

The Mortification of Sin

By John Owen

Chapter Eleven: Strategies to Use in Mortification

Direction # 3: Load your conscience with the guilt of your sin.

Begin with general considerations of the guilt of sin:

- Bring the holy law of God unto your conscience and pray that you might be affected in the consideration of your transgression of it.
 - Owen instructs his reader to consider the holiness, spirituality, fiery severity, inwardness, and absoluteness of the law, and see how he stands before it.
 - He says, “*Be much, I say, in affecting thy conscience with the terror of the Lord in the law, and how righteous it is that every one of thy transgressions should receive a recompense of reward.*”
 - Owen warns that when you attempt this, your conscience may try to evade such considerations by insisting that you are freed from the condemning power of the law and so need not be troubled by your lack of conformity to it.
 - But Owen instructs you to tell your conscience that you have no assurance of being delivered from the condemning power of sin while an unmortified lust lies in your heart; and as the law may yet damn you to perdition, it is necessary that you ponder to the utmost what it has to say.
 - Owen insists that a man who in the secret reserve of his heart tells himself that he is forgiven of his sin in order to continue in that sin has no gospel grounds for being assured that he is forgiven.
 - Owen goes on to say that regardless of a man’s state, “*the law has commission from God to seize upon transgressors wherever it finds them, and so bring them before his throne, where they are to plead for themselves... This is the proper work of the law, to discover sin in the guilt of it, to awake and humble the soul for it, to be a glass to represent sin in its colours; and if thou deniest to deal with it on this account, it is not through faith, but through the hardness of thy heart and the deceitfulness of sin.*” (p. 121)
 - He observes: “*This is a door that too many professors have gone out at, to open apostasy. Such a deliverance from the law they have pretended, as that they would consult its guidance and direction no more, they would measure their sin by it no more. By little and little this principle hath insensibly proceeded from the notion of it to influence their practical understandings; and having taken possession there, hath turned the will and affections loose to all manner of abominations.*”
 - So Owen charges his readers: “*By such ways as these, then, I say, persuade thy conscience to hearken diligently to what the law speaks in the name of the Lord unto thee, about thy lust and corruption. Oh! If thy ears be open, it will speak with a voice that shall make thee tremble, that shall cast thee to the ground, and fill thee with astonishment. If ever thou wilt mortify thy corruptions, thou must tie up thy conscience to the law,*

shut it from all shifts and exceptions, until it owns its guilt with a clear and thorough apprehension; so that hence, as David speaks, thy 'iniquity may be ever before thee' (Ps. 51:3)." (pp. 121-2)

- Bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to your sin, not for relief, but for further conviction of its guilt as you look with sorrow upon Him whom you have pierced.
 - Owen teaches his reader to consider his sins before the cross and ask:
 - *"What have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace, have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the Son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace?"*
 - *"Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash, which the blessed Spirit hath chosen to dwell in? And can I keep myself out of the dust? What can I say to the dear Lord Jesus? How shall I hold up my head with any boldness before Him?"*
 - *"Do I account communion with Christ of so little value, that for this vile lust's sake I have scarce left him any room in my heart?...Love mercy, grace, goodness, peace, joy, consolation: I have despised them all, and esteemed them a thing of nought, that I might harbour a lust in my heart."*
 - With respect to the Father: *"Have I obtained a view of God's fatherly countenance that I might behold his face and provoke him to his face?"*
 - With respect to the Son: *"Was my soul washed that room might be made for new defilements? Shall I endeavor to disappoint the end of the death of Christ?"*
 - With respect to the Spirit: *"Shall I daily grieve the Spirit whereby I am sealed to the day of redemption?"*
 - Owen teaches you to subject your conscience daily to such questions and see if it can stand before this aggravation of its guilt.
 - He says, *"If this make it not sink in some measure, and melt, I fear thy case is dangerous."* (p. 122)

Then proceed to particulars of the guilt of sin:

- First, consider the infinite patience and forbearance of God toward you in particular.
 - Owen teaches you to dwell on the fact that God might have made you a shame and reproach to the world and an object of His wrath forever for your sin.
 - He says you should recall how you have dealt treacherously and falsely with God, flattered Him with your lips, and broken your promises to Him even by the sin that you now pursue; yet God has in many ways spared you.
 - Owen says: *"Hast thou not often been ready thyself to conclude that it was utterly impossible that he should bear any longer with thee; that he would cast thee off, and be gracious no more; that all his forbearance was exhausted, and hell and wrath was even ready prepared for thee? And yet, above all expectation, he hath returned with visitations of love; and wilt thou yet abide in the provocation of the eyes of his glory?"* (p. 123)
- Secondly, consider how often you have been at the door of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, yet God by his infinite grace has restored you to communion with him again and again.

- Owen asks: “*Hast thou not found grace decaying; delight in duties, ordinances, prayer and meditation vanishing; inclinations to loose, careless walking thriving; and such as before were entangled, almost beyond recovery? Hast thou not found thyself engaged, and that with delight, in such ways, societies, companies as God abhors? And wilt thou venture any more to the brink of hardness?*” (p. 124)
- Thirdly, consider all God’s gracious dealings with you in providential dispensations, deliverances, afflictions, mercies, and enjoyments.
 - By these remembrances you are taught to load your conscience until it is thoroughly affected with the guilt of your indwelling corruption, until it is “*sensible of its wound and lie in the dust before the Lord.*”
 - Owen insists: “*Unless this be done to the purpose, all other endeavors are to no purpose. Whilst the conscience hath any means to alleviate the guilt of sin, the soul will never vigorously attempt its mortification.*” (p. 124)

Direction # 4: Once affected with a sense of the guilt of sin, get a constant longing and breathing after deliverance from the power of it.

- Owen says that you should not allow your heart one moment to be content with its present condition.
 - He says that in most matters, longing desires after anything in a person are of no value or consideration unless they motivate that person to be diligent in the use of the means for attaining what he wants.
 - However, in spiritual matters, this is not the case: “*Longing, breathing, and panting after deliverance is a grace in itself, that hath a mighty power to conform the soul into the likeness of the thing longed after.*” (p. 125)
 - Owen cites the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:24: “*O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*”
 - Further he notes that if this is the state of the believer’s heart in the general consideration of his sin, how much greater should this longing be when there is added to it the perplexing rage and power of a particular sin?
 - Owen says: “*Assure thyself, unless thou longest for deliverance, thou shalt not have it.*” (p. 125)
 - Owen concludes by showing that such longing for deliverance makes the heart watchful and ready to seize upon all opportunities of advantage against its enemy.
 - So as a matter necessary for mortification, he commands his reader: “*Get thy heart into a panting and breathing frame; long, sigh, cry out.*”

Direction # 5: Consider whether the sin that perplexes you is rooted in your nature or otherwise cherished, incited, and heightened by your constitution.

- Owen states: “*A proneness to some sins may doubtless lie in the natural temper and disposition of men.*”
 - Owen stresses that this fact does not in any way lessen the guilt of sin or excuse it, but should further abase and humble us in the consideration of it.
 - He points out that David reckoned himself ‘shapen in iniquity and conceived in sin’ (Ps. 51:5), and yet this original corruption of his nature only heightened his sense of guilt in the outbreak of it.

- When it is observed that a particular sin is rooted in our constitution, we should recognize that this gives such a great advantage to that sin and to Satan in the manipulation of it, that without extraordinary watchfulness, care, and diligence it will assuredly prevail upon us
- In this case, in addition to all the other ways and means of mortification, it can be helpful to “bring the body into subjection” as Paul expresses in I Corinthians 9:27.
 - Owen says that such denial of one’s own appetites “*gives check to the natural root of the distemper, and withers it by taking away its fatness of soil.*”
 - He states that the abuse of such means by the Roman Catholic Church and others should not cause us to neglect what God himself has owned and appointed as a legitimate means of mortification.
 - Owen mentions the following limitations to observed with respect to bringing the body under subjection:
 - The outward weakening and impairing of the body should not be looked upon as mortification itself, but only a means of the weakening a sin in its natural root and seat in order that it might be mortified.
 - The means whereby this is done (e.g. fasting, watching, etc.) should not be regarded as having some power of mortification in themselves, but rather are ways that the Spirit may and sometimes does put forth strength in the accomplishing of His work.

Direction # 6: Consider what occasions and advantages your sin has taken to exert and put forth itself, and watch against them all.

- Owen says this is what is intended when Christ instructs his disciples to “watch” (Mark 13:37) and to “take heed that their hearts be not weighed down” with sins and cares of the world (Luke 21:34).
 - Likewise this is what is meant when David says, “*I have kept myself from mine iniquity,*” i.e. he watched all the ways and workings of his iniquity in order to get before them and rise up against them. (Psalm 18:23)
- Owen instructs: “*Consider what ways, what companies, what opportunities, what studies, what businesses, what conditions, have at any time given, or do usually give, advantages to thy distempers; and set thyself heedfully against them all. Men will do this with respect to their bodily infirmities and distempers: the seasons, the diet, the air that have proved offensive shall be avoided. Are the things of the soul of less importance?*” (p. 129)
 - He warns: “*Know that he who dares to dally with occasions of sin, will dare to sin. He that will venture upon temptations to wickedness, will venture upon wickedness.*”
 - Owen says that this concept is of great importance in mortification but not treated at length in The Mortification of Sin because Owen had already written an extensive treatise on this subject in particular.

Direction # 7: Rise mightily against the first motions and conceptions of your sin.

- Owen charges: “*Suffer it not to get the least ground: do not say, ‘Thus far it shall go, and no farther.’ If it have allowance for one step, it will take another. It is*

impossible to fix bounds to sin. It is like water in a channel; if it once break out, it will have its course. Its not acting is easier to be compassed than its bounding.”

- ❑ So Owen urges: *“Dost thou find thy corruption to begin to entangle thy thoughts? Rise up with all thy strength against it, with no less indignation than if it had fully accomplished what it aims at. Consider what an unclean thought would have; it would have thee roll thyself in folly and filth. Ask envy what it would have; murder and destruction are at the end of it. Set thyself against it with no less vigour than if it had utterly debased thee to wickedness.”* (p. 130)
 - ❑ He concludes: *“Without this course thou wilt not prevail. As sin gets ground in the affections to delight in it, it gets also upon the understanding to slight it.”*
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Summary

- In the mortification of any particular sin, labor to load your conscience with the guilt of it using both the law and the gospel, as well as the particular occasions of God’s blessing and being patient with you in the past.
- Once affected with the guilt of sin, then immediately long and breathe after deliverance from it that you may be ready to seize every advantage against it.
- Consider as well whether your sin might have some advantage by your natural disposition, not as an excuse for sin but as a warning that it must be mortified by extraordinary means including the subjection of the body.
- Study that occasions and advantages that your sin has used to gain the upper hand and break forth in your life, and be on your watch against them.
- Rise immediately and mightily against the first motions of sin in you as the surest way of keeping it from gaining a foothold in your heart and mind.