Little needs to be said about John Owen by way of commendation. He is regarded by many as one of the greatest English speaking theologians who has ever lived—by some as the greatest. Andrew Thomson goes to the heart of Owen’s greatness in his *Life of Dr. Owen*:

> We have hesitated which most to admire—his intimate knowledge of the Word of God, or his profound acquaintance with the heart of man, or the skill with which he brings the one into vigorous and healing action upon the other.¹

All three qualities are obvious in Owen’s treatise, *On Indwelling Sin*. Thomas Chalmers, writing from St. Andrew’s in 1825, states:

> The writings of this venerable and much-admired Author form a rich spiritual treasury, suited to the various needs and conditions of almost every class of men; but perhaps there is no Treatise of this learned and pious Author more fitted to be useful to the Christian disciple, than the one we have now ventured to recommend.²

Chalmers is recommending Owen’s treatise on indwelling sin. And people today continue to bear testimony to how God has used Owen on indwelling sin to help make sense of the conflict that they find in their hearts as Christians.³ And how Owen gives a vision of the Christian life that is both more robust and more realistic than the one we are presented with in many popular books and from many modern pulpits.

*Indwelling Sin* was published in 1668 under the full title, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers; together with the ways of its working and means of prevention, opened, evinced and applied: with a resolution of sundry cases of conscience thereunto appertaining*.⁴ Owen’s theme is the unremitting conflict between a believer and the remainders of indwelling sin all the days of his life in this world. In 1668 Owen was about 52 years old, having been born in 1616. He died 15 years later on 24 August 1683. In other words, when Owen wrote *Indwelling Sin* he had himself engaged personally in the spiritual

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conflict about which he writes during many years of intense theological, pastoral, and political labour.5

The year 1660 marked a new phase in Owen’s life. Cromwell had died in 1658. 1660 saw both the Restoration of the monarchy and Owen being relieved of his Deanship of Christ Church College Oxford. Owen’s political influence waned but he was nevertheless to be the leading light of the Congregationalists during the years of persecution that followed the Act of Uniformity in 1662. During this later period of his life Owen poured his energies into being a pastor. And it is perhaps not surprising that there is a personal and pastoral richness to the writings that come out of these later years.

On Indwelling Sin then, is not primarily a theological treatise on the nature of sin, although Owen will explain what its nature is. Rather, it is a pastoral word of exhortation concerning the power and the danger of the remainders of indwelling sin in believers’ lives. Quite possibly, as with Owen’s work On Mortification, the treatise originally started out as a series of sermons. If you are relatively new to Owen, as I am, it is easy to become bogged down in his dense and complex argumentation. Personally I have not found the solution to be to slow down and read more deliberately but rather to read as much of On Indwelling Sin as possible in one sitting. And it is then that the overwhelming impression you are left with is not with Owen as the precise theologian but with Owen as the passionate pastor. It is true that we do not know much about Owen’s personal life. In some ways we know frustratingly little.6 But as you read Owen on indwelling sin you at least sense that you hear the man’s heartbeat. And what you detect is that Owen’s heart was above all a pastoral heart. Owen was a pastor and his chief concern was the progress in holiness of those in his charge, whether churchgoers, soldiers, or members of parliament.

II. Sin and the Christian Life

I want to put Owen’s teaching on indwelling sin within the wider context of his teachings. We won’t consider everything Owen has to say about sin in general. However we will ask how his teaching on indwelling sin fits into his understanding of the problem of sin in the Christian life. Owen’s teaching on indwelling sin does not stand alone. There is a foundational distinction upon which it is built, as well as a vital prescription to which it leads. Owen’s pastoral concern is evident in both. In fact, without this foundational distinction grounding Owen’s teaching on indwelling sin and without the vital prescription as its goal, his teaching would prove utterly overwhelming. Such is the strength and searching nature of his analysis that it would lead to despair.

The foundational distinction is a distinction between the dominion of sin in the life of an unregenerate person and the presence and power of sin that remains in the life of a believer. Owen, it seems, is seeking to be faithful to the structure of the apostle Paul’s thought in Romans in which the struggles of the “wretched man” in chapter 7 are preceded by union with Christ in his death to sin in chapter 6.

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What is the evidence that this distinction is foundational to Owen’s teaching on sin in the Christian life? Well, most obviously there is his treatise entitled, *Of the Dominion of Sin and Grace.* In it Owen expounds the nature of sin’s dominion and the difference between being under law and being under grace. But before Owen embarks on the nature of sin’s dominion, he highlights the practical issue that he is seeking to address. Simply stated it is that sin still abides in believers. Owen’s message is that though believers are acutely aware of its presence and although sin is always seeking dominion over them, it shall not have the dominion over them.

The distinction between sin’s dominion and sin’s power is so crucial because sin in the believer remains a ferociously powerful foe. Owen knows that Christians, acutely aware of their enemy’s power, need to be guarded against despair. The fighting and the warring of sin is consistent with sin having been dethroned. So Owen says:

> If sin have the dominion, we are lost forever; if it be dethroned, we are safe. It may tempt, seduce and entice; it may fight, war, perplex, and disquiet; it may surprise into actual sin; yet *if it have not the dominion in us,* we are in a state of grace and acceptation with God.  

Evidence that this distinction is foundational for Owen also comes from *On Indwelling Sin* itself. Once again of course the presenting pastoral issue is sin continuing to abide in believers. Owen starts his treatise on indwelling sin by making four observations from Romans 7:21, Paul’s words, “I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.”

*Observation 1*: that since indwelling sin is called a law, it has an exceeding efficacy and power.

*Observation 2*: that since the apostle discovered this law in himself, since he found it by personal experience, we can say that believers have experience of the power and efficacy of indwelling sin.

*Observation 3*: the general frame and habitual inclination of believers is to do good.

*Observation 4*: when the will is set on doing good, indwelling sin is there, at work, inclining to evil.

What we must not miss is that as Owen lays out his preliminary observations, he is keen to underline the distinction between dominion and power as he does so. So, for example, in explaining that the apostle Paul found the law of sin by personal experience, which is observation number 2, Owen bluntly states, “they that find not its power are under its dominion.” He then gives a typically vivid illustration of his point with the image of a man swimming in a river: “he shall find the stream to be strong who swims against it, though he who rolls along with it is insensible of it.” Again, as Owen is explaining the believer’s inclination to do good under observation 3, he distinguishes between the way believers choose good and the way unbelievers choose good. Believers choose good for its own sake, “because it is desirable and suitable to the soul.” Unbelievers however have their desires set not on what is good itself,

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8 *Works*, Volume 7, p. 508, emphasis in original.
9 *Works*, Volume 6, p. 159.
but on the end, the outcome that the good leads to. It is the same foundational issue of the
difference between dominion and power. Owen is clearly working hard to hold together the
uniqueness of Christian experience with the fact that sin is no respecter of persons and will
powerfully assault both non-Christian and Christian alike.

Owen was very sensitive to particular situations in which it was not actually that easy to
discern whether or not sin’s dominion had been ended in a person’s life. It is a recurring issue in
his writing on sin. And it is a particularly interesting one.

In Of the Dominion of Sin and Grace Owen notes that some people may show signs in their
lives which in a positive way would argue against the reign of sin, when in fact those signs are
not actually clear evidence that sin does not have dominion. And on the other hand, the power of
sin in the lives of other people would seem to argue in favour of sin having the dominion, when
in fact it may not.12

An instance of the second category would be what Owen calls a perplexing or a prevalent
lust. In his treatise on Mortification he discusses the issue of a disquieting, prevailing lust and
how it should be dealt with. Owen does not say that such a state is incompatible with being
regenerate, but he does state that “unless some extraordinary course be taken, such a person hath
no ground in the world to expect that his latter end shall be peace.”13

Owen takes up the theme again in one of his discourses discussing practical cases of
conscience, printed in volume 9 of the Goold edition. He asks, “whether lust or corruption,
habitually prevalent, be consistent with the truth of grace?”14 Owen’s answer is that the root of
spiritual life may be in a person when there is a habitually prevalent or powerfully prevailing lust
or corruption. But Owen frames his answer in a carefully nuanced way, not wanting to give any
ground to the suggestion that such a state of affairs is either normal or desirable. However,
although Owen’s answer is in substance the same to the one he had given earlier in his work On
Mortification, there is a considerably gentler and more exploratory tone to the discussion.15

The path of wisdom is obviously never to allow a particular sin or lust to prevail and
dominate in the soul. When Owen is discussing in On Indwelling Sin how sin seeks to win the
consent of the will, he gives this warning:

Observe that reiterated, repeated acts of the consent of the will unto sin may beget a
disposition and inclinableness in it unto the like acts, that may bring the will unto a
proneness and readiness to consent unto sin upon easy solicitations; which is a
condition of soul dangerous, and greatly to be watched against.16

One further observation needs to be made whilst considering this distinction between
dominion and power. Owen bases his exposition of indwelling sin on Romans 7:21. Owen
recognises that the identity of “the wretched man” of Romans 7 was a debated issue. Although
he doesn’t set out to do so he believes that it can be “undeniably proved and evinced”17 that Paul
is explaining the condition of a regenerate person. Commentators today spread out all over the
map in their interpretations of Romans 7. Notwithstanding that there are other passages in the

12 Works, Volume 7, p. 518.
13 Works, Volume 6, p. 44.
14 Works, Volume 9, p. 386.
15 This may of course be the difference between a sermon and a discourse. The difference in tone is however
marked.
16 Works, Volume 6, p. 253.
17 Ibid., p. 157.
New Testament that deal with the conflict with sin, many of which Owen uses in his exposition, we are bound to consider the extent to which one’s interpretation of Romans 7 shapes one’s view of Christian experience. But that question is beyond the scope of this paper.

We move on from Owen’s foundational distinction to his **vital prescription**. The prescription that Owen asks us to take is called mortification. Of course it’s not all that he has to say concerning growth in holiness and conformity to the image of Christ. But it is the duty immediately incumbent on believers as they are aware of the remainders of indwelling sin within. Mortification is vital because unmortified sin will both weaken the soul, depriving it of its vigour, as well as darken the soul, depriving it of its comfort and peace. There is no other way to grow in conformity to Christ and to enjoy communion with God.

There are logical connections in Owen’s mind, a progression of steps. The searching analysis on indwelling sin is to lead to a self-knowledge that in turn must lead to a serious commitment to mortification. Mortification is to lead to holiness. But even holiness is not an end in itself. Rather it is fundamental to the restoration of the image of God in us, which ultimately will mean the enjoyment of life with God. That teleological thrust, that ultimate goal, is important for Owen and it gives a glorious purpose to the painful process of mortification.

An overwhelming sense of our weakness before the power of sin is not a hindrance, but rather a help in the duty of mortification, because the power does not come from us. Although mortification is a duty, it is Christ centred and Spirit empowered. Owen exhorts us:

> Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror.

Power for mortification comes from the cross of Christ and it flows to us through the activity of the Spirit. It is by the Spirit that we mortify the deeds of the body. We need to know what we are to expect as we mortify sin, and Owen is clear that we are not to expect the rooting out of all sin such that it has no more power in us. Rather, through mortification we can expect what Owen calls “an habitual weakening of sin.” A prolonged course of such mortification should lead to success, which Owen describes in terms of “a pursuit of [sin] to a complete conquest.” By which he doesn’t of course mean that there are no longer any stirrings of sin within but that sin doesn’t hinder duty or interrupt peace quite like it used to.

Both Owen’s foundational distinction and his vital prescription are hope giving teachings. They give a thoroughly Christocentric context to Owen’s teaching on indwelling sin. And it is in that context that Owen seeks to wake us up to the terrifying power of sin.

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18 The discourse that bears the name is printed in volume 6 of the Goold edition.
19 *Works*, Volume 6, p. 22.
20 Ibid., p. 79.
21 Ibid., p. 28.
22 Ibid., p. 32.
III. On Indwelling Sin

The burden of Owen’s analysis of indwelling sin is to tell us that it is powerful. He calls it an “exceeding” power. And second only to his emphasis on its power, is his insistence that it is dangerous: “I fear we have few of us a diligence proportionable to our danger.”

I will give a broad outline of Owen’s analysis before drawing out three important practical implications of Owen’s teaching.

After Owen’s four introductory observations on Romans 7:21 he reiterates the first of them i.e., “that there is an exceeding efficacy and power in the remainder of indwelling sin in believers, with a constant inclination and working towards evil.” That is Owen’s thesis that he then sets out to prove. And so he begins to elaborate on those things that show indwelling sin to be powerful. He seeks to build a cumulative case that proves the power of indwelling sin. The main points are as follows.

1. The fact that indwelling sin is called a law shows that it is powerful.

Owen distinguishes between law as a moral commandment, a “directive rule,” and law as a principle, an “operative effective principle.” In Romans 7:21 Paul is using the word “law” in the latter sense. And as a law in this sense, Owen says, it inclines and it urges to actions that are in accordance with its own nature. Thus it is, for example, that the law of nature works, the principle that is at work in everything in the world around us. And so it is also with the law of sin. As a law in this sense there is an inherent urging, inclining principle, a power at work.

What distinguishes the law of sin though is that it is an inbred law, an inner law. It is indwelling. As such it abides in the soul and therefore it is able to apply itself with ease. Owen quotes Hebrews 12:1. It is “the sin that doth so easily beset us.” Sin possesses the very faculties of the soul, the mind, will, and affections, those faculties that drive all that we do. And that means there is no escaping this law. It is an inner law. And that leads to Owen’s next point.

2. The fact that indwelling sin has its seat in the heart shows that it is powerful.

Owen makes this as a separate point, although he is clearly developing his first point by showing the sort of inner residence that the law of sin has. Its seat is the heart. That is the fort, the citadel of sin. That is where it has taken up residence, in the heart. And that is an awesome thought, because the heart is the throne of God. By heart Scripture sometimes means the mind and understanding, sometimes the will, sometimes the affections, sometimes the conscience, sometimes the whole soul of man.

The advantage that sin has obtained from dwelling in the heart is that the heart is both unsearchable and deceitful. Owen quotes Jeremiah 17:9,10, “Who can know the heart? I the Lord search it.” The point is that we don’t know our hearts and only the Lord can search them. And
so it is that sometimes we may think sin is ruined, when it’s really only hiding, for the simple reason that we do not know our hearts:

Hath a man had a contest with any lust, and a blessed victory over it by the Holy Ghost as to that present trial?—when he thinks it is utterly expelled, he ere long finds that it was but retired out of sight. It can lie so close in the mind’s darkness, in the will’s indisposition, in the disorder and carnality of the affections, that no eye can discover it.²⁹

But not only is the heart unsearchable, it is also deceitful. And here Owen makes a point that is fundamental to his understanding of the fallen human soul. The reason that the heart is deceitful is that the faculties of the soul are now all in a state of disorder and confusion. There is chaos in the soul. God created the faculties in a perfect harmony and union, with the mind being subject to God, the will subject to the mind, and the affections following the mind and will. But now things are so different:

The will chooseth not the good which the mind discovers; the affections delight not in that which the will chooseth: but all jar and interfere, cross and rebel against each other.³⁰

Owen’s application at this point is simple. Since the heart is unsearchable and deceitful, we can be sure that our work in contending against sin is never at an end. And this explains the spiritual decline that can so easily set in with old age, because people ease up before the work is done. We must be “endless in our pursuit” and never allow ourselves to be deceived in the matter:

It may be under some great affliction, it may be in some eminent enjoyment of God, in the sense of the sweetness of blessed communion with Christ, we have been ready to say there was an end of sin, that it was dead and gone forever; but have we not found the contrary by experience?³¹

3. The fact that the nature of indwelling sin is enmity against God shows that it is powerful.

The nature of indwelling sin is that it is always enmity against God. That is the unchangeable nature of sin. So it cannot be pacified in any way. And so we cannot expect quietness from our corruptions by satisfying them. That is the equivalent to satisfying a fire by adding fuel to it! Indwelling sin is never satisfied because it is enmity against God. And therefore the only relief of the soul is in sin’s ruin. No terms of peace are possible.

This enmity against God is universal to all of God. That explains why there is a greater enmity against God in the Gospel than in the law, because more of the glorious excellencies of God are manifested in the Gospel than in the law. And this enmity against God is universal in all of the soul. The mind, will, and affections are all secured against God.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 172.
³⁰ Ibid., p. 173.
³¹ Ibid., p. 175.
The enmity operates in two ways. By *aversation*, which is a turning away, a drawing away from God, and by *opposition*. Owen first considers the aversation of sin, before moving on to its opposition. Then in taking up the theme of opposition he breaks it down under two heads, force and deceit. The reader needs to know at this point that though he is beginning to descend into the depths of Owen’s subdivisions, when he gets to the discussion of force and deceit he has in fact reached the heart of Owen’s analysis. An argument’s location in the order of Owen’s system of divisions is not an indication of its importance in his line of argument! But we need to move back for a moment to consider what Owen means by aversation.

4. **Enmity against God acts powerfully by aversation.**

Aversion, or a turning away from God, is seen in weariness and formality in duty. It is easier to see this at work in private duties, “duties of retirement,” than in public duties. The reason is that motivation for public duties is more mixed, and may include being influenced by custom and necessity.

And so it is that as we draw near to God in private, “sometimes there will be a violent inclination to the contrary, so that the soul had rather do any thing, embrace any diversion, though it wound itself thereby, than vigorously apply itself unto that which in the inward man it breathes after.”

The only way to watch against this aversation is to keep the soul in a universally holy frame. And only as we do that will we be able to say with the Psalmist in Psalm 57:7, “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed.”

5. **Enmity against God acts powerfully by opposition, an opposition that sin expresses by force.**

There are four degrees of progress here. First, the general inclination of forceful opposition is lusting. Second, the particular way in which it contends is that it fights or wars. Third, it reaches a point of success by leading the soul captive. Fourth, and the last degree of forceful opposition, is rage and madness.

To explain the lusting of sin Owen quotes Galatians 5:17, “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit.” This is the most basic way in which the law of sin opposes God and the rule of his Spirit. It lusts. This lusting is a consistent, habitual propensity unto evil. Running water always presses upon anything that lies in its way. Set a dam before it and it will rise and swell until it overflows the banks. So it is with indwelling sin, Owen says. “Whilst the springs and fountains of it are open, in vain is it for men to set a dam before it by their convictions, resolutions, vows, and promises.”

It is because of this habitual propensity in sin that Christians suffer what Owen calls “involuntary surprisals of soul”:

I know no greater burden in the life of a believer than these involuntary surprisals of soul; involuntary, I say, as to the actual consent of the will, but not so in respect of that

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corruption which is in the will, and is the principle of them. And it is in respect unto these that the apostle makes his complaint, Rom.7:24.  

The warring of sin, which is the next degree of progress after its lusting, is its stubborn, obstinate opposition to the commands and the directions of the law of grace. And that explains why we don’t do what we want and what we delight in. How strange, Owen says, that we don’t do what we actually want to do. And that is because sin wars.

Sometimes it proposeth diversions, sometimes it causeth weariness, sometimes it finds out difficulties, sometimes it stirs up contrary affections, sometimes it begets prejudices, and one way or other entangles the soul; so that it never suffers grace to have an absolute and complete success in any duty.

Sin doesn’t rest, it doesn’t give up. It has an importunity that “wearies and wears out the soul.”

After the warring of sin comes its success in taking the soul captive. We need to remember at this point that Owen is still talking about the law of sin, not about a particular sin. And so Owen says, this captivity is true of the Christian, it is the Christian who has been led captive to the law of sin. This means that “we are compelled to bear its presence and burden whether we will or no.” This is against our will. We may give consent with our will to a particular individual sin, but not to this horrid captivity. It is a miserable thing:

When the neck is sore and tender with former pressures, to be compelled to bear the yoke again, this pierces, this grieves, this even breaks the heart.

The last degree of forceful opposition is the rage and madness of sin. Owen quotes Ecclesiastes 9:3, “The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart.” This is the idea of importunity again, but this time with violence attached to it. “It is the tearing and torturing of the soul by any sin to force its consent and to obtain satisfaction.” Sin does not ordinarily rise to this height.

6. The other way that indwelling sin furthers its opposition to God is by deceit.

It would be impossible to summarise Owen’s analysis at this point in a way that communicates just how extraordinarily searching and insightful it is.

He gives many pages to the deceit of sin. He takes James 1:14,15 as his starting point: “Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.” Owen takes that teaching from James and he passes it through the grid of the categories of mind, affections, and will. He explains how the mind is drawn off, how the affections are enticed, how sin is then conceived in the will.

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34 Ibid., p. 192.
36 Ibid., p. 205.
37 Ibid., p. 206.
It will be obvious by now that Owen understood the activity of the soul in terms of the three-fold psychological categories of mind, affections, and will. This was an accepted teaching within the Reformed tradition. What is striking is the way in which Owen harnesses the tradition at this point to paint such a vivid picture of the havoc that sin wreaks in the soul.

Sin draws off the mind. The mind is given to lead and to guide. It is the leading faculty of the soul. Owen sees it as the primary point for the entrance of sin:

Now, this is that which for the most part is the beginning of sin unto us, even the drawing off the mind from a due attendance in all things unto the discharge of its duty.

One of the ways in which sin draws off the mind is “by a horrible abuse of gospel grace.” The working of sin upon the mind “separates between the doctrine of grace and the use and end of it.” False assurance of forgiveness allows for continuing in sin: “from the doctrine of the assured pardon of sin, it insinuates a regardlessness of sin.” Owen is obviously mirroring Paul’s teaching in Romans 6:1-2 at this point.

The actual level of danger posed by sin is not in proportion to our awareness of the danger. This is a point that Owen goes on to make, although not in so many words. He makes the point in a very interesting way. When the affections begin to be entangled, or the will begins to conceive sin, then conscience makes an uproar in the soul. As conscience cries out it is informing the soul of the danger. However, conscience does not respond in a similar way when the mind is drawn off. The reason, Owen says is that the actings of the mind are spiritual and so they are less easily discerned. The danger is great because the mind is the leading faculty of the soul, but the conscience is not alerting the soul in the same way that it might when the affections and the will are being acted upon by sin. Great watchfulness is called for so that the mind is not drawn away.

The affections are enticed. It is our affections that drive our choices and responses in the light of the rational consideration of the mind. We can summarise Owen’s teaching briefly at this point by saying that sin deceives the affections by presenting the desirability of sin whilst hiding its danger. The deceit of sin works in such a way that the sense of desirability overpowers any consideration of the danger.

And then finally, the deceit of sin conceives actual sin in the will. Owen described the will as a “rational appetite.” It is rational because guided by the mind and it is an appetite because excited by the affections. Guided by the mind and affections it is then to respond to what is good. Sin is conceived in us when it obtains the consent of the will.

Owen distinguishes between a consent which is full and absolute, which is the soul going into sin like a ship before the wind with all its sails up, and a consent which has a secret reluctance in it, a “renitency.” An example of the latter is Peter denying his master. So though in believers there may be a predominant consent in the will there is never an absolute, full consent of the will, because there is always this secret reluctance. And so Owen has brought us back once again to the distinction between dominion and power.

38 Griffiths’ whole discussion of Owen at this point is helpful, cf. op. cit. pp. 57-86.
39 Works, Volume 6, p. 231.
40 Ibid., p. 218.
41 Ibid., p. 219.
42 Ibid., p. 233.
43 Ibid., p. 254.
After explaining various ways in which God often obstructs his people from committing the sin that is conceived in the will, Owen moves to his final point.

7. If further evidence of sin’s power is needed then just look at the affect it has had in people’s lives.

Owen is now rounding off his exposition with some concluding observations. He points out the scandalous eruptions of sin in the lives of believers, the lives of eminent men like Noah, and Lot, and David, and Hezekiah. And then he outlines the sad declensions from zeal and holiness that are found in many believers. It is so sad, because many believers who were once very fruitful are now so entangled with temptations, that they have enough to do during the remainders of their lives just to keep themselves spiritually alive.

Owen ends his treatise by noting the power of sin in unregenerate people, and its ability to resist even the power of God’s law. He then directs us to the remedy which is found in his treatise on mortification.

IV. Practical Lessons

Owen would want us to take to heart three practical lessons from his analysis of indwelling sin.

1. The Need for Wisdom

The man that understands the evil of his own heart, how vile it is, is the only useful, fruitful, and solid believing and obedient person. Others are fit only to delude themselves, to disquiet families, churches, and all relations whatever.44

An understanding of our sickness is healthy, for ourselves, for our families, and for our churches. Owen is saying to us, Christian know yourself, be wise and get to know yourself! Owen is writing to aid self knowledge. Do you realise what you are like? Do you know anything about this enemy within? Do you have knowledge of your souls?

Listen to Owen on this point:

Many men live in the dark to themselves all their days; whatever else they know they know not themselves. They know their outward estates, how rich they are, and the conditions of their bodies as to health and sickness they are careful to examine; but as to their inward man, and their principles as to God and eternity, they know little or nothing of themselves. Indeed few labour to grow wise in this matter, few study themselves as they ought, are acquainted with the evils of their own hearts as they ought; on which yet the whole course of their obedience, and consequently of their eternal condition, doth depend.45

Superficial views of sin will lead to shallow and sentimental views of God’s grace in Christ. And Owen wants us to know Christ. It is not morbid introspection he is after. It is the pursuit of

44 Ibid., p. 201.
Christ. Towards the end of the book Owen draws our attention to the practise of infanticide. What he is saying is, Just look at the evil madness of sin, just look at what it does, it leads some people even to murder their own children. Do you not know its power, its rage, its madness? Then he adds, “and it may not be to the disadvantage of the best to know and consider that they carry about them and in them which in others hath produced these effects.”

2. The Need for Watchfulness

The great wisdom and security of the soul in dealing with indwelling sin is to put a violent stop unto its beginnings, its first motions and actings. Venture all on the first attempt. Die rather than yield one step unto it.\(^47\)

Constantly and repeatedly Owen says, Watch against the first motions of sin, watch against its beginnings, don’t give it any ground whatsoever. The spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and meditation and prayer are crucial because without them there can be no watchfulness against sin, there can be no sensitivity to its deceitfulness, there will be no protection of the mind.

3. The Need for Warfare

It is perhaps at this point that Owen speaks most powerfully to our generation. We do need to learn wisdom, lots of it. We do need to be watchful, much more so. But perhaps above all, the admonition we need to hear is this, “You need to make war. You are not at peace, you are at war.”

To be in a fierce battle is a challenging and dangerous thing. But to be in a fierce battle, and to live as if you are not, is a desperately foolish thing. To wonder carelessly through the fields as if there were no landmines, to amble aimlessly around the city like a tourist as if there were no snipers, to walk alone in enemy territory without the support and encouragement of your comrades, for a soldier to do such things is the height of folly. To be at war and not to make war is to court disaster. That is why Owen said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

\(^{46}\) Ibid., p. 306.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., p. 208.
\(^{48}\) Ibid., p. 9.