

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Mortification

The Puritan divine John Owen is rightly considered to be one of the greatest English speaking theologians of all time. But Owen was no mere academic theologian, as Sinclair Ferguson observed. "Owen also writes with a concern for Christian experience. He had, after all, a deep personal reason to expound the role of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the believer. One of the axioms that Owen returns to again and again as a preacher of the gospel is that there is a difference between the knowledge of the truth and the knowledge of the power of the truth. That was a distinction carved out of personal experience. For he himself had possessed a knowledge of the truth since childhood (his own father was a minister with Puritan leanings). Yet he had at one time a deep consciousness that he lacked real experience of the power of the truth of which he had so much knowledge. For the later Owen it became axiomatic that it is the presence of the Spirit of God that transforms our bare knowledge of the truth into our experience of the power of the truth. He lived and breathed for this. As David Clarkson would say later, in his funeral address after Owen's death, it was for the promotion of Spirit-given holiness that all of John Owen's significant intellectual powers were laid in tribute at the feet of his Lord Jesus Christ."¹

Strength and comfort, power and peace, these are the things we desire in our walking with God. Were any of us asked seriously what it is that troubles us, we must refer it to one of these heads. Either we need strength or power, vigor and life in our obedience to God, or we want peace, comfort and consolation in our daily walk. Whatever it is that may befall a true believer that does not belong to these things, does not really deserve to be mentioned as a priority.² It is important to note that mortification has to do with our individual sins and *not* with what is called indwelling sin (or what is often called the sin nature). We cannot cease being sinners in this life. As Luther put it, the believer is *simul iustus et peccator* "at once righteous and a sinner."³

I. THE TERMS FOR MORTIFICATION

- A. Rom. 8:13 *THANATOUTE* (pres. act. ind.) lit. 'put to death.'
- B. Col. 3:5 *NEKRŌSATE* (aor. act. imp.) lit. 'put to death.' Similar language is found in Gal. 5:24 (aor. act. ind.) lit. 'to crucify.'

NOTE: It is probable that the aorist tense in Col. 3:5 has reference to the decisive initial act which is continued by the present tense attitude as expressed in Rom. 8:13.

II. THE NEED FOR MORTIFICATION

Mortification is no small part of our repentance since it represents our repentant attitude in reference to sin. It is therefore an act of faith and obedience. Mortification is the soul's vigorous opposition to self wherein sincerity is most evident.

- A. The Dangers of neglecting mortification
 - Unmortified sin in the life will certainly do at least two things:
 - 1. DARKEN the mind

- a. in understanding Scripture
- b. in prayer
- c. in fellowship with believers
- 2. WEAKEN the soul (cf. Ps. 38:3, 8; 40:12)
 - a. untune the heart and entangle the affections (James 1:14, 15)
 - b. lead astray the will
 - c. hinder duty

These are direct effects, on top of which is the "grieving of the Holy Spirit" (Eph. 4:30).

B. Dangerous Symptoms of unchecked sin; what are the signs that this has gone on unmortified?

- 1. Longlasting and persistence in a sin (Ps. 38:5)
- 2. Secret pleas for the justification of the particular sin. Attempts to rationalize the guilt away, and to assuage the conscience.
- 3. Taking forgiveness and the freedom of confession for granted. Using this as an 'escape hatch' before the fact. If this is done with the intent to continue in the practice of sin, this is using grace and mercy for a cloak (Rom. 6:1, 2; Jude 5: 4).

NOTE: The flesh would fain be indulged unto upon the account of grace and every word that is spoken of mercy, it stands ready to catch at and to pervert it to its own corrupt aims and purposes. To apply mercy then to a sin that is not vigorously the object of mortification is to fulfill the end of the flesh upon the gospel (Owen, p. 46).

- 4. Frequency of success in sin's seduction. If we are carefree and negligent when we should be sober and watchful, we are no less innocent if we fall prey to sin – in fact, the carelessness and negligence constitute sin in the first place since we are exhorted otherwise (Eph. 5:14, 15; 6:18; Col. 4:2; I Pet. 5:8).
- 5. Arguments against the issue of sin (or what is called 'besetting sin') that are derived solely from the fear of exposure to shame before others or to punishment due sin are only fears of the flesh.

NOTE: If a person opposes sin with only the measures of the law, with thoughts of punishment and judgment (which are the proper aims of the law), then the sin which troubles that person has surely entangled the will and the affections. Paul's main argument in Rom. 6:14 is otherwise. We cannot expect success if our contendings against sin stem only from legal principles and motives. We must arm ourselves with Gospel and Grace principles (Eph. 6:1-19). Remember, what Gospel principles do not, legal principles cannot do!

III. WHAT MORTIFICATION IS NOT

- A. To utterly kill, root out and completely destroy sin so that it is gone forever. This, indeed is the desire of every Christian and this is what is aimed at, but is never completely accomplished in this life (Phil. 3:12).
- B. The improvement of the outward performance of our natural temperament. It is not like making a 'New Year's resolution.' We may refrain from many 'vices' or establish our own list of personal 'taboos' (many of which may not have any support from Scripture) and still be teeming inside with unmortified sin.
- C. A sin is not mortified when it is only diverted and allowed to manifest itself in another form or fashion (i.e., pride in personal appearance may be diverted and reappear as pride in appearing humble!).
- D. Occasional conquest of a sin is not mortification. You may, for one reason or another avoid a sin for a season and yet not deal with it in mortification (Ps. 78:32-37).

IV. MORTIFICATION CONSISTS OF THREE THINGS

- A. A habitual weakening of sin, so that it does not, without violence and earnest, provoke and entice. The first thing in mortification is the weakening of this habit, so that it does not impel and tumultuate as it once did, that it shall not entice and draw aside – that it

shall not perplex and sap the life, vigor, promptness and readiness of the soul in its duties to God (Gal. 5:24) so that sin is dealt with by taking away its blood and spirit that it gives it strength and power (Rom. 6:6; II Cor. 4:16). Mortification therefore aims at the root of sin, the temptation to sin, for sin gains its strength from temptation.

- B. In constant fighting and contending against sin. This entails the following:
 1. A real knowledge of sin and its danger (I King 8:38) without which there is no beginning the fight.
 2. To know the ways, wiles and methods, advantages and occasions of sin's success (a lesson David painfully learned – Ps. 51:3; cf. I Cor. 10:6).
 3. To be constantly and daily at it (no one should think his lust/sin dead because it is quiet, but should labor to give it new wounds and new blows every day).
- C. In success. Frequent success against any sin is another part and evidence of mortification and when this is so, then a person can have diligence in duty and find his peace uninterrupted.

V. **IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES IN MORTIFICATION**

- A. Without sincerity and diligence in a universality of obedience, there can be no real mortification of any one perplexing sin (Isa. 58:2-7). To attempt mortification without universal diligence proceeds from a corrupt principle. There must be hatred of sin as sin, not only as galling or disquieting to us personally, but a sense of the love of Christ in His cross. This must form the foundation of all spiritual mortification. God's work consists in universal obedience (II Cor. 7:1).

NOTE: How do you know but that God has allowed the outbreak of this sin that troubles you in order to chasten you for your negligence and over-all lukewarmness in your daily walk? One thing is true, the rage and growth of a particular sin is commonly the fruit of a careless, negligent course in general.

- B. Fix a right judgment of sin and its guilt. Furnish the mind with the truth of the horrible nature of sin in order that the heart may not allow or excuse sin. Where there is insensibility to sin, sin will gain strength and prevail.

NOTE: The Evils of Unmortified Sin

1. There is no greater motive and incentive in the life of the believer unto universal holiness and the preserving of their hearts and spirits in all purity and cleanness, than this – that the Holy Spirit dwells in believers – the Christian is the temple of God, and the Spirit is grieved when Christians live defiled lives (Eph. 4:30).
 2. For a Christian to cherish and harbor unmortified sin is to hold at the same time the Lord Jesus Christ and His work in low esteem.
 3. It takes away a person's usefulness in service (II Tim. 2:21; comp. with Ps. 51:13).
- C. A constant longing and desire to be free of the grip of sin. Longing, breathing and panting after deliverance is a grace in itself, it has a mighty power to conform the soul unto the likeness of the very thing longed after (II Cor. 7:11).
 - D. Know yourself. Consider your own make-up and constitution (I Cor. 9:27). Consider the occasions and advantages in which sin seeks to work. This demands watchfulness (Mk. 13:37; Lk. 21:34; Col. 4:2).
 - E. Rise up against the first motion of sin. Do not allow the sin you contend with to take the first step. It is impossible to fix the bounds of sin.
 - F. Exercise yourself in meditation on the truth of Scripture in reference to your own weakness and foolishness, and how really needy you are – in connection with this and in order to properly assess yourself, consider the greatness and excellency of the majesty of God – Isa. 40:12-25; I Pet. 5:6-7. Therefore, give yourself to the daily consideration of the great theme: The infinite greatness and majesty of God. Fill your soul with thoughts of God and His attributes. This will keep you humble and in a proper frame of mind towards the temptation to sin.

NOTE: Take heed not to speak peace to your own case before God does so. Do not deceive yourself in this matter. Men speak so to their souls when there is not a hating of the sin which they have committed and now for which they wish to have a sense of peace, without hating the sin which brought guilt. When God comes home to speak peace, He fills the soul with shame for all the ways whereby it has been alienated from Him (II Cor. 7:11; Ps. 78:33-35).

“Let a man make what application he will for healing and peace, let him do it to the true Physician, let him do it the right way, let him quiet his heart in the promises of the covenant – yet, when peace is spoken, if it be not attended with the detestation and abhorring of that sin which was the wound and caused the disquietment; this is no peace of God’s creating, but of our own purchasing” (Owen, pl. 73); cf. Jer. 6:14; Heb. 4:2. God’s peace brings humiliation. It is a humbling peace. Note the case of David – Ps. 51:1 (cf. Ps. 130:4).

CONCLUSION:

- (1) Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of your sin. Consider His work, His riches. To act in faith upon the fullness of Christ in His Person and work is what is spoken of by Paul in Col. 2:6, 7 (comp. with Rom. 11:19, 20; II Cor. 12:9).
- (2) Encourage your heart to expect relief from Christ (Heb. 2:18; 12:1-4). It is the will of God that you be sanctified (I Thess. 4:7) and mortification is part of sanctification.
- (3) Consider the mercifulness of Christ as your great High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16).
- (4) Consider especially the work of Christ in dying for your sins so that you might be sanctified (Tit. 2:14; I Jn. 1:7; Heb. 9:14).

ENDNOTES

¹ S. Ferguson, John Owen” The Man and His Theology (P & R, 2002) p. 106.

² (These notes and the references to Owen are adapted in substance, with modification, from John Owen, vol. VI, Collected Works, Banner of Truth Trust, reprint, 1974.)

³ As R. C. Sproul recently pointed out, this emphasis of Luther’s was anathema to the Roman Catholic Church why? “Catholics argued in the sixteenth century and have continued to argue, as recently as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 1994, that God will declare a person just only when that person has achieved inherent righteousness. True, that righteousness cannot be gained apart from grace, apart from faith, or apart from Christ. But with the help of these means of grace, the Catholic argues, that righteousness may and must be attained before God will make His declaration that a person is just. That is why, according to Rome, if a person dies with imperfections or impurities still present in his soul, before he can go to heaven, he must first go to purgatory, where his abiding imperfections are purged away. That time in purgatory could last millions of years in order for the cleansing necessary to bring about total purity. What was anathema to Rome about Martin Luther’s teaching, among other things, was his famous formula defining justification as bringing sinners into a state whereby we are *simul iustus et peccator* – at the same time just and sinner. We are just by virtue of God declaring us just in Christ, but we still struggle with abiding sin.” Table Talk (May 2010) p. 6.