience, and know that every lust, every omission of duty, is burdensome to God, though by one is so to him. Whilst there abides a treachery in the heart to indulge to any negligence in not pressing universally to all perfection in obedience, the soul is weak, as not giving faith its whole work; and selfish, as considering more the trouble of sin than the filth and guilt of it; and lives under a constant provocation of God: so that it may not expect any comfortable issue in any spiritual duty that it doth undertake, much less in this under consideration, which requires another principle and frame of spirit for its accomplishment.

Questions for thought and discussion.

- How must we think of sin universally before we can successfully practice the mortification of individual sins?
- How can we tell if we are motivated by 'self-love' rather than the proper motivations for such a work, such as real hatred of sin? What are the characteristics? Can you think of a text/s of Scripture that presents a more wholesome picture of proper motivation unto mortification and true repentance?
- What effects will such a false mortification, motivated by self-love have in us?

- How should our struggle with individual sins lead us to examine our whole lives?
- Why will only a concern for complete obedience and faithfulness lead to real mortification?