

# Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

## CHAPTER 9

### 'Particular Directions to deal with Disquieting Lusts'

This is a searching chapter. It should be read carefully, prayerfully, honestly, and yet I must add it must also be read always reminding yourself what it is in fact that Owen is writing about and why. If we forget that, surely none of us will finish reading this chapter with any assurance intact! Owen purpose for this chapter is to alert us to the times and conditions when we must apply true and 'extraordinary' mortification, that is he is highlighting when we must make special efforts to apply to God for mercy and grace, mercy and grace freely offered in the Gospel. His purpose is not to destroy our assurance, but to make sure that we are not being careless or negligent towards sin. As he says in the last paragraph, true believers can suffer the things he will describe. He also says that when we do, we ought not to be in any way content until we have dealt with such through mortification.

So, when we are disquieted and disturbed by some lust or sin, how do we know when we must, for example, repent and move on forgiven, or just 'give ourselves a spiritual shake' as opposed to giving ourselves to a particular and intense period of mortification? Owen answers that question by describing to us 6 scenarios, 6 conditions that demand we apply ourselves very actively to Christ, by the Spirit that we might overcome the sins and lusts.

His first direction, which he outlines in this chapter that you may know when and where to mortify is this,

FIRST. Consider what dangerous symptoms thy lust hath attending or accompanying it, -- whether it hath any deadly mark on it or no; if it hath, extraordinary remedies are to be used; an ordinary course of mortification will not do it.

**1. If the sin that is troubling you is deeply rooted, is firmly established, has troubled you for an extended period of time, then you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.**

Hast thou permitted worldliness, ambition, greediness of study, to eat up other duties, the duties wherein thou oughtest to hold constant communion with God, for some long season? or uncleanness to defile thy heart with vain, and foolish, and wicked imaginations for many days? Thy lust hath a dangerous symptom.

If you find yourself in such a condition you must surely have no hope of true peace for

- a. how can you ever tell if you are indeed a true believer lacking in mortification, or an unbeliever who is yet under the dominion of sin?
- b. how can you expect peace and a happy end through the means you have used (instead of true mortification) if they have not thus far achieved present peace.

**2. If you find your heart moving towards peace and contentment in spirit of the fact you know you are, and have indulged a clearly sinful practice, then you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.**

Owen suggests some indicators that we should watch out for that we may be able to identify if we are in this state.

- a. If instead of thinking about how you may kill the sin you are instead thinking about all the good and righteous things you do and ‘hoping’ that they will, as it were, cancel out the sin, then you have fallen into this state, and therefore you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.

When a man’s conscience shall deal with him, when God shall rebuke him for the sinful distemper of his heart, if he, instead of applying himself to get that sin pardoned in the blood of Christ and mortified by his Spirit, shall relieve himself by any such other evidences as he hath, or thinks himself to have, and so disentangle himself from under the yoke that God was putting on his neck, his condition is very dangerous, his wound hardly curable.

- b. If you find yourself thinking that in spite of you engaging in this sin, that God’s grace and mercy will overlook such a sin, then you have fallen into this state, and therefore you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.

When a man hath secret thoughts in his heart, not unlike those of Naaman about his worshiping in the house of Rimmon, “In all other things I will walk with God, but in this thing, God be merciful unto me,” his condition is sad. It is true, indeed, a resolution to this purpose, to indulge a man’s self in any sin on the account of mercy, seems to be, and doubtless in any course is, altogether inconsistent with Christian sincerity, and is a badge of a hypocrite, and is the “turning of the grace of God into wantonness;” yet I doubt not but, through the craft of Satan and their own remaining unbelief, the children of God may themselves sometimes be ensnared with this deceit of sin, or else Paul would never have so cautioned them against it as he doth, Rom. 6:1,2.

**3. If you find that the particular lust or sin has success over you, and even over your ‘better will’ and you find yourself taking some delight in it, even in thoughts about it, should providence never permit you to actually engage in it, then you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.**

When the sin spoken of gets the consent of the will with some delight, though it be not actually outwardly perpetrated, yet it hath success. A man may not be able, upon

outward considerations, to go along with sin to that which James calls the "finishing" of it, as to the outward acts of sin, when yet the will of sinning may be actually obtained; then hath it, I say, success. Now, if any lust be able thus far to prevail in the soul of any man, as his condition may possibly be very bad and himself be unregenerate, so it cannot possibly be very good, but dangerous; and it is all one upon the matter whether this be done by the choice of the will or by inadvertency, for that inadvertency itself is in a manner chosen.

**4. If you find that you 'merely' dislike the thought of the punishment for the sin, or the temporal consequences of being caught in it, the shame of it, rather than disliking and hating it for gospel reasons, then you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.**

Such a man as opposes nothing to the seduction of sin and lust in his heart but fear of shame among men or hell from God, is sufficiently resolved to do the sin if there were no punishment attending it; which, what it differs from living in the practice of sin, I know not. Those who are Christ's, and are acted in their obedience upon gospel principles, have the death of Christ, communion with God, a deep-grounded abhorrency of sin as sin, to oppose to any seduction of sin, to all the workings, strivings, fightings of lust in their hearts. So did Joseph. "How shall I do this great evil," saith he, "and sin against the Lord?" my good and gracious God.

**5. If on reflection your conscience suggest that the present suffering under some sin is connected with a past lack of faithfulness, or other sin, and therefore God is chastening you, then you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.**

That this is his way of dealing with unregenerate men no man questions. But how shall a man know whether there be any thing of God's chastening hand in his being left to the disquietment of his distemper? Ans. Examine thy heart and ways. What was the state and condition of thy soul before thou fellest into the entanglements of that sin which now thou so complaineest of? Hadst thou been negligent in duties? Hadst thou lived inordinately to thyself? Is there the guilt of any great sin lying upon thee unrepented of? A new sin may be permitted, as well as a new affliction sent, to bring an old sin to remembrance.

**6. If you can in honesty see that God has warned you either by His Word, or preaching, or indeed by providence and yet you still have not put away the sin, then you need to apply yourself to a course of intense Spirit-energised mortification.**

God oftentimes, in his providential dispensations, meets with a man, and speaks particularly to the evil of his heart, as he did to Joseph's brethren in their selling of him into Egypt. This makes the man reflect on his sin, and judge himself in particular for it. God makes it to be the voice of the danger, affliction, trouble, sickness that he is in or under. Sometimes in reading of the word God a man stay on something that cuts him to the heart, and shakes him as to his present condition. More frequently in the hearing of the word preached, his great ordinance for conviction, conversion, and edification, doth he meet with men. God often hews men by the sword of his word in that ordinance, strikes directly on their bosom-beloved lust, startles the sinner, makes him engage unto the mortification and relinquishment of the evil of his heart. Now, if his lust have taken such hold on him as to enforce him to break these bands of the Lord, and cast these cords from him, -- if it overcomes these convictions, and gets again into its old posture, -- if it can cure the wounds it so receives, -- that soul is in a sad condition.

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

- What are the particular dangers associated with sins and patterns of sin that we may have allowed to fester and which we have indulged for long periods of time?
- Think about and explain how we can sometimes seek peace and contentment, and even achieve it (falsely), even though we have not sought it through the Gospel, and in spite of the fact we are still living in a sinful way, not having mortified sin. How is this an abuse of the Gospel and God's grace?
- Why is it so vitally important to see that the sinfulness of sin is not constituted by the actual performance of a sin and sinful deeds and therefore mortification is not evidenced by freedom from guilt that we have engaged in sinful deeds?
- What is wrong and useless about hating sin *merely* because of fear of punishment or shame.
- How must we think about sin and pursue mortification if we are to have any success?
- Sometimes God can permit a sin to overtake us to alert us to areas of past unfaithfulness or sin, in this way he chastises us as a father. How ought we to find out if this is the case when we are disturbed by some present sin?
- Sin sometimes finds a way back into us even though we have been warned of it, and indeed have fled from it in the past. How can this happen? how does it come to capture us again?

## Some other helpful material from Richard Baxter's 'Christian Directory'

Here are some sections of Baxter's Christian Directory the first of which is particularly relevant to Point 4 - why we dislike the sin. In the first section Baxter gives us some 'Directions as to How to Hate Sin'.

**Direct. I. Labour to know God, and to be affected with his attributes, and always to live as in his sight.**—No man can know sin perfectly, because no man can know God perfectly. You can no further know what sin is than you know what God is, whom you sin against; for the formal malignity of sin is relative, as it is against the will and attributes of God. The godly have some knowledge of the malignity of sin, because they have some knowledge of God that is wronged by it. The wicked have no practical, prevalent knowledge of the malignity of sin, because they have no such knowledge of God. They that fear God will fear sinning; they that in their hearts are bold irreverently with God, will, in heart and life, be bold with sin: the atheist, who thinks there is no God thinks there is no sin against him. Nothing in world will tell us so plainly and powerfully of the evil of sin, as the knowledge of the greatness, wisdom goodness, holiness, authority, justice, truth, &c. of God. The sense of his presence, therefore, will revive our sense of sin's malignity.

**Direct. II. Consider well of the office, the bloodshed, and the holy life of Christ.**—His office is to expiate sin, and to destroy it. His blood was shed for it: his life condemned it. Love Christ, and you will hate that which caused his death. Love him, and you will love to be made like him, and hate that which is so contrary to Christ. These two great lights will show the odiousness of darkness.

**Direct. III. Think well both how holy the office and work of the Holy Ghost is, and how great a mercy it is to us.**—Shall God himself, the heavenly light, come down into a sinful heart, to illuminate and purify it? And yet shall I keep my darkness and defilement, in opposition to such wonderful mercy? Though all sin against the Holy Ghost be not the unpardonable blasphemy, yet all is aggravated hereby.

**Direct. IV. Know and consider the wonderful love and mercy of God, and think what he has done for you; and you will hate sin, and be ashamed of it.** It is an aggravation which makes sin odious even to common reason and ingenuity, that we should offend a God of infinite goodness, who has filled up our lives with mercy. It will grieve you if you have wronged an extraordinary friend: his love and kindness will come into your thoughts, and make you angry with your own unkindness. Here look over the catalogue of God's mercies to you, for soul and body. And here observe that Satan, in hiding the love of God from you, and tempting you under the pretence of humility to deny his greatest, special mercy, seeks to destroy your repentance and humiliation, also, by hiding the greatest aggravation of your sin.

**Direct. V. Think what the soul of man is made for, and should be used to, even to love, obey, and glorify our Maker; and then you will see what sin is, which disables and perverts it.**—How excellent, and high, and holy a work are we created for and called to! And should we defile the temple of God? And serve the devil in filthiness and folly, when we should receive, and serve, and magnify our Creator?

**Direct. VI. Think well what pure and sweet delights a holy soul may enjoy from God, in his holy service; and then you will see what sin is, which robs him of these delights, and prefers fleshly lusts before them.**—O how happily might we perform every duty,

and how fruitfully might we serve our Lord, and what delight should we find in his love and acceptation, and the foresight of everlasting blessedness, if it were not for sin; which brings down the soul from the doors of heaven, to wallow with swine in a beloved dunghill!

**Direct. VII. Bethink you what a life it is which you must live for ever, if you live in heaven; and what a life the holy ones there now live; and then think whether sin, which is so contrary to it, be not a vile and hateful thing.**—Either you would live in heaven, or not. If not, you are not those I speak to. If you would, you know that there is no sinning; no worldly mind, no pride, no passion, no fleshly lust or pleasures there. Oh, did you but see and hear one hour, how those blessed spirits are taken up in loving and magnifying the glorious God in purity and holiness, and how far they are from sin, it would make you loathe sin ever after, and look on sinners as on men in bedlam wallowing naked in their dung. Especially, to think that you hope yourselves to live for ever like those holy spirits; and therefore sin does ill beseeem you.

**Direct. VIII. Look but to the state and torment of the damned, and think well of the difference betwixt angels and devils, and you may know what sin is.**—Angels are pure; devils are polluted: holiness and sin do make the difference. Sin dwells in hell, and holiness in heaven. Remember that every temptation is from the devil, to make you like himself; as every holy motion is from Christ, to make you like himself. Remember when you sin, that you are learning and imitating of the devil, and are so far like him, John 8:44. And the end of all is, that you may feel his pains. If hell-fire be not good, then sin is not good.

**Direct. IX. Look always on sin as one that is ready to die, and consider how all men judge of it at the last.**—What do men in heaven say of it? And what do men in hell say of it? And what do men at death say of it? And what do converted souls, or awakened consciences, say of it? Is it then followed with delight and fearlessness as it is now? Is it then applauded? Will any of them speak well of it? Nay, all the world speaks evil of sin in the general now, even when they love and commit the several acts. Will you sin when you are dying?

**Direct. X. Look always on sin and judgment together.—Remember that you must answer for it before God, and angels, and all the world; and you will the better know it.**

**Direct. XI. Look now but upon sickness, poverty, shame, despair, death, and rottenness in the grave, and it may a little help you to know what sin is.** These are things within your sight or feeling; you need not faith to tell you of them. And by such effects you might have some little knowledge of the cause.

**Direct. XII. Look but upon some eminent, holy persons upon earth, and upon the mad, profane, malignant world; and the difference may tell you in part what sin is.**—Is there not an amiableness in a holy, blameless person, that lives in love to God and man, and in the joyful hopes of life eternal? Is not a beastly drunkard or whoremonger, and a raging swearer, and a malicious persecutor, a very deformed, loathsome creature? Is not the mad, confused, ignorant, ungodly state of the world a very pitiful sight? What then is the sin that all this consists in?