

## **John Owen on Dealing with Sin:**

### **Lesson 6: What Mortification Is**

from Various Scriptures

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

*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.

*Note* that Owen uses the term “lust” in a much broader fashion than we do in our own day. We use the word “lust” almost exclusively to refer to sexual desires. Owen uses the term to refer to evil desires of all sorts and their out-workings whether they be sexual or not. Owen's use of the term “lust” helps distinguish “sin” as nature from “sin” as action. In this outline, however, I have substituted words like “sin” or “sinful habits” for “lust” or “lusts” simply to reflect our modern usage and understanding. Remember, however, that every outward sin has its root in a sinful desire and one must get at the root to deal with the sin (see Lesson 2 for more on this).

Owen begins his chapter by stating, “The mortification of a lust [sinful habit and its root] consists in three things:”

*View mortification realistically by understanding what it is.*

#### **I. The mortification of a sin is a habitual weakening of the sin.**

##### A. Important understandings about the nature of sin.

1. Every sin is a depraved habit or inclination pushing the heart toward evil.
  - a. Genesis 6:5 describes the one who has not mortified his lusts: “...every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
  - b. One who is unmortified is always under the power and bent of an inclination to sin.
  - c. The only reason the natural man does not pursue a single sin day and night is because he has so many different sins to serve and each one cries out to be satisfied.
2. Sin is not always exerting an influence upon our thoughts and imagination, but it is a deeply rooted and strong habitual inclination and bent of the will and affections.
3. Moral and holy habits exert themselves differently from sinful habits.
  - a. Moral habits speak to the soul gently and appropriately as they should; sinful and depraved habits arrive with violence and impetuosity.
  - b. Sinful lusts “war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11) by rising up and demanding fulfillment.
  - c. Sin takes a man captive to accomplish its goal (Romans 7:23).
4. Romans 7 tells us about sin and how it works. Sin:
  - a. Darkens the mind
  - b. Extinguishes convictions
  - c. Dethrones reason
  - d. Interrupts the power and influences that resist it
  - e. Breaks out into an open flame

##### B. Important distinctions about the nature of sin.

1. Some sins are more obvious than others and some sins are more serious in their outcomes (e.g., sexual immorality, 1 Cor. 6:18).

2. Other sins may be just as strong and prominent but not do as much damage to the whole person.

C. The weakening of sin:

1. Weakening sin is called “crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24). We aim to kill the body of death “day-by-day” (2 Cor. 4:16).
2. This is what Paul describes in Romans 6 when he says sin is crucified; it is fastened to the cross “so that the body of sin might be destroyed.”
3. “When a man is nailed to the cross, he at first struggles, strives, and cries out with great strength and might; but as his blood and spirits waste, his strivings are faint and seldom, his cries low and hoarse, and scarce to be heard. So when a man first determines to conquer a lust or sin, and to deal with it in earnest, it struggles with great violence to break loose; it cries with earnestness and impatience to be satisfied and relieved.”
4. This picture describes how sin is put to death through mortification. For all sin, whether it encourages us to do evil or hinders us from doing good, the rule is the same: it must be mortified or it will rise again.
5. Do not forget that you cannot beat down the fruit of a sin, you must strike at its root or it will continue to rise up over and over again. If you do not, you will make little or no progress in mortification.

## **II. The mortification of sin is a constant fight and contention against sin.**

Three things are necessary to wage the war against sin:

- A. Recognize the enemy you are dealing with and resolve that it is to be destroyed by all means possible.
  1. Remember that this is a battle with eternal consequences so don't trivialize any sin.
  2. When one trivializes sin, it is an indication that he is not mortified or even heading in that direction.
  3. We must recognize the plague in our hearts (1 Kings 8:38). Too many do not realize the enemy they carry around in their hearts and so they justify themselves and are impatient when they are rebuked, reprov'd, or admonished (2 Chron. 16:10).
- B. Be intimately acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions which give sin its success.
  1. This is how one wages war with their enemies: they plot, ponder, and scrutinize. You must learn to use strategic thinking.
  2. When things seem well and everything seems at ease, you must still beware and maintain the mindset of warfare against that which is still your enemy.
  3. To be always ready is the beginning of any successful warfare.
- C. Continue to attack your lusts daily with the spiritual weapons most detrimental to it.
  1. This is the key to spiritual warfare. Just because a sin is quiet, doesn't mean it is dead. You still must strike blows against it every day (Col. 3:5).
  2. As long as you face sin this way, you will have the upper hand.

## **III. Mortification involves some degree of success in the battle.**

- A. Frequent success against any sin strengthens us and give us evidence of mortification.
- B. When a person reaches this state, his lust is weakened at the root and principle.

C. Victory in mortification is realized, to a large extent, as you weaken lust's presence and enticements.

1. Implant those graces that stand in direct opposition to sin. By implanting humility, pride is weakened, by patience lack of self-control is weakened, by purity of mind and conscience, uncleanness, by heavenly-mindedness the love of this world is weakened.
2. Victory is further realized as the new man springs into action each time the sin appears.

Conclusion: "These weapons will secure a great degree of success. If a particular sin does not have some unusual advantage as a result of its nature, then the victory gained may become a permanent conquest. The soul may thus arrive at a great degree of peace of conscience, according to the terms of the covenant of grace."