



The Mortification of Sin





The Mortification of Sin



John Owen

Edited and Modernized
by Joshua Schwisow



The Mortification of Sin

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Contents



Editor's Introduction.....	7
Preface	13
CHAPTER I	
Introduction.....	17
CHAPTER II	
Why We Must Mortify the Flesh	29
CHAPTER III	
The Holy Spirit and Mortification.....	47
CHAPTER IV	
Life and Comfort Depend Upon Mortification ...	59
CHAPTER V	
What Mortification Is Not.....	67

CHAPTER VI

What the Mortification of Sin Is77

CHAPTER VII

Only Regenerate Persons Can Mortify Sin..... 89

CHAPTER VIII

The Necessity of Universal Obedience109

CHAPTER IX

The Dangerous Symptoms of Lust117

CHAPTER X

View Sin Rightly135

CHAPTER XI

Additional Preparatory Directions151

CHAPTER XII

Meditating on the Majesty of God169

CHAPTER XIII

Wait for God to Speak Peace187

CHAPTER XIV

Faith in the Work of Christ
and the Power of the Spirit.....207



Editor's Introduction



Perhaps John Owen's most well-known quote in all his writings is this: "be killing sin, or it will be killing you." It is a memorable, easy-to-quote phrase which briefly summarizes the message of *The Mortification of Sin*. Since its publication, Owen's book on mortification has been one of his most often read and often quoted books. It is an enduring classic among Puritan literature for several reasons. First, though the language of the original can be challenging to modern readers, the book is relatively short. Second, it is a very practical book which speaks to the human heart in its struggle with sin and its experience of grace.

Pastor Charles Bridges, writing in the early 1800s, described Owen as one of the most skillful physicians of the heart.

*Indeed upon the whole—for luminous exposition, and powerful defence of Scriptural doctrine—for determined enforcement of practical obligation—for skillful anatomy of the self-deceitfulness of the heart—and for a detailed and wise treatment of the diversified exercises of the Christian’s heart, he stands probably unrivaled.*¹

Readers will find Pastor Bridges’ analysis to be spot-on as they read *The Mortification of Sin*. Yet, it is important to remember that John Owen’s skillful exposition of these matters was not rooted in his own thinking. Rather, it was based upon the teaching of Holy Scripture. That is one reason Owen’s book is of such enduring value. This is not a book dealing with narrow and dated concerns from the 17th century. Rather, this is a book that speaks to sinners across all centuries who need their sins put to death. The

1 Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967, originally published, 1830), 41.

solution Owen presents is also timeless: faith in the LORD Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit.

The Mortification of Sin was first published in 1656 at the prompting of Owen's friends, who found the sermons it was based upon to be very edifying and practical. During these years, Owen served as a professor at Oxford teaching theology, tutoring students, and preaching God's Word from the local pulpits of Christ Church and St. Mary's Church. His two short books on mortification and temptation resulted from sermons which he preached in these pulpits.

Editorial approach of this edition

What sets this edition of Owen's classic apart from other available editions? One option for modern readers is to read the original and unabridged edition of *The Mortification of Sin*. It is available in *The Complete Works of John Owen*.² Compared with other books by John Owen, *Mortification* is one of his shortest and easiest to read books. Yet compared to modern publications and even

2 Banner of Truth publishes the complete edition of Owen's works from the Goold edition of the 1800s. Recently, Crossway began re-publishing a new, complete edition of his works (projected to be in 40 volumes).

compared with some other Puritans of his day, it can still be a challenging book to read. For this reason, we have provided Owen's classic with modernized language in this edition. Though the language is modernized, it was also our intention to avoid abridging Owen's book. Some modernizations of *The Mortification of Sin* have not only modernized but also abridged. In some instances, this abridgment obscures certain parts of Owen's argumentation (which can be lengthy and detailed). It was our intention to accurately modernize Owen's language while retaining the substance of all that he wrote. To this end, wherever possible, Owen's original has been followed sentence by sentence. In some cases, lengthy sentences have been made shorter. The aim throughout has been to lose nothing of the force and power and clarity of the original work.

As another aid to readability, bold headings have been added throughout each chapter to enable the reader to follow the divisions of Owen's chapters.

When Scripture quotations are referenced by Owen within the text, the New King James Version (NKJV) translation has been used (with a few exceptions).

It is our prayer that this edition of John Owen's classic work will be an edifying, convicting, and equipping resource for Christians in the present day.

Joshua Schwisow

Editor

July 2026



Preface



Christian Reader,

I will briefly explain to you the reasons that I agreed to publish this book. As I consider the present state and condition of most professing Christians, and the evidence of their hearts and spirits, it is clear that they have great difficulty in dealing with temptations. Additionally, it is evident that many of them are at peace with a sinful world but divided among themselves. This is a matter of such grave consequence that I have written this book to press upon the consciences of men the importance of considering their ways. Additionally, it is my purpose

to give them further directions on how to proceed rightly in killing their sin.

The need for such a book was reinforced by observing the mistakes some people make as they seek to deal with their sin. Some go about this the wrong way because they do not know the mystery of the gospel nor the efficacy of Christ's death. By failing to understand these things, they have imposed a yoke upon their own necks: the yoke of killing sin by self-effort. This yoke neither they, nor those who went before them, can bear (see Acts 15:10).

Such people advocate for killing sin, but their way of going about it is not consistent with the gospel. By advocating for a method of dealing with sin that is not in harmony with the gospel, they end up producing deplorable effects including superstition, self-righteousness, and anxious consciences.

What I have written in weakness, I humbly hope will be consistent with the spirit and letter of the gospel and with the experiences of those who know what it is to walk with God, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace.

This book, or a book like it, is very necessary at this season for the promotion and furtherance of the work of gospel mortification in the heart of

believers. It is also necessary for their direction in safe paths so that they may find rest for their souls.

I must also add something concerning myself here. I preached on this subject with some measure of success, by God's grace, who gives seed to the Sower. Since I preached on the subject, I was asked by various persons, in whose hearts are God's ways, to publish what I had delivered in these sermons.

Because of their request, I have published this work for the public and now present it to you, Christian reader. I hope I may say with sincerity that my heart's desire to God, and the primary aim of my ministry in which God has placed me by His good providence, is to promote the mortification of sin and universal holiness in my own heart and the hearts of others. Through killing sin and growing in holiness, God will be glorified and the gospel of Jesus Christ will be adorned in all things.

If this short work is, in any way, useful to the least of the saints, it will be seen as an answer to the weak prayers that have been offered by its unworthy author,

John Owen



Chapter I



Introduction

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:13)

This text is the foundation of my discourse. What I have for direction in the work of mortification of sin, or killing sin, in believers is found in these words. By carefully examining this passage, our study will have both order and clarity to it. Let us summarize the whole verse and then make application of the great evangelical truth and mystery contained therein.

In verses 1-3 of Romans 8, the apostle Paul restated his doctrine of justification by faith. He described the blessed state and condition of those

who are made partakers of that grace. Following verses 1–3, Paul proceeded to apply it to the holiness and consolation of believers. Among his arguments and motives to holiness, Romans 8:13 contains one that contrasts the opposite effects of holiness and sin.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:13)

In these words we observe five points that will serve as the foundation for the following discourse:

- First, there is a *duty* prescribed: “put to death the deeds of the body.”
- Second, the persons are designated to *whom* it is prescribed: “You”—“if you put to death.”
- Third, there is in them a *promise* connected to that duty: “You will live.”
- Fourth, the *cause* or means of the performance of this duty—the Spirit: “If by the Spirit you put to death.”
- Fifth, there is a *condition* for the whole proposition, in which the duty, means, and promise are contained: “If you.”

The conditional statement in the text

The first thing occurring in the words as they are used in the whole proposition is the conditional note, “but if.” Conditional statements in such propositions may indicate two things:

(1) The uncertainty of the event

The *uncertainty* of the event or thing promised in regards to those to whom the duty is prescribed. And this takes place where the condition is absolutely necessary to a particular outcome, and is not itself dependent on any determinate cause known to him to whom it is prescribed. For example, we might say, “If we live, we will do such a thing.” This cannot be Paul’s intention with the conditional expression in this place. We know this because those to whom these words are written, it is said of them in verse 1 of the same chapter, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” Since they are true believers and they are in Christ, they will not be condemned.

(2) The certainty of the connection that is between the things spoken of

The conditional can also refer to the *certainty* of the *coherence* or connection that is between the things spoken of. For example, we might say to a sick man, “If you will take such a medicine, or use such a remedy, you will get well.” The thing we solely intend to express in saying this is the certainty of the connection that is between the medicine or remedy and health. And this is the use of it here. The certain connection that is between the *killing* of the deeds of the body and *living* is taught by this conditional statement, “but if.”

It is important to note that the connection and coherence of things can have different relationships. There is the relationship of *cause* and *effect*. There is also the relationship of the *way* and *means* and the *end*. In the case of mortifying sin, the connection is not strictly speaking one of cause and effect. The reason we must qualify it in this way is because of what Romans 6:23 teaches: “the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The way we should understand the connection and coherence of mortifying sin to living is the relationship of the means and the end. God has appointed this means

for attaining that end, which He has freely promised. Paul's intention, then, of this proposition as a conditional statement is this: that there is a certain infallible connection and coherence between true mortification and eternal life. If you use this means, you shall obtain that end; if you mortify sin, you shall live. And in this statement, we find the main motive unto and the enforcement of the duty Paul prescribes.

The persons addressed

The second thing we meet also in the verse is the *persons* to whom this duty is prescribed. That is expressed in the word "you." In the original Greek text, it is included in the verb, "if you put to death"—that is, you believers; you to whom "there is no condemnation" (Rom. 8:1); you that are "not in the flesh, but in the Spirit" (Rom. 8:9); you who are given life by the Spirit of Christ dwelling in you (Rom. 8:10–11)—to you is this duty prescribed.

If we were to press this duty of killing sin upon unbelievers who are not in Christ, and who do not have the Spirit of God, we would encourage the fruit of superstition and self-righteousness. The world is already full of such things. Such superstition and

self-righteousness are the great work and design of “devout men” who yet remain ignorant of the gospel (see John 15:5, Rom. 10:3–4).

Now, this description of the persons (“you”), in connection with the prescribed duty (“if you put to death”), is the main foundation of the following discourse. To summarize our observations upon the verse, we may state it in the following proposition:

Proposition: *The choicest believers,¹ who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.*

The principal or efficient cause

The principal *efficient cause* of the performance of this duty of mortifying sin is the Spirit: “if by the Spirit.” The Spirit here is the Spirit mentioned in Romans 8:11, the “Spirit of Christ,” the Spirit of God that “dwells in you” (Rom. 8:9), that gives life (Rom. 8:11); “the Spirit of God” (Rom. 8:14); the “Spirit of adoption” (Rom. 8:15); the Spirit who “makes

1 The word “choicest” is used by John Owen here to point out that even the most mature and godly believers must engage in this lifelong duty of killing sin. No believer has an exception to this command.

intercession for us” (Rom. 8:26). All other ways of mortification are vain. All other “helps” leave us helpless. It must be done by the Spirit. Men may attempt this work on other principles, as the apostle Paul notes (Rom. 9:30–32). But Paul says in essence, “This is the work of the Spirit. By Him alone is it to be accomplished, and by no other power will it be brought about.” Mortification from self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, for the purpose of achieving self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world. And this is a second principle of my following discourse.

The duty itself

Fourthly, we come now to the *duty* itself, “put to death the deeds of the body.” We must remark on this phrase next.

Let us consider three questions about this phrase: (1) What is meant by *the body*? (2) What is meant by *the deeds of the body*? (3) What is meant by *putting them to death*?

(1) *The body* at the end of the verse is the same thing as *the flesh* in the beginning of the verse: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if . . . you put to death the deeds of the body, you will

live.” It is that which the apostle has all along spoken of under the name of *the flesh*. This is clear from how the contrast between the Spirit and the flesh is developed before and after this point.

The body, then, here is taken for that corruption and depravity of our natures of which the body, in a great part, is the seat and instrument. The members of the body are described as being instruments of unrighteousness elsewhere (Rom. 6:19). It is indwelling sin, the corrupted flesh or lust, that Paul is referring to. Many reasons might be given to view this as a metonymical² expression. This is supported by comparing it with other verses in Romans. The body here is the same as “the old man” and “the body of sin” (see Rom. 6:6). The word body may also be used as a synecdoche³ to mean “the whole person considered as corrupted,” or “the seat of lusts and wrongly-ordered affections.”

(2) *The deeds of the body*. The word in Greek is *praxeis*, which, indeed, refers to the outward actions chiefly, “the works of the flesh,” as they are

2 The substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant, for example “the crown” for royal authority, or “the bench” for the judiciary.

3 A figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa, as in as in “all hands on deck” (meaning “all sailors”).

called (Gal. 5:19). In Galatians 5 those works are described as “evident” and are then listed by Paul (Gal. 5:19–21). Now, though the outward deeds are here only expressed, yet the inward causes of those outward actions are chiefly intended by Paul in this verse. The axe is to be laid to the root of the tree. The deeds of the flesh are to be mortified in their causes, from which they spring. The apostle calls them *deeds* because every lust tends to some outward action. Though some lusts are conceived and later killed, yet every lust aims to bring forth a perfect sin (see Jas. 1:15).

In Romans 7 and the beginning of Romans 8, Paul dealt with the matter of indwelling lust and sin as the fountain and principle of all sinful actions. Here he mentions its destruction using the name of the effects that it produces. The deeds of the body flow from the carnal mind described in Romans 8:6. In Galatians 5:24, Paul refers to the “passions” and “desires” of the flesh. It is from this carnal mind, and from these passions and desires that the deeds and fruit of sin arise. It is in this sense that the word “body” is used in Romans 8:10: “the body is dead because of sin.”

(3) To *put to death*. This is a metaphorical expression, taken from the putting of any living thing to death. To kill a man, or any other living thing, is to take away the principle of all his strength, vigor, and power so that he cannot act or exert. The expression in this case is applied to sin. Indwelling sin is compared to a person, a living person, called “the old man,” with his faculties and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, and strength. This, says the apostle, must be killed, put to death, mortified. That is, it must have its power, life, vigor, and strength to produce its effects taken away by the Spirit. It is, indeed, meritoriously, and by way of example, utterly mortified and slain by the cross of Christ. Hence, we read that the “old man” is said to be “crucified with Him” (Rom. 6:6). We ourselves have “died with Christ” (Rom. 6:8) by regeneration and union with Christ (Rom. 6:3–5). When we are made alive in Christ, a principle that is opposite to sin and destructive to sin is planted in our hearts (Gal. 5:17). But the whole work of mortification is carried on by degrees toward perfection all of our days. We will say more about this in the process of the discourse.

The intention of the apostle in this prescribed duty mentioned is this: *it is the constant duty of*

believers to mortify indwelling sin that remains in their mortal bodies, so that it may not have life and power to bring forth the works or deeds of the flesh.

The promise attached to this duty

The *promise* attached to this duty is life: “you shall live.” The life promised here is opposed to the death threatened in the same verse: “if you live according to the flesh you will die.” The apostle expresses a similar warning when he says in Galatians 6:8: “he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption [or destruction from God].” Now, perhaps the word may not only refer to eternal life, but also the spiritual life in Christ, which we presently possess. But not necessarily to the essence or being of such spiritual life, which is already enjoyed by all believers. Rather, Paul seems to be referring to the joy, comfort, and vigor of such spiritual life. For example, he says in 1 Thessalonians 3:8: “For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord” He seems to be saying, “now my life will do me good. I will have joy and comfort with my life.” Hence, when applied to Romans 8:13, Paul is saying, “you will live, lead a good, vigorous, comfortable, spiritual life while you

are here on this earth, and then obtain eternal life thereafter.”

Let’s remember what was said before of the connection between mortification and eternal life. It is the connection or coherence of the means and the end. Remembering this point, I will add as a second motive to the duty prescribed, this motive:

The vigor, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the works of the flesh.