OWEN ON THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN: 1

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Owen’s teaching is based on Romans 8:13: ‘If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live’, although he also alludes to the other New Testament reference to mortification, notably to Colossians 3:15, where the Apostle Paul exhorts his readers: ‘Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and covetousness, which is idolatry’.

However, although the actual word ‘mortify’ appears only twice in the New Testament, ‘it gets right to the heart of the conflict in which the Christian is involved’, says Kenneth Prior, ‘and which is such an essential part of his sanctification’.

Commenting on Romans 8:13, Dr. Lloyd-Jones described mortification as ‘Vital and crucial to the understanding of the New Testament doctrine of Sanctification’. Now that being so, the first question we need to ask is, ‘What is Mortification?’ So we begin with a definition. ‘To mortify,’ says Owen, ‘is to put to death or crucify any living thing or principle, to take away its strength, so that it cannot act according to its nature.’ Or again, ‘to mortify is to extinguish and destroy all that force and vigor of corrupted nature which inclines unto earthly, carnal things, opposite unto that spiritual, heavenly life and its actings, which we have in and from Christ’ (Vol. 3, p. 540). However, lest anyone should deduce from that the possibility of complete success in that activity in this world, Owen adds a vital qualification: ‘This word is used by our Apostle not absolutely to destroy and kill, so that that which is so mortified or killed should no more have any being, but that it should be rendered useless as unto what its strength and vigor would produce’ (Vol. 3, pg. 540).

In other words, mortification, to Owen, is not eradication. It is the daily fighting against sin, and the weakening of it by the crucifying of the old nature through the power of the Holy Spirit. If Christ died for all our sins (Vol. 6, pg. 41), he asks, ‘why dost thou not set thyself against them also?’ As Christians, we are committed to a lifelong battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. Mortification is our fight against the second of that trinity of evil. So to sum this point up in Owen’s own words, ‘To mortify a sin is not utterly to kill, root it out, and destroy it, that it should have no more hold at all nor residence in our hearts. It is true that this is that which is aimed at; but this is not in this life accomplished. There is no man that truly sets himself to mortify any sin, but he aims at, intends, desires its utter destruction, that it should leave neither root nor fruit in the heart of life. He would so kill it that it should never move nor stir any more, cry or call, seduce or tempt, to eternity. Its “not-being” is the thing aimed at. Now, though doubtless there may, by the Spirit and grace of Christ, a wonderful success and eminency of victory against any sin be attained, so that a man may have almost constant triumph over it, yet an utter killing and destroying of it, that it should not be, is not in this life to be expected’ (Vol. 6, pg. 25).

Having defined his terms Owen proceeds in typical Puritan manner to summarise the teaching of Romans 8:13 in propositional form. ‘The choicest believers, who are assuredly freed

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1 This article originally formed part of a paper delivered to the 1985 Evangelical Fellowship of the Congregational Church Study Conference.

from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify
the indwelling power of sin.’ Now that is Owen’s fundamental assertion. Let us analyse this
general statement and consider it, in Owen’s own words, under the form of several particular
principles. First of all, we have:

A LIFE-LONG STRUGGLE

Though delivered from the guilt and dominion of sin, no Christian, whatever spiritual
experiences he may have enjoyed, or however advanced in the Christian life he may be, is freed
from the duty and necessity of mortification. And the cause of this continual warfare is found in
the remaining presence of sin in the Christian. ‘Indwelling sin always abides while we are in the
world,’ says Owen; ‘therefore it is always to be mortified’ (Vol. 6, p. 10). ‘This duty being
always incumbent on us argues undeniably the abiding in us of a principle of sin whilst we are in
the flesh.’ He quotes Galatians 5:17: ‘For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against
the flesh.’ Or again, ‘By the entrance of grace into the soul, (sin) loseth its dominion, but not its
being; its rule, but not its life’ (Vol. 3, p. 545). In other words, our first need as Christians is to
know ourselves. ‘It is because so many of us think of self-examination as old-fashioned and
morbid,’ says Dr. Packer (God’s Words, p. 182), ‘that we are hardly aware of indwelling sin at
all.’ There are two schools of thought, still popular in some evangelical circles, which because
they go astray over this basic assumption, end up by denying that mortification is a constant
necessity, although they deny it for different reasons.

The first is what we can describe as the Perfectionist teaching, which tells us that as the
result of an experience which is open to all Christians, sin can be totally eradicated from our
nature in this life. Now this teaching is usually explained in terms of baptism of the Spirit
subsequent to conversion, by which the Christian is entirely cleansed from sin. But altogether
apart from any other texts, Romans 8:13 is sufficient to demonstrate the utter falsity of such a
view. Owen refers to ‘the vain, foolish and ignorant disputes of men about perfect keeping of the
commands of God, and being wholly and perfectly dead to sin’ (Vol. 6, p. 10). So Perfectionism
was not unknown in Owen’s day, as it certainly is not in ours.

The second school of thought to which Owen’s teaching has special relevance is that
which teaches the principle of counteraction. The second view rejects the Perfectionist claim
completely, that sin can be entirely eradicated in the Christian. Instead, it teaches that by a
second experience of surrender, we can attain to a position in which there is no more struggle or
tension involved, a state in which even the desire to sin is no longer troublesome. Now this
experience has been variously described as ‘the deeper life’, ‘the higher life’ or ‘the victorious
life’, and it received its classic expression in the platform of the famous Keswick Convention.
The idea is this, that as we cease from struggling against sin, and abide in Christ by faith, He will
obtain the victory for us, so that all we have to do is to ‘Let go and let God’ as it is claimed. A
famous American holiness teacher named Charles Trumbull put it like this in his book, The Life
that Wins (published round about 1910): ‘I have learned that as I trust Christ for surrender, there
need be no fighting against sin, but complete freedom from the power, and even the desire of
sin.’

Sin is there, but dormant, kept in a state of suspended animation. That is the theory here
taught. What does Owen say to that? ‘When sin lets us alone, we may let sin alone; but as sin is
never less quiet than when it seems to be the most quiet… so ought our contrivance against it be

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3 Owen Works, Vol. 6, p. 7.
vigorous at all times, even when there is least suspicion’ (Vol. 6, p. 11). So, according to Owen, the sinful nature which remains in us will constantly endeavor to express itself through the medium of the body and its faculties; hence the need of mortification. ‘Sin aims at the utmost’ he warns. ‘Every unclean thought of glance would be adultery if it could you know what it did to David.’ In Owen’s view, the clear assumption underlying Romans 8:13 is that although the believer must not, and need not fall into acts of sin, he will be plagued by desires to sin. Not only so, but so long as we are in the body, these desires are more or less permanently active, as the traitor within the very walls of ‘mansoul’ itself, to borrow from John Bunyan’s imagery in *The Holy War*.

The poet Dante put it another way. Turning his face and feet towards the sunlit mount of holiness, he saw ‘a leopard supple, lithe, exceeding fleet, whose skin full many a dusky spot did stain; nor did she from my face retreat, nay hindered so my journey on the way, that many a time I backward turned my feet’. The leopard was indwelling sin. Some years ago, a friend of the writer was present at the conference in which Dr. Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Theological Seminary was taking part. Van Til was already in his seventies and in the question-and-answer session, someone asked him, ‘Dr. Van Til, isn’t there a sense in which as you get older, sins that once bothered you no longer do so?’ Van Til, his finger shaking, answered the question energetically: ‘Young man, that is incipient perfectionism. The greatest battles I have now are the sins of my youth!’

However, before we are exhorted to set about the work of mortification, or indeed to do anything, we need to grasp that the only way by which sin can be scripturally mortified is by the presence and the power of the indwelling Spirit of God. Having considered Owen’s basic assumption, we move on to our second principle:

### THE AGENCY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Paul says, ‘If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.’ To put it in Owen’s own words, ‘the foundation of all mortification of sin is from the inhabitation of the Spirit within us’ (Vol. 3, p. 549)… ‘and by no other power is it to be brought about’ (Vol. 6, p. 7). He says, ‘The Holy Spirit is the author of the work in us, so that although it is our duty, it is his grace and strength whereby it is performed’ (Vol. 3, p. 547). This he does by ‘implanting in our minds and all their faculties a contrary habit and principle… [contrary to sin that is], namely a principle of spiritual life and holiness, bringing forth the fruits thereof’ (Vol. 3, p. 551) – and by those ‘supplies and assistances of grace which he continually communicates unto us’ (Vol. 3, p. 553).

Because mortification is carried out by means of the Spirit, this is a work of which the unbeliever is totally incapable. ‘An unregenerate man may do something like it,’ says Owen, ‘but the work itself, so as it may be acceptable to God, he can never perform.’
Negatively then, true mortification can never be accomplished by the imposition of human rules and regulations. How is it accomplished? Positively, the Holy Spirit enables us to mortify sin by creating and sustaining our union and communion with Christ, by applying his fullness to us, and not only strengthening us to resist temptation but causing our hearts to abound in grace and in those fruits of the Spirit which are contrary to the flesh.

Yet the Holy Spirit is not given apart from the means of grace. Rather, he is communicated through the mean of grace. And therefore, says Owen, it is required of us that we look for supplies of grace ‘in all those ways and means whereby they are communicated; for although the Lord Christ giveth them freely and bountifully, yet our diligence in duty will give the measure in receiving them’ (Vol. 3, p. 554). And by duty, Owen refers to ‘prayer, mediation, reading, hearing of the Word, and other ordinances of divine worship’ (Vol. 3, p. 554). However, he mentions prayer particularly. It doth itself mightily prevail unto the weakening and destruction of sin.’ Or again: ‘the soul of a believer is never raised unto a higher delight in holiness, nor is more conformed to it than in prayer’ (Vol. 3, p. 560). That is where we start, says Owen, in effect; with the realisation that the Holy Spirit is in us as believers. In other words, we must know our resources, we must begin from a position of strength by realising what is already true of us as Christians.

However, the Spirit’s method is not to work mortification in us so as to bypass our activity but rather to enlist it. We are not spectators in the work but participants. This brings us to the third principle:

**THE BELIEVER’S ACTIVITY**

Mortification is a work in which the believer is fully taken up and involved. ‘If ye through the Spirit, do mortify the deeds of the body,’ says Paul. There the Apostle brings together in a beautiful fusion the relationship between our activity and the Spirit’s power. Owen says that the Spirit ‘works upon our understanding, will, conscience and affections, but agreeably to their nature; he works in us, and with us, not against us or without us’ (6:20). He quotes Philippians 2:12-13: ‘Work out your own salvation … for it is God that worketh in you.’ The Spirit does not mortify sin for you, says Paul. You do the mortifying, but by the means of the Spirit’s enabling. Both of those false systems of holiness teaching to which we referred teach the exact opposite. They say we are passive in this work. One example drawn from the book *So Great Salvation* by Dr. Stephen Barabbus and written about 1950 will help us. It is accepted as the standard work on the historic Keswick teaching. With reference to our text, Romans 8:13, Barabbus makes this comment: ‘Deliverance is not attained by struggle and painful effort, by earnest resolution and self-denial.’ Instead, he says, the Christian is to ‘hand over the fleshy deeds of the body to the Spirit for mortification. He is then to stand in faith – it is the Spirit’s responsibility to do the rest.’

But according to John Owen, that is precisely what the text does not teach. The fact that God is working in you by his Spirit does not mean that you do not need to do anything. The truth is, it means just the opposite!

Now let us expand this point a little and let Owen speak for himself on the necessity of activity on our part. ‘In whomsoever the death of Christ is not the death of sins, he shall die in his sin’ (Vol. 3, p. 560). Or even more sternly, (God) ‘will deliver none from destruction that continue in sin’ (Vol. 6, p. 34). ‘The contest if for our lives,’ he says. He tells us why.
Paul’s statement that if we ‘mortify the deeds of the body, we shall live’, Owen points out that mortification is urged on us as a condition of life. This is not because our activity provides the grounds of our salvation. Owen steers well clear of justification by works. It is because ‘God hath appointed this means for the attaining (of) that end which he hath freely promised.’ The relationship between our activity in mortification, and the attainment of life, is not a relationship of ‘cause and effect’ but of ‘means and ends’ (Vol. 6, p. 6). It is the way to ‘life’, spiritual well-being in this world, and eternal life in the world to come. ‘He who does not kill sin in his way,’ says Owen, ‘takes no steps towards his journey’s end’ (Vol. 6, p. 14). Therefore, if we would travel so as to arrive, we must mortify sin.

This is a vital issue confronting us, because Owen’s teaching at this point has come under attack from certain quarters as legalism, a form of salvation by works. For instance, Dr. R. T. Kendall committed himself to the following statement in his book Once Saved Always Saved: ‘I state categorically that a person who is saved will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work, or lack of work may accompany such faith. In other words, no matter what sin (or absence of Christian obedience) may accompany such faith’ (p. 43). Thus Dr. Kendall is teaching ‘once saved always saved’ no matter what you do, or how you live. But the question is, What do we mean by ‘Saved’? ‘Once saved, always saved.’ Certainly, so long as we remember that salvation is not a point only, but a line. Consequently, salvation to John Owen and the New Testament is never confined to deliverance from the penalty of sin – it always includes deliverance from the power of sin. It is as dangerous to rest on a justification unattended with holiness as it is to rest on a justification that has works for its basis (see W. S. Plumer on Romans 8). In other words, ‘once saved, always saved’, irrespective of mortification, is a contradiction in terms, because it sets up an impossible combination of things. The mortification of sin is an essential and an integral ingredient in the Christian life, and as such, is essential to salvation. It is not just an optional extra.

Not only is mortification a necessity: it is a continual necessity. As Owen points out, the verb in Romans 8:13 is in the present tense: ‘If ye keep on mortifying, ye shall live.’ Just as the principle of indwelling sin is a constant problem to the believer, so the putting to death of that principle is likewise always incumbent upon him. So there are no holidays in the spiritual realm for Owen. ‘Be always at it,’ he urges us. ‘Cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you’ (6:9). ‘He who ceases from this duty lets go all endeavors after holiness’ (Vol. 3, p. 541). And he adds: ‘Sin will not die, unless it be constantly weakened. Spare it, and it will heal its wounds and recover its strength. We must continually watch against the operation of this principle of sin; in our duties, in our calling, in conversation, in retirement, in our straits, in our enjoyments and in all that we do. If we are negligent on any occasion, we shall suffer by it; every mistake, every neglect is perilous.’

It comes to this, then, that mortification of sin is never an easy undertaking. Owen is realistic about this: ‘Men look upon it as an easy task, and as that which will be carried on with a little diligence. But is it for nothing that the Holy Spirit expresses it by “mortification” or “killing”? (Vol. 3. p. 541). We might add, ‘Is it for nothing that our Lord himself likened it to cutting off a hand, or gouging out an eye’ [Matt. 5:19-20]. Carnal self does not want to die. And it will do all it can to stay alive. Nevertheless, die it must. ‘Unmortified sin will weaken the soul,’ says Owen, ‘divert it from close communion with God, fill the mind with thoughts of sin and hinder in spiritual duties, so that the saint will lose his comfort and assurance’ (6:22). In other words, happiness and holiness are inseparably joined together by God. And few things give
more encouragement to the Christian than increasing victory over sins which once had victory over him.

It comes to this, that we are not passive in holiness, but active. ‘Holiness by faith in Jesus, not by effort in my own’ may sound very spiritual, but the trouble is, it is not scriptural. Mortification therefore is not the consecrating act of a moment but the persevering activity of a lifetime. May God help us all to realise that.

The fourth and last principle is this:

**WHAT MORTIFICATION INVOLVES**

We can divide this up under two aspects, negative and positive. Negatively, mortification means a refusal to allow sin to gain a foothold in our life by denying sinful self and sustenance it craves for. And in that connection Owen gives us nine preparatory directions. Here are some of the most significant of them:

1. Aim for a clear sense of the guilt, danger and evil of sin, lest you grow ‘sermon-proof and sickness proof’ (Vol. 6, p. 52);
2. Pray for a strong desire to be delivered from sin’s present power. ‘Assure thyself,’ says Owen, ‘that unless thou longest for deliverance, thou shall not have it’ (Vol. 6, p. 60);
3. Seek to recognise the things which are an occasion of sin to you and avoid them. ‘He that dares to dally with sin,’ he says, ‘will dare to sin’ (Vol. 6, p. 62). ‘Rise mightily against the first actings of sin’ (Vol. 6, p. 62).

These are some of the negatives. But Owen is insistent that this is never enough. So we turn briefly to the positive aspects. Here the essence of wisdom, according to Owen, is ‘the weakening of the flesh by the growth of positive graces’. ‘Let men take never so much pains to mortify, crucify, or subdue their sins,’ he says, ‘unless they endeavor in the first place to weaken and impair its strength by the increase of grace, they will labour in the fire, where their work will be consumed’ (Vol. 3, p. 543). Again: ‘the more vigorous the principle of holiness in us, the more weak, infirm and dying will be that of sin’. ‘The more we abound in the “fruits of the Spirit”, the less we shall be concerned in the work of the flesh’ (Vol. 3, p. 552). As the Christian walks in the Spirit, he is kept from fulfilling the lust of the flesh [Gal. 5:17]. Thomas Chalmers described this as ‘the expulsive power of a new affection’.

Owen did not leave it there. Pastoral concern led him to consider how we may discern success in the work of mortification. Here he is particularly helpful. ‘We cannot test our mortification by such things as natural temper gives no vigor to. One man may be troubled by anger and passion as much during one day, as another all his life, by reason of constitution, yet the former may have done more to mortify sin than the latter. But if we try ourselves by self-denial, envy or some other spiritual sin, we will have a better view of ourselves’ (6:25). In other words, if you happen to be equable and even-tempered by disposition, the fact that you have not lost your temper for a long time is no proof at all of progress in mortification. Test yourself rather against those sins to which you are temperamentally and constitutionally inclined, he says.

This is a vital subject and one of great relevance at the present time. ‘The evident importance of the subject,’ says Dr. Packer, ‘makes the long-standing neglect of it among Christians appear both sad and odd’ (God’s Words, p. 181). The truth is that the subject we have been considering is much more closely linked to the present depressed state of evangelicalism
than is generally realised. One contemporary writer put it like this: ‘It seems to us that possibly the most neglected current controversy in the church concerns the nature of true Christian experience.’ He goes on: ‘False or superficial teaching has given rise to the exaltation of a certain type of alleged experience as being the most desirable for all Christians. Because it begins at the wrong place, much current discussion on Christian experience is man-centred, concerning itself with our “happiness” or “power”, rather than moral conformity to God.’ In view of the emergence of the Charismatic movement, that danger exists today with a new urgency. Whether or not some of the charismata were temporary is beside the point here. The point is that according to the New Testament, there is no necessary connection between gifts and holiness. As our Lord made clear in those awesome words toward the close of the Sermon on the Mount, it is not those who prophesy or who cast out demons, or who perform miracles who will enter the kingdom of heaven but only those who ‘do the will of the Father who is in heaven’ [Matt. 7:21].

Doing the will of God from the heart is therefore the immediate goal of all true Christian piety. To promote that great and glorious end was the purpose John Owen saw in his own ministry. He put it like this in a rare autobiographical comment in the preface to the treatise we have been considering. With this we may fitly leave the subject:

‘I hope I may own in sincerity, that my heart’s desire unto God, and the chief design of my life in the station wherein the good providence of God hath placed me, are, that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and ways of others, to the glory of God; that so the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things’ (Vol. 6, p. 4).

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4 I. H. Murray in *Banner of Truth* magazine, issue 253, Oct. 1984