

John Owen on Dealing with Sin:
Lesson 9: The Dangerous Symptoms of Sin
from Various Scriptures
adapted from Owen's *Mortification of Sin* ch. IX

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.

This chapter begins a list of nine preparatory directions for mortification and the closing chapter gives two specific directions for mortification itself.

Preparatory Direction 1: Consider the symptoms that accompany a sin. If they are deadly and serious, extraordinary remedies must be used; the ordinary work of mortification will not work.

Consider six deadly and serious symptoms of besetting sin. A sin is dangerous and deadly and must be dealt with through extraordinary means when...

I. When a sin is firmly established over a long period of time and has settled itself as a habitual practice.

- A. In this circumstance, the sin has already made a deep imprint on your soul and your affections are now comfortable with it. Your mind and conscience are no longer disturbed at its presence.
- B. In this state, such a sin will exert itself without your even taking notice of it.
- C. Such a sin may hold on even though great afflictions or great mercies come to you.
- D. If this is the case, it will not be easy to dislodge it from you. It will never die by itself, but will require special care. It must be killed daily to prevent it from gaining added strength.

II. When the heart pleads to be thought in a good state, yet all the while allows the continuance of a lust without any attempt at its mortification.

There are two ways in which one falls into this.

- A. When we focus on good works rather than the unpleasant sin or unpleasant task of dealing with it.
 - 1. It is good to remember God's blessings and to take joy in your service, but it is wrong to use your past good works to soothe your conscience when it is taken with sin.
 - 2. When you do this, you are ignoring the yoke of conviction and you are justifying yourself.
 - 3. The Jews lived in sin and yet comforted themselves that they were “Abraham's children.” Beware not to fall into the same trap.
 - 4. A person who is willing to seek peace at any cost and to live away from the love, peace, and blessing of God, loves sin more than God.
- B. When we dismiss or minimize our sin by applying grace and mercy to a sin we are not seeking to mortify.

1. Such a person is like Naaman who said, “In all other things I will walk with God, but in this thing, God will be merciful to me” (2 Kings 5:18).
 2. It is inconsistent to indulge a sin on account of mercy. “It is the badge of a hypocrite” and is “turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness” (Jude 4).
 3. Through the wiles of Satan and our own unbelief, it is easy to become ensnared in this trap. If it weren’t a danger, Paul would not have warned against it (Rom. 6:1-2).
- C. The deceitful heart will find many ways to justify its sin. In this state, a person will give in to a secret sin when other considerations do not hinder him.
- D. You must not, as a believer, seek to relive your conscience any way other than mortification and pardon in the blood of Christ.

III. When sin frequently succeeds in obtaining the consent of the will.

- A. Temptation is successful when your will takes delight in sin, even if you do not perform it outwardly.
- B. You are responsible for such sin even if it comes from spiritual negligence because spiritual negligence is itself a choice. Negligence does not make it less serious. (Note: You are also responsible for choices that lead to spiritual negligence.)
- C. You should not think sin less evil because it catches you by surprise; you must not neglect to guard your heart and watch over it.

IV. When a person fights against a sin only because of the consequences or penalty of that sin.

- A. This is evidence that sin has a great grip on a person’s will. If a person only refrains from sin because of shame of man or fear of punishment, he would practice that sin if there were no shame or punishment attached to it.
- B. Those who belong to Christ and love God hate sin as sin and all the workings of sin in their heart or in the world.
- C. Consider Joseph who said, “How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9). Paul said, “The love of Christ constrains us” (2 Cor. 5:14) and “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).
- D. If the only opposition to sin is the law and you cannot bring the gospel to bear upon it, then sin has control over you. In this case, you have cast off *renewing* grace and are kept from ruin only through *restraining* grace. You have returned to living under the power of the law.
- E. Using the law as a defense against sin will not last long. This will not restrain you when you have voluntarily given up the stronger gospel means of mortification. “What *gospel principles* have not done, *legal motives* cannot do!”

V. When it is likely that trouble over a sin or lust is a punishment from God.

- A. God sometimes leaves his own children under the power of a particular sin to correct them for former sins (Isa. 63:17).

- B. No one can questions that God deals with unregenerate men this way, but how can a saved man know if his troubled heart is due to the chastening hand of God?

Answer: Examine your heart and ways. What was the state of your soul before you fell into the current entanglements that trouble you? Were you negligent in your duties? Were you living without control or self-discipline? Is there the guilt of any great sin lying upon you that you have not repented of? Have you received any eminent mercy, protection, or deliverance which did not benefit you or for which you were not thankful? Have you experienced any affliction without considering the blessings intended for you behind it? Have you failed to glorify God when He graciously afforded you the opportunity to do so in your generation? Have you been conforming yourself to the world and those in it through the abounding temptations in the day in which you live?

- C. If any of these are true, call upon God for you are in danger.

VI. When your sin or lust has already withstood particular dealings from God against it.

- A. This is described in *Isaiah 57:17*, “For the iniquity of his covetousness I was angry and struck him; I hid and was angry, And he went on backsliding in the way of his heart.”
- B. Only sovereign grace can set one free from this but no one in this state should presume deliverance.
- C. God often deals with a person’s sin in such a way that they reflect on their sin and judge themselves for it.
1. Sometimes the reading of the Word will cut you to the heart and alert you to your present condition.
 2. More frequently, the preaching of the Word, which is God’s great ordinance for conviction, conversion, and edification, will strike at the heart of your cherished sin to startle you and make you seek mortification and to relinquish your hold on sin.
 3. When you are in sin, every warning like this that you receive is a mercy from God. That God does not cast you off and swear in his wrath that you will not enter into his rest (Ps. 95:11; Heb. 3:11; 4:3) is a sign of his infinite patience.
 4. If your lust is so strong that it stifles this conviction, you are truly in a sad state.

Conclusion: These six symptoms (among others) show the strength of sin. Just as our Savior said about an evil spirit, “This kind does not go out but by prayer and fasting,” may be said about sins that have these symptoms. The ordinary course of mortification will not do; extraordinary measures must be used. So one must first consider whether the particular sin or lust you have been fighting has any of these symptoms.

One word of caution is in order here. These evils may ensnare a true believer, but do not think because you experience these that you are a true believer. It is wrong to conclude that you are a believer just because you experience similar struggles against sin that a believer might. This is like believing that you are a believer because you are an adulterer since David, too, was an adulterer. Beware not to fall into this trap.