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Teaching Notes

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Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers

John Owen

I. Background

II. Chapter Summaries

CHAPTER I

1. Foundational text: Romans 8:13

KJV Romans 8:13 For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

NASB Romans 8:13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

2. observations on the text

- a. a duty prescribed: “Mortify the deeds of the body”
- b. the persons to whom it is prescribed: “ye”
- c. a promise annexed to that duty: “ye shall live”
- d. the cause or means of the performance of that duty: the Spirit “if ye, through the Spirit...”
- e. the conditionality of the whole (duty, means, promise contained): “IF...”
 - i) the *uncertainty of the event*... thus the condition is absolutely necessary to the outcome
 - ii) the *certainty of the connection*...

Illustration: saying to a sick man: “If you will take such a potion (medicine) or such a remedy, you will be well.”

Thus there is an absolutely certain connection between *mortifying the deeds of the body* and *living*

3. Emphasis given on who must mortify: “Ye...”
 - a. people of whom it is spoken: “There is no condemnation...” (Romans 8:1)
 - b. people of whom it is spoken: “You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit” (vs. 9)
 - c. people of whom it is spoken: “quickened (made alive) by the Spirit of Christ (vs. 10-11)
 - d. THESE are the ones who MUST mortify the deeds of the body

4. Key doctrinal conclusion on this point:

“The choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.”

5. Essential to focus on the efficient cause of mortification: the Holy Spirit

“All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit.... This is the work of the Spirit; by Him alone is it to be wrought, and by no other power is it to be brought about. Mortification from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world.”

6. What is MORTIFICATION? What is the duty to which we are commanded?

- a. what is meant by “the body”?

It is the same as the “flesh” in one sense... the “old man”, the sin nature; it is indwelling sin, the corrupted flesh, a seat and instrument of “lust and distempered affections”

- b. what is meant by “the deeds of the body”?

Word “deeds” denotes the outward actions chiefly; but here the meaning is also the inward root from which the deeds of the flesh spring: “the axe is already laid at the root of the tree”... every lust intends to conceive and bring forth a perfect sin, even if it ends up aborted before that end

- c. what is meant by “mortifying” them?

“To kill a man, or any other living thing, is to take away the principle of all his strength, vigour, and power, so that he cannot act or exert...” So it is in this case.

Definition: “The mortification of indwelling sin remaining in our mortal bodies, that it may not have life and power to bring forth the works or deeds of the flesh is the constant duty of believers.”

7. What is the PROMISE attached to this duty? LIFE... “Ye shall live”

“The life promised is opposed to the death threatened in the clause forgoing: ‘If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die.’” But the word may go beyond our eternal life in heaven but include our ongoing experience of spiritual life here on earth with Christ: thus, it means “You shall live, you shall have a good, vigorous, comfortable, spiritual life while you are here, and obtain eternal life hereafter.”

The vigor, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depend on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh.

CHAPTER II: THE DUTY OF THE BEST BELIEVERS, AND THE EVIL OF NEGLECTING THIS DUTY

1. Unfolding first key principle

“The choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.”

a. supporting text

Colossians 3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

To whom is Paul speaking? To those who have been raised with Christ and will appear with Him in glory (Colossians 3:4)... they are the ones who must put sin to death!

b. strong exhortation: THIS IS FOR CHRISTIANS... even the most mature

“You must mortify! You must make it your daily work. You must be constantly at it while you live. Cease not a day from this work! **Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you!** Your being dead with Christ virtually, your being quickened with him, will not excuse you from this work”

John 15:1-3 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes (Gk. “cleans”) so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

So, those who are already “clean” the Father “cleans” so that they will be even more fruitful.

c. Paul’s own example

1 Corinthians 9:27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

“And if this were the work and business of Paul, who was so incomparably exalted in grace, revelations, enjoyments, privileges, consolations, above the ordinary measure of believers, where may we possibly bottom an exemption from this work and duty whilst we are in this world?”

2. Why is this constantly necessary?

- a. indwelling sin always abides while we are in the world... therefore it is always to be mortified

Owen refutes any possibility of “perfectionism” in this world, against some who have taught it possible.

Philippians 3:12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

“Now, it being our duty to mortify, to be killing of sin whilst still in us, we must be at work. He that is appointed to kill an enemy, if he stops striking before the other ceases living, does but half his work.”

- b. not only does sin still live in us, but it is also **acting**, still laboring to bring for the deeds of the flesh

“When sin leaves us alone, we may leave sin alone.”

“But as sin is never less quiet than when it seems to be most quiet, and its waters are for the most part deep when they are still, so ought our contrivances against it to be vigorous at all times and in all conditions, even where there is least suspicion.”

Galatians 5:17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

Romans 7:19-21 For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. 21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

“Who can say that he ever had anything to do with God or for God, that indwelling sin had not a hand in the corrupting of what he did?”

“If sin be subtle, watchful, strong, and always at work in the business of killing our souls, and we be slothful, negligent, foolish, in proceeding to the ruin thereof, can we expect a comfortable (outcome)? **There is not a day but sin foils or is foiled, prevails or is prevailed upon; and it will be so whilst we live in this world.**”

“I will discharge from this duty who can bring sin to ... a cessation of arms in this warfare; if it will spare him any one day, in any one duty,... let him say to his soul as to this duty, ‘Soul, take thy rest.’”

The only safety is “constant warfare.”

- c. sin not only was be constantly acting, but if let alone will bring forth **great, cursed, scandalous, soul-destroying sins**

Galatians 5:19-21 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

“Sin always aims at the utmost; every time it rises up to tempt or entice, if allowed to have its own course, it would go out to the utmost sin in that kind. Every unclean thought or glance would be adultery if it could; every covetous desire would be oppression, every thought of unbelief would be atheism... It is like the grave, that is never satisfied. And herein lies no small share of the deceitfulness of sin.”

Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Sin makes its progress little by little, by degrees, and thus has a hardening effect. The soul comforts itself that, at least the maximum sin in that category hasn't happened yet, insensible of the fact that the soul is much closer than ever before to committing those great, scandalous, soul-destroying sins.

- d. this is one main reason **why the Spirit is given** to us... that we might put sin to death

Galatians 5:17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

Romans 8:13-14 For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

- e. negligence in this duty contradicts the gradual transformation Paul describes in 2 Cor. 4:16

2 Corinthians 4:16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

In these people the order is reversed... inwardly we are wasting away, outwardly renewed day by day. “Sin is as the house of David, and grace as the house of Saul”

2 Samuel 3:1 The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

“Exercise and success are the two main cherishers of grace in the heart; when it is suffered to lie still, it withers and decays.”

- f. it is our duty to be “perfecting holiness in the fear of God”, “growing in grace” daily

KJV 2 Corinthians 7:1 Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

2 Peter 3:18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

“This cannot be done without a daily mortification of sin. Sin sets itself against every act of holiness, and against every degree we grow to. Let not that man think he makes any progress in holiness who walks not over the bellies of his lusts. He who does not kill sin in his way takes no steps towards his journey’s end.”

3. Do many or only few people do this?

“There is a noise of religion and religious duties in every corner, preaching in abundance ... so that if you will measure the number of believers by light, gifts, and profession, the church may have cause to say ‘Who hath born me all these?’ But now if you will take the measure of them by this great discriminating grace of Christians [i.e. mortification], perhaps you will find their number not so multiplied.”

4. What evils attend every unmortified professor of Christian faith?

a. in himself

he will have *slight thoughts of sin*

“The root of an unmortified course is the **digestion of sin without bitterness in the heart.**”

“When a man hath confirmed his imagination to such an apprehension of grace and mercy as to be able, without bitterness, to swallow and digest daily sins, that man is at the very brink of turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, and being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

b. to others

i) it *hardens* them

Unbelievers may think they are in as good a condition as the best professors of Christ... since these professors are living an unmortified lifestyle little different from the world

ii) they *deceive* them

Unmortified professors of Christ deceive unbelievers into thinking all they need do is come to their level and it will be well with them

CHAPTER III: THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT IN MORTIFICATION

1. The Great Sovereign Cause of All True Mortification: The **Holy Spirit**

The principle efficient cause of the performance of this duty is the Spirit ... all other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit

2. Human strivings apart from the Spirit are false and will fail

He only is sufficient for this work; all ways and means without him are as a thing of nought; and he is the great efficient of it—He works in us as he pleases.

a. Roman Catholic “mortification”

Owen has especially in mind the efforts of Roman Catholic monks and “holy men” who resorted to physical torments and deprivations in order to “become holy”

“The greatest part of popish religion, of that which looks most like religion in their profession, consists in mistaken ways and means of mortification. This is the pretense of their rough garments, whereby they deceive. Their vows, orders, fastings, penances, are all built on this ground.”

b. other types of human effort in mortification

Colossians 2:23 Such regulations [i.e. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" vs. 21] indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Many false religious systems make use of strict regulations and abuse of the body to help mortify sin. Others follow this same approach in a self-styled way:

“Neither will the natural Popery that is in others do it. Men are galled with the guilt of a sin that hath prevailed over them; they instantly promise to themselves and God they will do so no more; they watch over themselves and pray for a season, until this heat waxes cold, and the sense of sin is worn off: and so mortification is gone also, and sin returns to its former domination.”

3. This is the special work of the Spirit... for:

a. it is *promised* by God to be given to us for this work

Ezekiel 36:26-27 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

b. mortification is a gift given to us by Christ, and all His gifts come by the Spirit

John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

4. How does the Spirit mortify sin?

a. by causing our hearts to abound in grace and the fruits that are contrary to the flesh [and leading us accordingly]

Galatians 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Romans 8: 14 ... those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

- b. by a *real, physical efficiency* on the root and habit of sin, for the weakening and destroying of it

Isaiah 4:4 The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire.

He makes sin distasteful to us in its very nature, at its very root itself. “He is the fire which burns up the very root of lust.”

- c. by bringing the *cross of Christ* into the heart of a sinner by faith, and gives us communion with Christ in his death and fellowship in his sufferings
5. If this is the work of the Spirit alone, how is it that we are exhorted to it?—seeing the Spirit of God only can do it, let the work be wholly left to him
- a. as with all works of the Spirit, **we are also** exhorted to do them

Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

So also with faith, repentance, prayer, and many other aspects of the Christian life

- b. He does not so work our mortification in us as not to keep it still an act of our obedience

“He works upon our understandings, wills, consciences, and affections, agreeably to their own natures; he works *in us and with us, not against us or without us.*”

6. Lament for those under conviction by the law but strangers to the Spirit

“This is the saddest warfare that any poor creature can be engaged in. A soul under the power of conviction from the law is pressed to fight against sin, but hath no strength for the combat. They cannot but fight, and they can never conquer; they are like men thrust on the sword of enemies on purpose to be slain. The law drives them on and sin beats them back. Sometimes they think, indeed, that they have foiled sin, when they have only raised a dust that they see it not; that is, they distemper their natural affections of fear, sorrow and anguish, which makes them believe that sin is conquered when it is not touched. By that time they are cold, they must to the battle again; and the lust which they thought to be slain appears to have had no wound.”

BUT... if this is the sad case of those who strive against sin without the Spirit, what will come of those who make no effort at all, and live daily to feed their lusts???

CHAPTER IV: USEFULNESS OF MORTIFICATION

1. Key overall principle:

The life, vigor, and comfort of our spiritual life depend much on our mortification of sin.

- a. they do not proceed automatically from it

Owen cites the example of Heman from Psalm 88 (the darkest and most despondent hymn)

Psalm 88: 18 You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.

Heman walked faithfully in God, and yet enjoyed not a single day of comfort in the Spirit

However... this is not the norm!!! But, the lesson remains—it is up to God to speak peace to the soul

- b. mortification itself is not the immediate cause of life, vigor, and comfort... these come as a direct gift of God when sin is removed as an obstacle

Thus mortification is a defensive effort, to protect us from the sin which will prevent these gifts of life, health, vigor, fruitfulness from being poured upon us by God

2. Unmortified sin attacks our souls in two ways

- a. sin **weakens** the soul and deprives it of strength

- i) by moving the heart out of tune with God and twisting our affections

We say to some idol, “You are my portion, my desire, my joy and my treasure.” Thus the soul is weakened from its desire after God

- ii) sin fills the soul with thoughts about the sin... how to provide for its needs

NASB Romans 13:14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Thus the mind is constantly filled with thoughts of the sin, how it can be satisfied... this greatly weakens the soul

- iii) sin breaks out and actually hinders duty

Not just in thoughts, but in actual time spent pursuing the life of sin

- b. sin also **darkens** the soul, and deprives it of light

“Sin is a cloud, a thick cloud, that spread itself over the face of the soul, and intercepts all the beams of God’s love and favor. It takes away all sense of the privilege of our adoption; and if the soul begins to gather up thoughts of consolation, sin quickly scatters them.”

3. Mortification prunes all the graces of God, and makes room for them to grow in our hearts

The life and fruitfulness of the soul is likened to a garden in which the plants of God’s grace flourish when they are not competing with weeds for nutrients:

Matthew 13:22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

If we are not active in mortification, noxious weeds of sin will crowd out the gentle plants of God's grace and crowd them out

4. Peace is impossible without mortification

Peace must be sincere, and without vigorous slaying of sin, peace may actually be a false peace

CHAPTER V: WHAT MORTIFICATION IS NOT

1. Deep, perplexing question:

What should a true believer do who finds in himself some powerful indwelling sin: "consuming his heart with trouble, perplexing his thoughts, weakening his soul as to duties of communion with God, disquieting him as to peace, and perhaps defiling his conscience, and exposing him to hardening through the deceitfulness of sin—**WHAT SHALL HE DO???**"

2. Three Great Answers

I) Show what it is to mortify any sin... both negatively and positively (i.e. what it is NOT, and what it IS)

II) Give general directions for such things as without which it will be impossible for any sin to be truly mortified

III) Draw out the particulars how this is to be done

3. What mortification is NOT

- a. to mortify a sin is **not utterly to KILL**, root it out, and destroy it so that it should have no more hold at all, nor residence in our hearts

"It is true that this is what is aimed at, but it is not in this life to be accomplished."

"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 destruction of it, that it should not be, is not in this life to be expected."

Philippians 3:12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

- b. to mortify a sin is (obviously) **not a dissimulation of sin** (i.e. hypocritical, external 'triumph' only... outwardly clean, secretly just as vile as before)
- c. to mortify a sin is **not to develop a quiet, sedate nature**

Some people naturally have this kind of demeanor, but it should not be mistaken for true mortification of sin

d. to mortify a sin is **not to divert it to something else**

“A sin is not mortified when it is only diverted.”

“A man may be sensible of a lust, set himself against the eruptions of it, take care that it shall not break forth as it has done, but in the meantime allow the same habit to vent itself some other way.”

“He that changes pride for worldliness, sensuality for Pharisaism, vanity in himself to the contempt of others, let him not think that he has mortified the sin that he seems to have left. He has changed his master, but he is a servant still.”

e. to mortify a sin is **not to have occasional conquests of it**

Two false occasions when people may think they have mortified a sin:

- i) when the sin has had some **sad eruption** to the disturbance of his peace, terror of his conscience, dread of scandal, and evident provocation of God

Then the man stirs himself up to a frenzy of activity in this area... he is filled with abhorrence over the sin, and cries out to God against it, and sets himself to be rid of it

He is like a city in which at midnight the sentries raise a general alarm against an enemy; the whole city becomes aroused against the enemy; the enemy finds some clever hiding place and “lays low” until the alarm has passed. Then the enemy rises again and continues his evil work against the town

This is not genuine mortification because it does not continue, but lasts only a short time

- ii) in a time of some **judgment**, calamity, or affliction

Then the soul is troubled about other things and the sin has not an opportunity to work its mischief... but it is still alive and well in the soul. During these times of trial, the person is roused against sin in general and resolves never to sin again, if only to be free from God’s hand of affliction:

Psalm 78:34-37 Whenever God slew them, they would seek him; they eagerly turned to him again. 35 They remembered that God was their Rock, that God Most High was their Redeemer. 36 But then they would flatter him with their mouths, lying to him with their tongues; 37 their hearts were not loyal to him, they were not faithful to his covenant.

[The Book of Judges reveals this cycle very clearly]

[Also, if someone struggled with some kind of lust, but then falls ill and is seriously sick to their stomach... during the whole time of illness, the lust didn’t trouble them at all, but that doesn’t make it mortified!! As soon as health and vigor returns, so does temptation]

CHAPTER VI: WHAT MORTIFICATION IS... A PARTICULAR DESCRIBED

1. The mortification of a lust consists of three things

a. *habitual weakening* of it

“Every lust is a depraved habit or disposition, continually inclining the heart to evil. ... [It is] in itself a strong, deeply-rooted, habitual inclination and bent of will and affections unto some actual sin... always stirring up imaginations, thoughts, and contrivances about what it lusts for.”

“Thus the first thing in mortification is the weakening of this habit of sin or lust, that it shall not, with that violence, earnestness, frequency, rise up, conceive, tumultuate, provoke, entice, disquiet, as it is naturally apt to do.”

NOTE: “Lust gets strength by temptation. When a suitable temptation falls in with a lust, it gives it a new life, vigor, power, violence, and rage, which it seemed not before to have or to be capable of.”

NOTE ALSO: some lusts are far more sensible than others... sexual uncleanness is different than all other sins:

1 Corinthians 6:18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.

“Hence, the motions of that sin are more sensible, more discernible than of others; when perhaps the love of the world, or the like, is in a person no less habitually predominant than that, yet it makes not so great a combustion in the whole man.”

THUS the first work of mortification is the **HABITUAL WEAKENING** of the habit of this lust

Galatians 5:24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

This is as a man nailed to the cross... at first he struggles, and strives, and cries out with great strength... but little by little he weakens

Romans 6:6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin--

This is absolutely essential to true mortification:

“A man may beat down the bitter fruit of an evil tree until he is weary; while the root abides in strength and vigor, the beating down of the present fruit will not hinder it from bringing forth more.”

b. in *constant fighting and contending against sin*

i) first to recognize sin as the vicious bitter enemy it is

ii) second to learn everything you can about that enemy’s methods of success

iii) to load it daily with things which that enemy HATES... continuing to lay blow upon blow with effective weapons

c. in *success against the sin*

“Frequent successes against any lust is another part and evidence of mortification. By success I understand not a mere disappointment of sin, that it was not able to bring forth its fruit, but a victory over it and pursuit of it to a complete conquest.” .

CHAPTER VII: MORTIFICATION CAN ONLY BE DONE BY BELIEVERS

Owen now gives us the *ways and means* by which we may mortify a particular lust

1. Unless a man is a **believer** (i.e. truly grafted into Christ), he can NEVER mortify a single sin

a. scriptures commanding mortification addressed only to believers

Romans 8:13 “If you (i.e. those for whom there is no condemnation, who have the indwelling Spirit) **by the Spirit put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live**

Colossians 3:5 “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your sinful nature...”

To whom is this addressed? Those who are “risen with Christ” (Col. 3:1), whose life is “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3), and who shall “appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4)

b. classical philosophers who spoke much of pure lives lived debauched lives

“The lives of most of them manifested that their maxims differed as much from true mortification as the sun painted on a sign-post from the sun in the firmament; they had neither light nor heat.”

“There is no death of sin without the death of Christ.”

[or one might say, “death IN Christ”... i.e. spiritual union with Christ in His death:

Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

Romans 6:2-3 “We died to sin! How can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?”

Colossians 3:3 “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”]

c. Roman Catholics make extreme efforts and don’t get very far

d. Romans 8:13 says “by the Spirit” we mortify... how can we do this if we don’t have the indwelling Spirit (i.e. are not truly Christian)??

Romans 8:9 You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

e. unbelievers called not to mortification but to conversion

“I say, then, mortification is not the *present* business of *unregenerate* men. God calls them not to it as yet; *conversion* is their work—the conversion of the *whole* soul—not the mortification of *this* or *that particular* lust. You would laugh at a man that you should see setting up a great fabric, and never take any care for a foundation. ... So it is with [convicted] persons; though they plainly see, that what ground they get against sin one day, they lose another, yet they will go on in they same road still, without inquiring where the destructive flaw in their progress lies.”

Acts 2:37-38 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter’s answer was not “Put your sins to death!”

f. every effort at mortification by unbelievers is futile

“Unless a man be regenerate, all attempts that he can make for mortification, be they never so specious and promising—all means he can use, let him follow them with never so much diligence, earnestness, watchfulness, and intention of mind and spirit—are to no purpose. In vain shall he use many remedies; he shall not be healed.”

2. Various **evils** attended efforts by unbelievers to mortify sin

- a. distraction: his mind is taken off his proper business: conversion
- b. too much success: he can delude himself by some measure of temporary progress in mortification of this or that sin that he is fine without conversion
- c. too much failure: after long striving without success, he may become discouraged about the prospect of sin ever being destroyed that he may give up altogether

This is the process: false mortification by lost people 1) deludes them 2) hardens them 3) destroys them

3. Mortification a work of **faith**... the peculiar work of faith

Acts 15:9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

CHAPTER VIII: UNIVERSAL SINCERITY REQUIRED

1. “All or nothing”: Unless a man attacks ALL sin wherever it may be found, no particular progress can be made either

James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

“Without sincerity and diligence in a universality of obedience, there is no mortification of any one perplexing lust to be obtained.”

“A man finds any lust to bring him into the condition formerly described; it is powerful, strong, tumultuating, leads captive, vexes, disquiets, takes away peace; he is not able to bear it; wherefore he sets himself against it, prays against it, groans under it, sighs to be delivered: but in the meantime, perhaps, in other duties—in constant communion with God; in reading, prayer and meditation; in other ways that are not of the same kind with the lust wherewith he is troubled—he is loose and negligent. Let not that man think that ever he shall arrive to the mortification of the lust he is perplexed with.”

2. Why is this true? This mortification comes from SELF-LOVE rather than love for God

“It is evident that you contend against sin because of your own *trouble* in it. Would your conscience be quiet under it, you would let it alone.”

“Hatred of sin as sin, not only as galling or disquieting, a sense of the love of Christ in the cross, lie at the bottom of all true spiritual mortification.”

3. God’s work consists in *universal obedience*

2 Corinthians 7:1 Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

4. Perhaps God has allowed this one lust to trouble you so much to awake you from slumber in all the other neglected areas
5. The rage and success of sin in one particular area is usually the result of a generally careless negligent walk in many areas.

CHAPTER IX: SYMPTOMS OF A PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS LUST

Owen here begins a series of very practical steps to mortifying sin

(I) Identify the symptoms of a particularly dangerous lust

The Marks of a Particularly Dangerous Lust

1. Inveterateness: This sin habit has been entrenched in the soul for a long time so that the believer scarcely even notices its presence, and makes allowances for it.

2. The heart speaks peace to itself despite the open presence of the sin: The heart gathers up evidence of its good standing before God, but makes no strong efforts against the sin itself. Owen points out that the grace and mercy of God are not to be applied to an unmortified lust for the purpose of allowing it to continue.
3. The sin frequently triumphs: This is especially galling when the sin entangles both the will and the affections so that the will heartily approves the sin and the affections enjoy it or are disappointed should the temptation not be consummated in the sin.
4. The sin's danger rather than the love of God is the prime restrain: Thus, the fear of shame is more powerful than "the love of Christ constrains us." Here, Owen makes one of his most helpful distinctions: "**Such a person hath cast off as to the particular spoken of, the conduct of *renewing grace*, and is kept from ruin only by *restraining grace*; and so far is he fallen from grace and returned under the law.**" God sovereignly orchestrates our lives by His providence to keep us from temptation or from giving in to it ... but He prefers to renew our hearts so we learn to hate sin ourselves.
5. God has hardened our hearts or chastised us for the sin: When we see the activity of God coming out against a particular sin in our lives, this should be a great warning to us.
6. The sin has already withstood particular dealings from God: If we have seen God do amazing things to decrease the power of a lust, and yet it keeps returning, we should stand in fear of this sin's power.

CHAPTER X: UNDERSTAND HOW DANGEROUS SIN IS

(II) Understand how dangerous sin is, and how much guilt and evil come from it

"Get a clear and abiding sense upon thy mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin with which you are perplexed."

Owen recommends that we fill our minds with the following...a clear sense:

1. Of the **guilt** of sin
 - a. we tend to minimize sin and its guilt, saying that it's just a small thing
 - b. health and protection comes from actually intensifying the guilt of sin
 - c. the goal: to give your heart no room for making excuses so sin will have a chance to prevail
2. Of the **danger** of sin
 - a. danger of gradual hardening due to sin's deceitfulness

Hebrews 3:12-13 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

- b. danger of temporal correction from the Lord (discipline, judgment, vengeance)

“O remember David and all his troubles! Look on him flying into the wilderness, and consider the hand of God upon him. Is it nothing to you that God should kill your child in anger, ruin your estate in anger, break your bones in anger, allow you to be a scandal and reproach in anger, kill you, destroy you, make you lie down in darkness, in anger? Is it nothing that he should punish, ruin, and undo *others* for your sake?... If you fear not these things, I fear you are [already] under hardness.”

- c. danger of loss of peace and strength all your days

Sin greatly destroys our peace, making us fearful and weak in our walk with God

- d. danger of eternal damnation

For proper management of this consideration, observe:

- 1) There is a strong connection between continuing in sin and eternal destruction made constantly in Scripture
- 2) Anyone who is so entangled in abiding sin can have no “clear prevailing evidence of his interest” in the covenant of salvation in Christ

NOTE: Romans 8:1 promised specifically to a certain category of person:

Romans 8:1-2 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:5-8 goes on to make it very clear that those who live according to the sinful nature will die (i.e. go to hell). “Live according to” means be controlled by as a governing principle as display in the thoughts and actions of the person... the constant bent of his life.

3. Of the **evils** of sin

Note: “danger respects what is to come, evil respects what is already present”

- a. it grieves the Holy Spirit

Ephesians 4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

“As a tender and loving friend is grieved at the unkindness of his friend... so is it with this tender and loving Spirit, who has chosen our hearts for a habitation to dwell in.... He is grieved by our harboring His enemies in our hearts with Him, those enemies whom He is to destroy.”

b. the Lord Jesus Christ is wounded afresh by it

Hebrews 6:6 ...*they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.*

c. it will take away a man's usefulness in his generation

"The world is at this day full of poor, withering professors (those who claim to be Christians). How few are there who walk in any beauty or glory! How barren, how useless are they, for the most part! Amongst the many reasons that may be assigned of this sad estate is this: many men harbor spirit-devouring lusts in their bosoms, that lie as worms at the root of their obedience, and corrode and weaken it day by day. Every good grace God gives is corrupted by this means; and God blasts any harvest from their lives."

CHAPTERS XI-XIII: FURTHER ADVICE ON MORTIFICATION

Third direction: Labor to load your conscience with the guilt of sin, especially using the terrors of the law, and the shame of failing in the gospel to do so. (This is perhaps his most controversial advice.)

Fourth direction: Get a constant longing and breathing after deliverance from the power of sin. Work diligently to enflame your heart after freedom... "long, sigh, cry out."

Fifth direction: Determine if the sin is lodged in your natural temperament. This does not release you from your duty to mortify it- we can't say "It's just how I am." If anything, this should heighten our shame and our determination to kill it.

Sixth direction: Study the patterns of sin and temptation that work successfully against you, and watch more diligently for these. Know your enemy! (This is so important, Owen devotes a whole treatise to it- On Temptation.)

Seventh direction: "Rise mightily against *the first actings* of thy distemper, its first conceptions; suffer it not to get the least ground ... it is impossible to fix bounds for sin." Excellent advice from Owen, it reminds me of the statement made by German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel early in 1944 concerning the German defense of the impending cross-channel invasion by the Allies: "The war will be won or lost on the beaches," he said. He went on to say that, once the Allies got a beachhead established in Normandy, they would break out and sweep across France, and the war would be lost. "The first twenty-four hours will be critical. For both the Allies and us, it will be the longest day." So it is, says Owen, with the battle against sin. Once sin establishes a beachhead in your life, it presses on to conquer all. For the Christian battling sin, "the longest day" never ends until death brings him to heaven.

Eighth direction: Meditate on the glory of God for the expressed purpose of debasing one's own pride. Here Owen is forceful in his argumentation for the need for all sinners to work constantly on pride, the great enemy of all true spiritual growth. He believes that the healthiest way to kill pride is to meditate so frequently on the majesty and immensity of God that we are swallowed up in our vileness, smallness, and impotence. He shows convincingly how little we truly know of God, even despite all our best attainments in theological studies.

Ninth direction: Take heed you speak not peace to yourself before God speaks it; but listen to what He says to the soul. [I.e. Don't be in such a hurry to be done with your conscience and with the struggle before God is done with it!]

CHAPTERS XIV: READY FOR BATTLE

Owen's final word: All of the above is merely PREPARATION for mortification... not the actual mortification itself. Mortification only occurs at the moment of temptation. There the battle must be won.

Also, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit are of any efficacy at the moment of temptation. All the above preparation will be for nothing if the Christian does not rely totally on Christ's finished work on the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit at the key moment.