

**John Owen on Dealing with Sin:**  
**Lesson 3: The Work of the Spirit in Mortification**  
Galatians 5:16-25

adapted from Owen's *Mortification of Sin* ch. III

Introduction: The word “mortify” means “to put to death” and is used in the KJV of Romans 8:13 and Colossians 3:5, both of which speak of dealing with sinful habits arising from our fleshly natures.

The Holy Spirit is our only sufficiency for the work of mortification. All ways and means apart from him have no true effect. He is the only great power behind it, and he works in us as he pleases.

*Recognize the role the Holy Spirit plays in mortification.*

**I. Vain Methods of Mortification**

- A. Various useless ways men try to mortify sin:
1. Religious deeds such as are found in Roman Catholicism.
    - a. “They arouse the conviction of sin, but use poison as their cure. This can never deliver them from the anguish of conviction.”
    - b. “Their vows, orders, fastings, penances, and rough garments all have the goal of mortification, but they seek to mortify dead creatures.”
  2. Legalistic means found among those who have the light of the gospel.
    - a. “These often have “the same false teachings about mortification. They have their outside endeavors, bodily exercises, self-performances, and mere legal duties without the least mention of Christ or His Spirit. In their swelling words, they pass over the only means for the true mortification of sin.”
    - b. “They show their deep-rooted blindness to the power of God and the mystery of the gospel.”
- B. Why these actions cannot truly mortify sin:
1. Many of the ways and means were never appointed by God for this purpose.
    - a. The scriptural methods work precisely *because* God ordained them.
    - b. **Matthew 15:9** “...in vain they worship Me, Teaching *as* doctrines the commandments of men.”
  2. Even things that are appointed for mortification must be used in their proper place and order.
    - a. Spiritual disciplines are the stream, not the fountain.
    - b. They are the means only and there is no merit in the mere performance of them.
    - c. *There is no self-endeavor that can accomplish mortification. “Almighty energy is necessary for its accomplishment.”*

**II. Mortification is accomplished by the Spirit.**

- A. God promised his Spirit to us for this very work.
1. He gives us a new heart.
  2. He takes away the proud, stubborn, rebellious, unbelieving heart (Ezek. 11:19; 36:36; Isa. 57:17-18).
- B. Mortification is the gift of Christ we receive as part of the blessings of Christ’s work.

1. All the blessings we receive in Christ are communicated to us through the Spirit's work.
2. Mortification is a part of repentance and repentance is worked in us through the Spirit.
3. There are many promises he has made to us concerning the sending of the Spirit and the work he will accomplish through us.

### **III. Three Ways in the Spirit mortifies Sin:**

- A. The Spirit causes our hearts to abound in grace and the fruits that are contrary to the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21, 24)
  1. How does the Spirit give us victory? By our living in the Spirit and our walking after the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit then restrict the fruits of the flesh.
  2. The renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) is vital. He causes us to grow, thrive, flourish, and abound in the graces which are contrary, opposite, and destructive to all the works of the flesh and contrary to the thriving of indwelling sin itself.
- B. The Spirit effectively destroys the root and habit of sin to weaken, destroy, and take it away.
  1. He begins changes the heart (see above (II.A.2.).
  2. He continues by carrying this works out by degrees.
- C. He brings the cross of Christ into the heart of a sinner by faith, and gives communion with Christ in his death and fellowship in his sufferings (more on this later).

### **IV. The Work of the Spirit and Our Responsibility.**

If mortification is the work of the Spirit alone, how is it that we are exhorted to accomplish it? If the Spirit of God only can do it, why not leave the work wholly to him?

- A. Other graces and good workings us are his working also yet we are exhorted to do those works also. For example:
  1. God "works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).
  2. God works "all our works in us" (Isa 26:12)
  3. God works "the work of faith with power" (2 Thess. 1:11; cf. Col. 2:12).
  4. God causes us to pray and his Spirit is a "spirit of supplication" (Rom. 8:26; Zech. 12:10)
  5. And yet, we are commanded and exhorted to do all of these.
- B. He does not work in us such that it is not a work of our obedience.
  1. The Holy Spirit works in us and upon us and yet preserves our own liberty and free obedience.
  2. He works upon our understandings, wills, consciences, and affections.
  3. He works in us and with us, not against us or without us, so that his assistance is an encouragement as to the accomplishing of the work.

Conclusion: Many people are convinced of their sin but unable to stand against its power. They try to strive against it, but, "being strangers to the Spirit of God," they fight in vain with no hope of winning. "They combat without victory, have war without peace, and are in slavery all their days."

"If the case of these who labor and strive, and yet never enter into the kingdom of God is sad, what is the condition of those who are not even concerned?"