

Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers

If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body ye shall live (Rom. 8:13b; KJV)

Lecture 5—What It Is to Mortify Sin

Outline of Chapters 5–6 (24–33)

I. Outline of the Rest of the Treatise

A. An Extended Application of Chapters 1–4

B. Puritan Casuistry/Case of Conscience (*casus conscientiae*)

“The study of cases teaching us how we should apply general rules to specific cases” (J. Douma, *Responsible Conduct: Principles of Christian Ethics*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, [Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003], 198).

An example from William Ames (1576–1633) in his monumental treatise, *De Conscientia* (1630), translated and printed in London in 1639 as *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof*. In it he dealt with a question that perplexes Reformed churches that insist upon singing the Psalms, including the imprecations (from the Latin, *imprecatio*, an invoking of a curse) against our enemies. How do we sing these words when our Lord commanded us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44), and the apostle Paul said, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14)?

Quest. 4. How may we sing those Psalms aright, which contain dire imprecations in them?

8. A. 1. We may upon occasion of those imprecations meditate with fear and trembling, on the terrible judgments of God against the sins of impenitent persons.

9. 2. We may thereupon profit in patience and consolation, against the temptations which are wont to [habitually] arise from the prosperity of the wicked, and affliction of the godly.

10. 3. We may also pray to God that he would hasten his revenge (not against our private enemies but) against the wicked and incurable enemies of his Church.

—*Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof*, 4.19.8–10. English modernized.

J. I. Packer, “The Puritans as Guides of Conscience”
(<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=2190484527>)

C. The Case (24):

“Suppose a man to be a true believer, and yet finds in himself a powerful indwelling sin, leading him captive to the law of it, 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? what course shall he take and insist on for the mortification of this sin, lust, distemper, or corruption, to such a degree as that, though it be not utterly destroyed, yet, in his contest with it, he may be enabled to keep up power, strength, and peace in communion with God?”

II. **What It Is to Mortify Sin: Negatively (Ch. 5—pp. 24–27)**

A. Not Utterly to Kill, Root Out, or Destroy Sin (24–25)

B. Not the Dissimulation of a Sin (25)

Another example of Owen’s Latinized English—from *dissimulatio*, feigning, pretending, simulating.

Cf. Thomas Manton (1620–1677), who spoke of the threefold “mock mortification” of pagans, papists, and hypocrites (*Works* 12:56–58).

C. Not in the Improvement of a Quiet, Sedate Nature (25)

D. Not in Diverting Sin (26)

Example of Simon Magus (Acts 8)

E. Not in Occasional Conquests of Sin (26–27)

Two seasons of life where it seems a sin may have been mortified:

1. When it Erupts
2. When One Feels Judged

III. **What It Is to Mortify Sin: Positively (Ch. 6—pp. 28–33)**

A. Habitual Weakening (28–30)

“Every lust is a depraved habit (from the Latin, *habitus*) or disposition, continually inclining the heart to evil.”

They “war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11) and seek to enslave us (Rom. 7:23).

Note Owen's summary of Romans 7 (28).

Two limitations:

1. Everyone is different
2. Every lust is different

In response, we are called to habitually weaken lust:

“As a man nailed to the cross; he first struggles, and strives, and cries out with great strength and might, but, as his blood and spirits waste, his strivings are faint and seldom, his cries low and hoarse, scarce to be heard;—when a man first sets on a lust or distemper, to deal with it, it struggles with great violence to break loose; it cries with earnestness and impatience to be satisfied and relieved; but when by mortification the blood and spirits of it are let out, it moves seldom and faintly, cries sparingly, and is scarce heard in the heart; it may have sometimes a dying pang, that makes an appearance of great vigour and strength, but it is quickly over, especially if it be kept from considerable success. This the apostle describes, as in the whole chapter, so especially, Rom. vi. 6.” (30)

B. Constant Fighting (30–32)

1. By knowing our enemy
2. By being acquainted with its ways

“. . . one of the choicest and most eminent parts of practically spiritual wisdom consists in finding out the subtillies, policies, and depths of any indwelling sin; to consider and know wherein its greatest strength lies,—what advantage it uses to make of occasions, opportunities, temptations,—what are its pleas, pretences, reasonings,—what its stratagems, colours, excuses; to set the wisdom of the Spirit against the craft of the old man; to trace this serpent hi all its turnings and windings; to be able to say, at its most secret and (to a common frame of heart) imperceptible actings, ‘This is your old way and course; I know what you aim at’—and so to be always in readiness is a good part of our warfare.” (31)

Owen's contemporary, Manton gave four points on the meaning of “mortify” in Romans 8:13 that summarize well the Puritan teaching on mortification (*Works* 12:55):

- 1) “Sin is alive in some degree in the justified; otherwise what need it to be mortified? The exhortation were superfluous if sin were wholly dead.”
- 2) “It noteth a continued act. We must not rest in a mortification already wrought in us. . . . this must be our daily practice.”
- 3) It showeth that this work must not be attended slightly . . . but carried on to such a degree, that corruption may be weakened, or lie a-dying, or

be upon the declining hand. . . . We must so oppose sin, that in some sort we may kill it or extinguish it, not only scratch the face of it, but seek to root it out; at least that must be our aim.”

- 4) Mortifying noteth some pain or trouble. . . . the longer you suffer this Canaanite to live with you, the more it will prove as a thorn or goad in your sides.”

3. By daily assaulting it

C. Success (32–33)

“By success I understand not a mere disappointment of sin, that it be not brought forth nor accomplished, but a victory over it, and pursuit of it to a complete conquest For instance, when the heart finds sin at any time at work, seducing, forming imaginations to make provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof, it instantly apprehends sin, and brings it to the law of God and love of Christ, condemns it, follows it with execution to the uttermost.” (32)