

**John Owen on Dealing with Sin:
Lesson 7: Only Believers can Mortify Sin**
from Various Scriptures

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

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.

True mortification is the result of conversion.

I. Only truly converted persons can mortify sin.

- A. Mortification is the work of believers (Rom. 8:13), only believers are commanded to mortify sin (Col. 3:5), and only believers should mortify sin (Col. 3:4).
 - 1. Unbelievers can do something that looks like mortification, but they are unable to do the work that is acceptable to God.
 - 2. There is no death of sin without the death of Christ.
 - 3. Unbelievers can only work in their own righteousness and so are like the Israelites, who did not attain because they sought righteousness by the works of the law and not by faith (Rom. 9:31-32).
 - 4. It is the duty of everyone who hears to gospel to mortify sin, but it is not their immediate duty; they must mortify sin God's way.
 - 5. Only the Spirit can mortify sin (see Lesson 3). The unregenerate person does not have the Spirit, how then will they mortify sin? They cannot please God no matter what they do (Rom. 8:8).
- B. Many people are troubled by and even convicted of their sin. The first duty of these people is not mortification, but conversion.
 - 1. A man may work forever to clean himself up, but it will only make the outside clean.
 - 2. Unbelievers are called to cleanse their whole soul, not just to purge themselves of a particular lust. Those who seek mortification without conversion fail to build lasting progress.
 - 3. At Pentecost, the Jews who cried out to Peter were directed toward conversion, not mortification. John also came preaching repentance and conversion.
 - 4. The Pharisees worked hard, and forced others to work hard, at mortification, but in vain. Jesus says that if the tree is good, its fruit will also be good (Matt. 12:33).
- C. Unless a man is regenerated, all his attempts at mortification are to no purpose.

II. There are dangers in trying to mortify sin while unregenerate.

Seeking mortification without regeneration presents three serious problems:

- A. The mind and soul are diverted what that which is most important.
 - 1. The unconverted person's greatest need is conversion.
 - 2. Seeking mortification just to quiet the soul and conscience is really the result of self-love.
 - 3. This is one of the most common deceptions which ruins souls: people apply themselves to overcoming sin without letting that conviction lead them to the gospel of Christ.

4. These people perish in their reformation and rehabilitation.
- B. This duty, being out of its proper place, brings false peace to the conscience.
1. In itself and its proper place, mortification is a good thing. When it is entered into by unregenerate people, it leads a person to the delusion that all is well.
 2. A person may quiet his conscience over a sin but he is still unconverted and the true sickness of his soul has not been healed by the Great Physician.
 3. Many religions [and self-help techniques] are to this end: they pacify the conscience without Christ (Rom. 10:3).
 4. Such persons are hardened into self-righteousness.
- C. When a person has such soul deception, after realizing that his sin was not truly mortified, they begin to believe that victory over sin is impossible.
1. An unregenerate person who fights sin, and succumbs to it once again, may give himself completely over to it thinking that ultimate victory is impossible.
 2. These people are now hardened and more vile sinners are hard to find because they have tried this and found it useless without discovering Christ.
 3. Only living people can kill sin; all unregenerate persons are dead.
 4. "This, then, is a general rule: Be sure to get an interest in Christ; for if you attempt to mortify a sin without it, it will never be done. If a task can be accomplished only with one instrument, it would be madness for one to seek to accomplish it without using that instrument."

III. The unconverted person's first duty with regard to sin is to seek salvation.

Some object, asking, "Should people then stop striving against sin and live without restraint? Wouldn't this bring the whole world into confusion and further darkness?" There are several answers to this objection.

- A. God, in his goodness, uses various means to keep humanity from running into excess of riot and lust. Without this, the whole world would be a hell of sin and confusion. [Cf. Calvin's second use of the law, *Institutes* II.vii.10.]
- B. The Word of God works powerfully in the world to humble sinners and restrain them in their sin though they are never converted. This happens even though the purpose of the Word preached is conversion and not just restraint.
- C. Even though this restraining of sin is the outworking of the preaching of the Word and the work of the Spirit, and it is a good work, those who are unconverted are still under the power of darkness.
- D. We must let men know that mortification is their duty, but in its proper place. I do not encourage men to come away to mortification, but to conversion. It is foolish to set yourself against a particular sin without realizing that you are nothing but sin.

Conclusion: Advice to preachers

It is the duty of preachers to plead with men about their sins, but you must always be careful to speak in such a way that you lead them to the discovery of their state and condition.

Otherwise, you lead men to hypocrisy and do not accomplish the true goal of preaching the gospel. Drive the conviction to the heart, not just to individual sins.

Do not call men to mortification, but to believing. Vows and the like to mortify sin, apart from saving grace, commonly make sin more impetuous.

Sin cannot be killed without an interest in the death of Christ and the work of the Spirit. If directions apart from these do not change people's lives, they will never change their hearts. All such directions will do is make people self-justified or hypocrites, and not Christians.