

**John Owen on Dealing with Sin:**  
**Lesson 11: A Tender Conscience and a Watchful Heart (Part 2)**  
from Various Scriptures

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

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 continues the list of nine preparatory directions for mortification before the final chapter which gives two specific directions for mortification itself.

***Preparatory Direction 4: Seek a constant longing and thirsting to be delivered from the power of sin.***

- Do not let your heart be happy with your present condition for one moment.
- The desire, longing, and panting after deliverance is in itself a grace which begins to conform the soul to the likeness of godliness.
- The apostle Paul considers the repentance and sorrow of the Corinthians to be a work of Grace (2 Cor. 7:11) and in Rom. 7:24 passionately expressed a desire to be delivered from the power of sin.
- Your longing heart will now watch for all opportunities to gain an advantage over its enemy.
- Such a strong desire is the life-blood of praying without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17).
- A strong desire sets faith and hope to work and sets the soul to following hard and panting after the Lord and his righteousness (Ps. 63:1).

***Preparatory Direction 5: Consider whether the trouble that you are perplexed with is related to your particular make-up and nature.***

Does your personal constitution heighten and cherish some particular sin? A proneness for some sins may doubtless lie in the natural temper and disposition of individuals.

1. This is not, in the least, an excuse for sin.
  - a. You cannot ascribe sin to your make-up (or even your guilt for sin).
  - b. The poison and nourishment for any sin lies in the Fall and the original depravity of our nature.
  - c. David considered his being formed in sin (Ps. 51:5) an aggravation of, not an excuse for, his sin.
  - d. If you are prone to a certain sin, it is the breaking out of original lust in your nature and should humble you.
2. If your constitution is particularly prone to give way to a particular lust, then Satan and sin have an advantage and you must, with extraordinary watchfulness, care, and diligence, fight to overcome these attacks against your soul.
3. To mortify any sin so rooted in the nature of a person, there is only one expedient particularly suited: “I discipline my body and keep it under control” (1 Cor. 9:27). Some reject this because others use this method without knowledge of the true nature of sin and

grace, but bringing the body into subjection by cutting short the natural appetite through fasting, watchfulness and the like is acceptable to God.

- i. You must not view the outward weakness and the impairing of the body as being good in and of themselves, to do so is to legalism.
- ii. You must not view fasting and watching and the like as the things which in themselves have the power to mortify sin.
  - a. If they had this power, anyone, even an unregenerate person, could mortify sin apart from the Spirit.
  - b. These disciplines are only the means by which the Spirit may, and sometimes does, put forth strength for the accomplishing of his own work.

***Preparatory Direction 6: Consider what occasions your sin has taken advantage of to exert itself in the past, and watch carefully at such times.***

1. This is one part of the duty our Lord is alluding to when he says, “And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” (Mark 13:37) and “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly” (Luke 21:34).
2. You need to watch against every breaking out of your corruptions (Ps. 18:23; Hag. 1:5).
3. Consider what ways, what kinds of company, what opportunities, what studies, what occupations, what conditions have at any time given, or do usually give, advantages to your sins and set yourself against them all.
  - a. People do this with their bodily infirmities, are matters of the soul less important?
  - b. If you will venture on the temptation to wickedness, you will venture on to the wickedness itself.
  - c. You might tell a person they will venture on to such-and-such a sin and they will be surprised; but if they will venture onto the occasions that lead to these sins, there is little ground left for confidence against the sins themselves.

***Preparatory Direction 7: Rise mightily against the first sign of sin.***

Do not allow it to gain the slightest ground.

1. Do not say, “I will go this far and no farther”; it is impossible to fix boundaries upon sin. Sin is like water in a causeway, if there is a break in the wall, it will flow on through the hole. It is easier to stop it in the beginning than to stop it once it begins to run.
2. James teaches that sin is progressive (James 1:14-15). If you have an unclean thought, you must stop it because what it desires is to immerse you wholly in sin, folly, and filth.
3. Set yourself against the thought as if you were already surrounded in wickedness. If you do not attack temptation this way, you will not win the battle.
4. If sin gains ground in your affections so that you delight in it, your understanding also will come to think little of it.