

FOREWORD BY

JOHN PIPER

*OVERCOMING*

*SIN*

*and*

*TEMPTATION*

EDITED BY

KELLY M. KAPIC

AND

JUSTIN TAYLOR

JOHN OWEN



“The greatest Christian writers are those who most powerfully project to spiritual readers the knowledge of God, of ourselves, and of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Among these are Augustine, Calvin, Edwards, and the Puritan John Owen, who ought to be better known than he is. The editors of this volume have worked hard to make Owen’s unrivalled insight into the Christian’s inner war with sin accessible to all, and the result is truly a god-send. Filled with classic devotional theology which, like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, needs to be read again and again to be properly grasped, we have in the three treatises presented here a companion for life.”

J. I. PACKER, Professor of Theology, Regent College

“John Owen’s three treatises on sin, mortification, and temptation are a priceless treasure. To read them is to mine pure spiritual gold. Unfortunately, as in mining, reading Owen is hard work. Now, through skillful editing, Kelly Kopic and Justin Taylor have made Owen’s work accessible to modern readers while still retaining his unique writing style. Anyone concerned about personal holiness will profit from reading this new edition of a classic work.”

JERRY BRIDGES, Navigators Community Ministries Group

“Sin is tenacious, but by God’s grace we can hate it and hunt it. John Owen provides the master guide for the sin-hunter. Kopic and Taylor bring together three of Owen’s classics, clarifying them in simple ways—but all the substance, the careful, hounding arguments are still there to train our spiritual sight and love our souls.”

MARK DEVER, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,  
Washington, D.C.

“With a volume of Owen in your hands you may wonder why you have wasted so much time reading lesser things. True, as Dr. John (“Rabbi”) Duncan once said, if you are going to read this you will need to ‘prepare yourself for the knife.’ But that knife is the scalpel of one of the finest spiritual surgeons in the history of the church. Owen understood as few have how the gospel makes us well. Three cheers for everything Kopic and Taylor are doing to introduce a new generation of Christians to Owen’s peerless works.”

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, Senior Minister,  
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.

“For over three hundred years the doctrinal and devotional works of John Owen have been a classic resource for the church. Though unusually insightful, Owen may be too challenging for many to read with benefit. Now, with brilliant editorial efforts and insightful introductions by Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor, Owen’s magnificent treatises on sin and sanctification have been made available for a new generation. I am confident that this welcomed volume will provide guidance and enablement for believers in need of God’s grace and blessing. The editors are to be congratulated for their fine work!”

DAVID S. DOCKERY, President, Union University,  
Jackson, Tenn.

“John Owen is a spiritual surgeon with the rare skill to cut away the cancer of sin and bring gospel healing to the sinner’s soul. Apart from the Bible, I have found his writings on sin and temptation to be the best books ever written for helping me to stop sinning the same old sins. Now Owen’s profound thinking on spiritual change in the Christian life is available in a user-friendly format that will help a new generation gain gospel victory over the power of remaining sin.”

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, Senior Minister,  
Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

“No writer has taught me more about the dynamics of the heart and the deceitfulness of sin than John Owen. Reading his writing has been life-changing, although at times his seventeenth-century style can be a challenge to modern ears. How grateful I am that Kapic and Taylor have invested their time and considerable skills to bring Owen’s profound and practical teaching to a modern audience. Read this book carefully; it will help you understand your heart and experience God’s grace.”

C. J. MAHANEY, Sovereign Grace Ministries,  
Gaithersburg, Md.

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 **CROSSWAY**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Overcoming Sin and Temptation*

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This volume is dedicated to our children  
JONATHAN TAYLOR KAPIC and MARGOT MONROE KAPIC  
and  
CLAIRA LUCILE TAYLOR and MALACHI XAVIER TAYLOR  
Incredible gifts from God



# CONTENTS

FOREWORD	11
<i>John Piper</i>	
PREFACE: <i>Reading John Owen: Why a New Edition?</i>	15
<i>Justin Taylor</i>	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	21
INTRODUCTION: <i>Life in the Midst of Battle: John Owen's Approach to Sin, Temptation, and the Christian Life</i>	23
<i>Kelly M. Kopic</i>	
OVERVIEW OF JOHN OWEN'S <i>Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers</i>	37
<i>Justin Taylor</i>	

## OF THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN IN BELIEVERS

PREFACE	41
<b>PART 1: THE NECESSITY OF MORTIFICATION</b>	
CHAPTER 1	45
CHAPTER 2	49
CHAPTER 3	57
CHAPTER 4	63
<b>PART 2: THE NATURE OF MORTIFICATION</b>	
CHAPTER 5	69
CHAPTER 6	73
CHAPTER 7	78
CHAPTER 8	86
CHAPTER 9	89
CHAPTER 10	97



CHAPTER 11	103
CHAPTER 12	110
CHAPTER 13	118
<b>PART 3: THE MEANS OF MORTIFICATION</b>	
CHAPTER 14	131
OVERVIEW OF JOHN OWEN'S <i>Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It</i> <i>Justin Taylor</i>	141

## **OF TEMPTATION: THE NATURE AND POWER OF IT**

PREFACE	145
<b>PART 1: THE NATURE OF TEMPTATION</b>	
CHAPTER 1	151
<b>PART 2: THE DANGER OF ENTERING TEMPTATION</b>	
CHAPTER 2	159
<b>PART 3: THE GREAT DUTY OF ALL BELIEVERS</b>	
CHAPTER 3	167
<b>PART 4: PARTICULAR CASES AND GENERAL DIRECTIONS</b>	
CHAPTER 4	187
CHAPTER 5	192
CHAPTER 6	197
CHAPTER 7	201
CHAPTER 8	208
CHAPTER 9	220
OVERVIEW OF JOHN OWEN'S <i>Indwelling Sin</i> <i>Justin Taylor</i>	225

## **INDWELLING SIN**

PREFACE	229
<b>PART 1: THE NATURE OF INDWELLING SIN</b>	
CHAPTER 1	233

<b>PART 2: THE POWER AND EFFICACY OF INDWELLING SIN</b>	
CHAPTER 2	243
CHAPTER 3	249
CHAPTER 4	257
CHAPTER 5	262
CHAPTER 6	270
CHAPTER 7	284
CHAPTER 8	293
CHAPTER 9	306
CHAPTER 10	315
CHAPTER 11	326
CHAPTER 12	333
CHAPTER 13	342
<b>PART 3: THE EFFECT AND STRENGTH OF INDWELLING SIN</b>	
CHAPTER 14	363
CHAPTER 15	374
CHAPTER 16	388
CHAPTER 17	398
<b>OUTLINES</b>	
OF THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN IN BELIEVERS	411
OF TEMPTATION: THE NATURE AND POWER OF IT	417
THE NATURE, POWER, DECEIT, AND PREVALENCY OF INDWELLING SIN	425
GLOSSARY	435
GENERAL INDEX	443
SCRIPTURE INDEX	451



## FOREWORD

I REJOICE AT THIS publication of John Owen's works on the nature of our battle with sin. It is the kind of thinking we need. Therefore, I thank God for Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor. They have done a good service for the church. I hope teachers and pastors will help their people benefit from this book.

As I look across the Christian landscape, I think it is fair to say concerning sin, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly" (Jer. 6:14; 8:11, ESV). I take this to refer to leaders who should be helping the church know and feel the seriousness of indwelling sin (Rom. 7:20), and how to fight it and kill it (Rom. 8:13). Instead the depth and complexity and ugliness and danger of sin in professing Christians is either minimized—since we are already justified—or psychologized as a symptom of woundedness rather than corruption.

This is a tragically light healing. I call it a tragedy because by making life easier for ourselves in minimizing the nature and seriousness of our sin, we become greater victims of it. We are in fact not healing ourselves. Those who say that they already feel bad enough without being told about the corruptions of indwelling sin misread the path to peace. When our people have not been taught well about the real nature of sin and how it works and how to put it to death, most of the miseries people report are not owing to the disease but its symptoms. They feel a general malaise and don't know why, their marriages are at the breaking point, they feel weak in their spiritual witness and devotion, their workplace is embattled, their church is tense with unrest, their fuse is short with the children, etc. They report these miseries as if they were the disease. And they want the symptoms removed.

We proceed to heal the wound of the people lightly. We look first and mainly for circumstantial causes for the misery—present or past. If we're good at it, we can find partial causes and give some relief. But the healing is light. We have not done the kind of soul surgery that is possible only when the soul doctor knows the kind of things Owen talks about in these books, and when the patient is willing to let the doctor's scalpel go deep.

What Owen offers is not quick relief, but long-term, deep growth in grace that can make strong, healthy trees where there was once a fragile sapling. I

## 12 FOREWORD

pray that thousands—especially teachers and pastors and other leaders—will choose the harder, long-term path of growth, not the easier, short-term path of circumstantial relief.

The two dead pastor-theologians of the English-speaking world who have nourished and taught me most are Jonathan Edwards and John Owen. Some will say Edwards is unsurpassed. Some say Owen was the greater. We don't need to decide. We have the privilege of knowing them both as our friends and teachers. What an amazing gift of God's providence that these brothers were raised up and that hundreds of years after they have died we may sit at their feet. We cannot properly estimate the blessing of soaking our minds in the Bible-saturated thinking of the likes of John Owen. What he was able to see in the Bible and preserve for us in writing is simply magnificent. It is so sad—a travesty, I want to say—how many Christian leaders of our day do not strive to penetrate the wisdom of John Owen, but instead read books and magazines that are superficial in their grasp of the Bible.

We act as though there was nothing extraordinary about John Owen's vision of biblical truth—that he was not a rare gift to the church. But he was rare. There are very few people like this whom God raises up in the history of the church. Why does God do this? Why does he give an Owen or an Edwards to the church and then ordain that what they saw of God should be preserved in books? Is it not because he loves us? Is it not because he would share Owen's vision with his church? Great trees that are covered with the richest life-giving fruit are not for museums. God preserves them and their fruit for the health of his church.

I know that all Christians cannot read all such giants. Even one mountain is too high to climb for most of us. But we can pick one or two, and then ask God to teach us what he taught them. The really great writers are not valuable for their cleverness but for their straightforward and astonishing insight into what the Bible really says about great realities. This is what we need.

The Bible is God's word. Therefore, it is profound. How could it not be? God inspired it. He understands himself and the human heart infinitely. He is not playing games with us. He really means to communicate the profoundest things about sin and hell and heaven and Christ and faith and salvation and holiness and death. Paul does not sing out in vain, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33, *ESV*). No. He summons us to stop settling for pop culture and to learn what the Bible really has to say about the imponderable depths of sin and grace.

Owen is especially worthy of our attention because he is shocking in his insights. That is my impression again and again. He shocks me out of my platitudinous ways of thinking about God and man. Here are a few random recollections from what you are (I hope) about to read. You will find others on your own.

“There is no death of sin without the death of Christ” (*Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, chapter 7). Owen loves the cross and knows what happened there better than anyone I have read. The battle with sin that you are about to read about is no superficial technique of behavior modification. It is a profound dealing with what was accomplished on the cross in relation to the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit through the deep and wonderful mysteries of faith.

“To kill sin is the work of living men; where men are *dead* (as all unbelievers, the best of them, are dead), sin is *alive*, and will live” (chapter 7). Oh, the pastoral insights that emerge from Owen! As here: If you are fighting sin, you are alive. Take heart. But if sin holds sway unopposed, you are dead no matter how lively this sin makes you feel. Take heart, embattled saint!

“God says, ‘Here is one, if he could be rid of this lust I should never hear of him more; let him wrestle with this, or he is lost’” (chapter 8). Astonishing! God ordains to leave a lust with me till I become the sort of warrior who will still seek his aid when this victory is won. God knows when we can bear the triumphs of his grace.

“Is there the guilt of any great sin lying upon you unrepented of? A new sin may be permitted, as well as a new affliction sent, to bring an old sin to remembrance” (chapter 9). What? God ordains that we be tested by another sin so that an old one might be better known and fought? Sin is one of God’s weapons against sin?

“The difference between believers and unbelievers as to knowledge is not so much in the *matter* of their knowledge as in the *manner* of knowing. Unbelievers, some of them, may know more and be able to say more of God, his perfections, and his will, than many believers; but they know nothing as they ought, nothing in a right manner, nothing spiritually and savingly, nothing with a holy, heavenly light. The excellency of a believer is, not that he has a large apprehension of things, but that what he does apprehend, which perhaps may be very little, he sees it in the light of the Spirit of God, in a saving, soul-transforming light; and this is that which gives us communion with God, and not prying thoughts or curious-raised notions” (chapter 12). How then will we labor to help people know much and know it “in a right manner”? What is that?

## 14 FOREWORD

“[Christ] is the head from whence the new man must have influences of life and strength, or it will decay every day” (chapter 14). Oh, that our people would feel the urgency of daily supplies of grace because “grace decays.” Do they know this? Is it a category in their mind—that grace decays? How many try to live their lives on automatic pilot with no sense of urgency that means of grace are given so that the riches of Christ may daily be obtained with fresh supplies of grace.

The list could go on and on. For me, to read Owen is to wake up to ways of seeing that are so clearly biblical that I wonder how I could have been so blind. May that be your joyful experience as well.

—John Piper, Pastor for Preaching and Vision  
Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

## PREFACE

# READING JOHN OWEN: WHY A NEW EDITION?

JUSTIN TAYLOR

### READING OWEN IS WORTH THE EFFORT

One of our goals in publishing this volume is to reintroduce John Owen to the church today. And one of the hindrances in the way of his reception is his reputation for being hard to read. There is no glossing over the fact that studying Owen's writings requires hard work. But we would also insist—alongside many of the great saints in the history of the church—that the effort required to read Owen is richly repaid. We agree with the judgment of J. I. Packer regarding Owen's works: "I did not say that it was easy to read them!—that would not be true; yet I do venture to say that the labour involved in plodding through these ill-arranged and tediously-written treatises will find them abundantly worthwhile."<sup>1</sup> Our goal has been to produce a faithful and accurate edition of Owen's writings on sin and temptation that begins to overcome some of these barriers to understanding his profound and practical insights and instruction.

### OWEN'S WRITING STYLE

In order to understand Owen's literary style, it is worth quoting Packer at length:

There is no denying that Owen is heavy and hard to read. This is not so much due to obscure arrangement as to two other factors. The first is his lumbering literary gait. 'Owen travels through it [his subject] with the elephant's grace and solid step, if sometimes also with his ungainly

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<sup>1</sup>J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990), 84.



motion,' says [Andrew] Thomson. That puts it kindly. Much of Owen's prose reads like a roughly-dashed-off translation of a piece of thinking done in Ciceronian Latin. It has, no doubt, a certain clumsy dignity; so has Stonehenge; but it is trying to the reader to have to go over sentences two or three times to see their meaning, and this necessity makes it much harder to follow an argument. The present writer, however, has found that the hard places in Owen usually come out as soon as one reads them aloud. The second obscuring factor is Owen's austerity as an expositor. He has a lordly disdain for broad introductions which ease the mind gently into a subject, and for comprehensive summaries which gather up scattered points into a small space. He obviously carries the whole of his design in his head, and expects his readers to do the same. Nor are his chapter divisions reliable pointers to the discourse, for though a change of subject is usually marked by a chapter division, Owen often starts a new chapter where there is no break in the thought at all. Nor is he concerned about literary proportions; the space given to a topic is determined by its intrinsic complexity rather than its relative importance, and the reader is left to work out what is basic and what is secondary by noting how things link together.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, we shouldn't exaggerate the difficulties of Owen's prose when set before a certain sort of reader:

His studied unconcern about style in presenting his views, a conscientious protest against the self-conscious literary posturing of the age, conceals their uncommon clarity and straightforwardness from superficial readers; but then, Owen did not write for superficial readers. He wrote, rather, for those who, once they take up a subject, cannot rest till they see to the bottom of it, and who find exhaustiveness not exhausting, but satisfying and refreshing. . . .

Owen's style is often stigmatized as cumbersome and tortuous. Actually it is Latinised spoken style, fluent but stately and expansive, in the elaborate Ciceronian style. When Owen's prose is read aloud, as didactic rhetoric (which is, after all, what it is), the verbal inversions, displacements, archaisms and new coinages that bother modern readers cease to obscure and offend. Those who think as they read find Owen's expansiveness suggestive and his fulsomeness fertilising.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 147.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 193, 194.

## READING OWEN: A NEW OPTION

Up until now, there have been two main options for those who want to read Owen's writings on sin and temptation. One could work through volume 6 of *The Works of John Owen* as edited by William Goold in the 1850s,<sup>4</sup> or one could use a contemporary abridgement or paraphrase.<sup>5</sup> In this volume we are seeking to present something new: an unabridged but updated edition of Owen's three classic works that preserves all of Owen's original content but seeks to make it a bit more accessible. In so doing, we hope to play a small part in reintroducing Owen to both the church and the academy.<sup>6</sup>

## FEATURES OF THIS NEW EDITION

What changes have we made to the original edition of Owen's works? We have:

- provided overviews of the thesis and arguments for all three books
- footnoted difficult vocabulary words or phrases (at their first occurrence in each book) and collected them into a glossary
- Americanized the British spelling (e.g., behaviour to behavior)
- updated archaic pronouns (e.g., thou to you)
- updated other archaic spellings (e.g., hath to have; requireth to requires)
- updated some archaic word forms (e.g., concernments to concerns, surprisals to surprises)
- corrected the text in places where the nineteenth-century edition incorrectly deviated from the original
- modernized some of the punctuation

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<sup>4</sup>There are two main collections of Owen's works: a 21-volume set edited by Thomas Russell (1826), and a 24-volume set edited by William Goold (1850–1853). The former is long out of print; the latter, save for one volume, has been reprinted in facsimile by the Banner of Truth Trust in Edinburgh (1965–1968) and has remained in print for the last 40 years. *The Works of John Owen*, with some slight updates, have also been included on a CD-Rom published by Ages Software of Rio, Wisconsin.

<sup>5</sup>For an edited abridgement, see John Owen, *Triumph Over Temptation: Pursuing a Life of Purity*, Victor Classics, ed. James M. Houston (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004). (This volume was formerly titled *Sin and Temptation: The Challenge of Personal Godliness*, originally published by Multnomah in 1983, followed by Bethany in 1996.) The principle was "to seek the kernel and remove the husk," which involved cutting about half of the original work and extensive rewriting. See also Kris Lundgaard's popular work, *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk About the Power and Defeat of Sin* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), which is not an edition of Owen's writings per se, but rather an effort by Lundgaard to restate and recast Owen's arguments for today. In addition, the Banner of Truth Trust and Christian Focus Publications in the UK have each produced small paperback editions of *The Mortification of Sin*, with only slight modifications contained therein.

<sup>6</sup>We are also editing a new edition of Owen's *Communion with God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, forthcoming).

- placed Owen’s Scripture references in parentheses<sup>7</sup>
- added our own Scripture references in brackets when Owen quotes or alludes to a passage but does not provide a reference
- transliterated all Hebrew and Greek words, and provided a translation if Owen didn’t provide one
- translated all Latin phrases that Owen leaves untranslated
- provided sources for quotations and allusions where possible
- removed Owen’s intricate numbering system, which functioned as an extensive outline
- added headings and italics throughout this volume, and extensive outlines of our own at the end, to aid the reader in following the flow of Owen’s thought

As an example of the sort of limited modernizing that we have done to the text, the following is a reproduction of an original paragraph from Owen’s *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin* (from his exposition of Revelation 2) . . .

The fame might also be shewed concerning the rest of those *Churches*, only one or two of them excepted. *Five* of them are charged with decays and declensions. Hence there is mention in the Scripture of the *Kindness of Youth*, of the *Love of Espousals*, with great commendation, *Jer. 2. 2, 3.* of our *first Faith*, *1 Tim. 5. 12.* of the *beginning of our confidence*, *Heb. 3.14.*

. . . and this is our edited version as it appears in this volume:

The same also might be showed concerning the rest of those churches, only one or two of them excepted. Five of them are charged with decays and declensions. Hence there is mention in the Scripture of the “kindness of youth,” of the “love of espousals,” with great commendation (*Jer. 2:2-3*); of our “first faith” (*1 Tim. 5:12*); of “the beginning of our confidence” (*Heb. 3:14*).

## A WORD ABOUT THE STRUCTURE

Readers will note that, unlike in modern books, there are no chapter titles—Owen didn’t assign any. Furthermore, the location of the chapter breaks can

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<sup>7</sup>Readers will note that the Scripture references in this volume do not correspond precisely to any particular translation. The reason for this is twofold: (1) Owen did not rely upon one translation. His use of Scripture often involves his own combination of translation and paraphrase. (2) While some of the Scripture passages are similar to the Geneva Bible or to the King James Bible (published just five years before Owen’s birth), they do not match precisely due to our updating of archaic components in those translations.

come across as arbitrary. As Packer said, Owen “obviously carries the whole of his design in his head, and expects his readers to do the same. Nor are his chapter divisions reliable pointers to the discourse, for though a change of subject is usually marked by a chapter division, Owen often starts a new chapter where there is no break in the thought at all.” In fact, we believe that making the chapter breaks prominent can actually add to the confusion in reading Owen’s work. (For example, in the outline for *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, you’ll note that chapter 3 begins with Roman numeral II.) One option would have been to dispense with the chapter numbers altogether. We decided to retain the chapter numbers, but to make them less prominent by placing them in brackets and not always at the beginning of a new page. This allows Owen’s own outline to receive greater emphasis, and we believe it will aid the reader in following Owen’s thought.

As noted above, we have also taken Owen’s original intricate numbering system and used it to create our own outlines in the back of the book. We encourage readers to use these outlines, paginated for easy reference, where one can see his main points and the flow of his argument.

## OUR PRAYER

Although we desire to see an increased understanding of and appreciation for Owen’s works in our day, our greater desire is to see fellow believers return to the biblical means of sanctification in their battle to overcome sin and temptation. All of us find within ourselves a law to the effect that, when we want to do right, we discover evil within ourselves (Rom. 7:21). Our prayer is that this book will be used of God to help us watch and pray against temptation (Matt. 26:41) so that by the Spirit we would mortify the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13).<sup>8</sup>

*Soli Deo gloria.*

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<sup>8</sup>Romans 7:21 is the foundational text for Owen’s *Indwelling Sin*. Matthew 26:41 is the key text for *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*. And Romans 8:13 stands at the front of *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHILE AS EDITORS we have written relatively little of this volume, the amount of time we have spent on it has been considerable. Consequently, a project of this kind simply does not work without the help, kindness, and love of many people. We would therefore like to acknowledge some who have been so important to this process.

It is appropriate to begin by expressing our genuine gratitude to our covenant Lord, in whose love and compassion we find ourselves. We have felt his enabling grace even as we have worked on this project of reintroducing the church to his servant, John Owen.

Cameron Moran, Kelly's research assistant, provided invaluable assistance in tracking down references and helping us to get the manuscript in shape. Others who have given support, insight, and sometimes acted as guinea pigs include Daniel Hill, Jay Green, Jeff Morton, J. I. Packer, Tim Cooper, Ivor J. Davidson, Frank A. James III, John Holberg, Tad Mindemann, Brian Hecker, Andrea Long, Rebecca Sasscer, and Joshua Sowin (who helped Justin create [www.johnowen.org](http://www.johnowen.org)).

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We are especially thankful to John Piper for interrupting his own writing projects to pen the foreword for this book.

We are grateful to Crossway Books for sharing our vision for this project, and for Bill Deckard in particular, whose excellent edits have made the manuscript better.

We profoundly appreciate our wives, Tabitha Kopic and Lea Taylor, who have patiently and selflessly encouraged us during countless hours of editing. There can be no doubt that without your sacrificial love and support this volume would never have reached completion. And more than that, thank you for always reminding us that life is bigger than books read or written.

Finally, we dedicate this edited volume to our children, Jonathan and Margot Kopic, and Clair and Malachi Taylor. Even though it will be years

## 22 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

before you can understand this book—if you ever read it in the first place!—we do pray that by God’s Spirit you will always know the freedom and hope that comes in the gospel. We stand in awe of the incredible gift God gave when he gave us you.

—Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor  
July 2006

## INTRODUCTION

# LIFE IN THE MIDST OF BATTLE: JOHN OWEN'S APPROACH TO SIN, TEMPTATION, AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

KELLY M. KAPIC

*“Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”<sup>1</sup>*

### WHY READ JOHN OWEN?

Sitting across from me in our London flat with warm tea in her hand and shortbread on the table, my wife had a revelation. During recent conversations we had been praying that God would provide a mentor for me while I was working on my Ph.D.—someone who would ask the hard questions, challenge my thinking and living, and consistently point me to the love of the Father. As we sat talking that morning, in what had become normal language around our home, I began another sentence with, “Do you know what Owen said yesterday . . . ?” Stopping me, Tabitha interjected, “You *are* being mentored. Listen to how you refer to John Owen, as if he were still alive. He is your mentor.”

She was right. Although Owen had been dead for centuries, I found myself in almost daily dialogue with this prominent Puritan whose thought was serving as the object of my doctoral studies. While recognizing the cultural and historical differences between Owen's time and my own was of vital importance for my academic research, still I was often drawn into a living dialogue with this intriguing man. Sometimes I found myself frustrated with his methods or conclusions, but very often his insights simply captured me. His words would stir me to the point of honest self-examination and an

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-1855; reprint by Banner of Truth Trust, 1965, 1991) (hereafter cited as *Works*), 6:9.



ever-growing appreciation for the glory and love of God. I can recall many a time when I would have to stop reading, stand up, and just walk around for awhile, trying to digest a profound sentence. While a person from another century cannot serve as a replacement for living and breathing fellowship, I have learned the value of listening to the saints of old, and this Puritan theologian is certainly a voice worth hearing. I sometimes think of Dr. John Owen as a perceptive physician who delivers both a terrifying diagnosis and the means of a miraculous cure.



John Owen was born in the year of William Shakespeare's death, 1616, and his life paralleled an exciting and tumultuous century in Britain.<sup>2</sup> Before he died in 1683, Owen had experienced life as an army chaplain, a political insider, Vice Chancellor of Oxford, a leading Puritan theologian, faithful pastor, father, and husband. He had also known great personal loss. Though he had eleven children with his first wife, only one of them survived beyond adolescence; the one girl who did survive ended up returning to live with her father after her marriage collapsed, and while in his home she died of consumption.<sup>3</sup> Such painful experience cannot help but leave a deep imprint on a person. On the professional level Owen's career had reached great heights, such as preaching before Parliament, leading Oxford University, and having friendships with those in the highest positions of authority, including Oliver Cromwell. Yet he also lived through the loss of power and position, as his country moved away from a Puritan-influenced government back to a country led by a King who was less than excited about the Puritan ideals.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The best published biography on Owen remains Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen: Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1971). See also Peter Toon, ed., *The Correspondence of John Owen* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1970); idem, ed., *The Oxford Orations of Dr. John Owen* (Cornwall: Gospel Communications, 1971). Some recent book-length studies on Owen's thought deserve mention: Richard W. Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage, 2004); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987); Robert W. Oliver, ed., *John Owen: The Man and His Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002); Steve Griffiths, *Redeem the Time: The Problem of Sin in the Writings of John Owen* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2001); Jon D. Payne, ed., *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004); Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002); Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998). Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, forthcoming, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Dewey D. Wallace, "The Life and Thought of John Owen to 1660: A Study of the Significance of Calvinist Theology in English Puritanism" (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1965), 124. Sarah Gibbord Cook also writes of the difficult time after the Restoration, when Dr. and Mrs. Owen were separated from their children for long periods of time because of various circumstances ("A Political Biography of a Religious Independent: John Owen, 1616–83" [Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1972], 290).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 170–178.

Throughout the various seasons of his life Owen proved himself a most able author: the authoritative nineteenth-century edition of his works fill twenty-four tightly printed volumes.<sup>5</sup> Amid his extensive writings, which include biblical commentaries and exhaustive (and exhausting!) treatments of doctrines like justification and the atonement, Owen also produced devotional literature that quickly became beloved. In the volume you are reading we have selected three of his classics on spirituality—although it needs to be said that he viewed all of his discourses as spiritual exercises and not as something void of practical import. In these three particular works we find Owen’s detailed reflections on sin, temptation, and the believer’s call to holiness.

In 1656 Owen first published *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. In 1658 that volume was slightly revised and another short treatise, *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*, was also printed. During the time that these two books were published, Owen was still serving as Dean of Christ Church, Oxford University, and the substance of both discourses grew out of brief sermons that Owen delivered during his tenure there. Young students were most likely the bulk of his original audience—Owen had entered Queen’s College Oxford as a student at the age of twelve, which was not uncommon for the time.<sup>6</sup> One consequence of addressing this youthful audience seems to be that his reflections tend toward the concrete and practical, emphasizing the particular rather than lingering too long on the abstract. Here were young people who were beginning to experience the complexity of sin and self, and Owen was compelled to help.

Crucial to resisting sin and temptation, according to Owen, was an understanding of what you were fighting. Although written a decade later, Owen’s explorations on these practical subjects are further unpacked in his book, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin* (1667). Here Owen focuses on the power of sin not as it exists “out there,” but as it exists “within” a person. By the time this volume was published, Owen’s context had significantly changed: he had been removed from the academic setting, had watched the return of Charles II, and had personally witnessed the governmental crackdown on nonconformist Puritan preachers. But for Owen, circumstances—whether amiable or painful—were not an excuse to

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<sup>5</sup> Besides the standard printed 24-volume set noted above, an electronic version has recently been produced: “The Works of John Owen” (Rio, Wis.: Ages Software, 2000). Owen’s Latin writings have also recently been translated and made available in English: John Owen, *Biblical Theology, or, the Nature, Origin, Development, and Study of Theological Truth, in Six Books*, trans. Stephen Westcott (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 5.

stop resisting sin. The call of holiness was a call from God himself, and thus not contingent upon the state of affairs in which one finds oneself.

Christians are called to war against sin. According to Owen, this means they are called to learn the art of battle, which includes understanding the nature of sin, the complexity of the human heart, and the goodness and provision of God. Following a classic stream of orthodox theology, Owen argues that humility is crucial to growth in the Christian life, and proper humility comes from “a due consideration” both of God and of oneself.<sup>7</sup> Only from this perspective can one be in a right position to approach the call to holiness.

### KNOWING YOURSELF

Owen’s varied experiences, such as working with students (not to mention faculty) and providing pastoral care, gave him ample opportunity for reflection on the way that sin weaves its way into every aspect of people’s lives. Two particular challenges about human nature that appear in these volumes deserve brief comment: his attempt to present a holistic view of the human person, and his belief that personality differences must be considered when dealing with sin.

#### *Engaging the Whole Person*

Contemporary readers may at first glance struggle with Owen’s detailed parsing of human nature and sin, believing that his reflections are dated and irrelevant. However, upon closer examination the reader may begin to recognize that although Owen does not use current labels, he is dealing with very contemporary issues, such as depression, addiction, apathy, and lust.

One of Owen’s concerns was that some people reduced the struggle with sin to a problem centered on the physical body. They had taken the biblical language of the “body of sin” (Rom 6:6, ESV) and inappropriately treated it as a literal reference to physicality. This misunderstanding leads to what Owen considers the monastic “mistake”: believing that rigid regiments that yield greater physiological control will eventually diminish the sin that lies in a person.<sup>8</sup> For Owen, while the body is important, it is but the instrument for the real problem.

Using classic faculty-psychology categories of the mind, the will, and the affections, Owen consistently attempts to present a holistic perspective of the

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<sup>7</sup> *Works*, 6:200.

<sup>8</sup> *Works*, 6:7, 18.

human person, and this informs his view of sin and sanctification.<sup>9</sup> Originally humanity was created without sin, and thus their mind rightly reflected on the Creator and his creation, their affections properly loved God, and their will followed after the good. However, with the fall these faculties became disordered. Even after believers are redeemed by God they will continue to struggle with the abiding vestiges of sin that disorient the faculties, a condition that remains throughout their earthly life.<sup>10</sup>

Sin moves by drawing the mind away from God, enticing the affections and twisting desires and paralyzing the will, thus stunting any real Christian growth.<sup>11</sup> One of the most frightening truths that Owen wants the believer to recognize is that “Your enemy is not only *upon* you . . . but is *in* you also.”<sup>12</sup> Part of understanding the battle against sin is seeing that the enemy, so to speak, is not only external, but internal, which is why Christians often have conflicting desires within them.<sup>13</sup> Most Christians seem unaware of or apathetic about the sin that remains in them, but whether they recognize it or not there is a “living coal continually in their houses,” which, if not properly attended to, will catch their home on fire.<sup>14</sup>

As the Scriptures often call attention to the “heart” or “soul” of a person, Owen argues that such references tend to be shorthand for the various faculties, and thus to deal with sin the whole person must be engaged.<sup>15</sup> Although Owen gives ample attention to each of the faculties, let us focus on the affections as a test case to show the nature of sin and temptation. Far too often Christians working within the Reformed tradition have been guilty of confusing stoic ideals of emotional detachment with maturity in the Christian life. But this Reformed tradition, which Owen self-consciously grows out of, has at its best made significant space for the importance of the affections. As early as the sixteenth century John Calvin, one of the great fathers of the Reformed tradition, saw this confusion and warned against it. Calvin chided those Christians who acted like “new stoics,” because they believed that groaning, weeping, sadness, and having deep concerns were signs of sinfulness. According to Calvin such comments tend to grow from “idle men who, exercising themselves more in speculation than in action,” do not understand

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<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of Owen’s anthropology and his use of faculty psychology, see Kacic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen*, especially chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Works*, 6:165.

<sup>11</sup> *Works*, 6:97, 167, 245, 252.

<sup>12</sup> *Works*, 6:162.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Romans 7:7-25. Owen’s whole treatise *Indwelling Sin* builds off of this chapter, especially Romans 7:21.

<sup>14</sup> *Works*, 6:166.

<sup>15</sup> *Works*, 6:170.

the pain of this world and the ravages of sin, which the Savior who wept and mourned knew so well.<sup>16</sup> The goal of Calvin and of others after him, like Owen, was not the absence of affections, but rightly informed and directed affections.

Affections are a gift from God to all humanity. Far too often the faculties have been “gendered” in the church, for example, when people lump “rationality” with men and “emotions” with women. In addition to empirical evidence that easily contradicts such hastily drawn stereotypes, one should reject such schemas because *all* Christians are called to love God with their mind, will, and affections. Healthy affections are crucial to the life of faith, and numbing them cannot be the answer. In Owen’s estimation, because the affections are so important to faithful obedience, Scripture often interchanges the language of heart and affections, for here is “the principal thing which God requires in our walking before him. . . . Save all other things and lose the heart, and all is lost—lost unto all eternity.”<sup>17</sup>

The goal of the Christian life is not external conformity or mindless action, but a passionate love for God informed by the mind and embraced by the will. So the path forward is not to decrease one’s affections but rather to enlarge them and fill them with “heavenly things.” Here one is not trying to escape the painful realities of this life but rather endeavoring to reframe one’s perspective of life around a much larger canvas that encompasses *all* of reality. To respond to the distorting nature of sin you must set your affections on the beauty and glory of God, the loveliness of Christ, and the wonder of the gospel: “Were our affections filled, taken up, and possessed with these things . . . what access could sin, with its painted pleasures, with its sugared poisons, with its envenomed baits, have unto our souls?”<sup>18</sup> Resisting sin, according to this Puritan divine, comes not by deadening your affections but by awakening them to God himself. Do not seek to empty your cup as a way to avoid sin, but rather seek to fill it up with the Spirit of life, so there is no longer room for sin.

### *Considering Personalities*

Part of treating persons as holistic beings is recognizing the similarities and differences among them. With this in mind, it seems strange that “psychology” is so often a negative term among Christians. Certainly people have

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:709 (III.viii.9).

<sup>17</sup> *Works*, 6:249.

<sup>18</sup> *Works*, 6:250; cf. 6:188.

used this science in a problematic manner at times, reducing human persons to mechanistic behavioral responses without any reference to God. However, many Christians have created problems on the other end by their overly simplistic view of human persons, failing to account for such important factors as physiological distinctions, diverse backgrounds, and deep-seated socio-economic impulses. While it is true that all humans are made in God's image, and that everyone is called to resist sin and seek righteousness, these commonalities do not cancel out undeniable particularities. In other words, what does righteousness look like in the lives of concrete individuals? How does sin tempt people in different ways? In many respects Owen's three treatises can be read as early modern attempts to explore human psychology as affected by sin and renewed by the Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Faithful living does not always look the same. Sensitive pastors have long recognized this, learning the art of taking the wisdom of Scripture and applying it with care to the lives of those they counsel. Cookie-cutter molds simply will not work. In this vein, one reason that Owen consistently calls his readers to understand their own temperaments is because this will help them better appreciate how sin and temptation arise in their own lives. He recognizes that some people are by birth and experience "earthy," while others are "naturally gentle," and still others tend to have "passionate" dispositions. The challenge for all is to learn about their own constitution: "He who watches not this thoroughly, who is not exactly skilled in the knowledge of himself, will never be disentangled from one temptation or another all his days."<sup>20</sup>

According to this Puritan pastor, there is no temperament that is free from temptation, and the trick is to be aware of the threats that are easily overlooked. For example, those who are naturally gentle and pleasant may be surprised to find themselves far down a path that they should have courageously departed from long ago. Such a person may, for instance, turn a deaf ear to slander or a blind eye to injustice because acknowledging these wrongs might require the person to act courageously. Although it would be easier to mind his own business, he may need to risk discomfort by standing up for those mocked or being willing to express righteous anger in the face of discrimination. Others who tend toward the "earthy" may rightly uphold what is now commonly called authenticity, but in the process they foster "selfishness" and "harsh thoughts of others." We all have "peculiar lusts" due to our particular constitution, education, or prejudice, and such things have "deep rooting and strength in

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Timothy J. Keller, "Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9/3 (1988): 11-43.

<sup>20</sup> *Works*, 6:132.

them.”<sup>21</sup> Satan tends to attack us according to our particular personalities, moving against a confident person much differently than an anxious one, but tempting both nonetheless. Thus, we must learn our dispositions, for in so doing we are more prepared to avoid the stealthy arrows directed at us.

A persistent danger among Christians is that we confuse certain personalities with sanctification, creating an inaccurate hierarchy within the kingdom of God. In fact, Owen believes that because of our various backgrounds and temperaments, it is very hard to discern the most faithful Christians, since looks can be deceiving:

Remember that of many of *the best Christians, the worst* is known and seen. Many who keep up precious communion with God do yet oftentimes, by their *natural tempers* of freedom or passion, not carry so glorious appearances as others who perhaps come short of them in grace and the power of godliness.<sup>22</sup>

Not only can appearances be misleading, but people in positions of leadership in the church often suffer greater falls than the average congregation member. When considering countless examples of the saints in Scripture (e.g., Noah, David, Hezekiah), Owen concludes that great “eruptions of actual sin” often occur not in “the lowest form or ordinary sort of believers,” but in people who have in the past “had a peculiar eminency in them on the account of their walking with God in their generation.”<sup>23</sup> Past faithfulness is not a protection against present dangers.

In this life there is no escaping the challenges of temptation, and thus all—young and old, pastor and parishioner, poor and rich, wise and simple—must commit themselves to battle against sin. “Be acquainted, then, with thine own heart: though it be deep, search it; though it be dark, inquire into it; though it give all its distempers other names than what are their due, believe it not.”<sup>24</sup> Do not justify your own particular sin, but seek to recognize it so that you might fight against it with all your strength. Although sin and temptation affect everyone differently, none can escape the constant onslaught. Christians are called to wage war against this enemy, knowing that there are only two options: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”<sup>25</sup> While battlefield

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<sup>21</sup> *Works*, 6:132.

<sup>22</sup> *Works*, 6:298, emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> *Works*, 6:279.

<sup>24</sup> *Works*, 6:132.

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, 6:9.

language may sound extreme to our ears, that is how Owen—following the Bible—conceives of this struggle. With this in mind, the only hope Owen can promise comes not through further self-examination but by embracing the love and provision of God.

## KNOWING YOUR GOD

Affirming the importance of honest introspection does not blind Owen to the fact that this exercise will lead a person to despair if it is not also paralleled with a study of the grace of God. Since sin entered the world, it has become challenging for people to rightly view themselves, God, and his work. We are prone to have “hard thoughts” of God that tend to keep us from turning to him.<sup>26</sup> Owen’s goal is not to have people remain focused on their sin but rather to embrace the redemption accomplished in Christ. The aim is not despair but freedom for what Owen often calls “gospel obedience.”<sup>27</sup> Obedience rightly understood is always a response to God’s love.

A crucial work of the mind in the process of sanctification is the consistent consideration of God and his amazing grace.<sup>28</sup> This does not mean considering God as an abstract metaphysical principle. Rather, the Christian meditates *upon* him and *with* him. This distinction makes all the difference, placing the discussion within the framework of *relationality*, rather than mere rationality. Owen’s challenge is most instructive: “when we would undertake thoughts and meditations of God, his excellencies, his properties, his glory, his majesty, his love, his goodness, let it be done in a way of speaking unto God, in a deep humiliation . . . in a way of prayer and praise—speaking unto God.”<sup>29</sup> The invitation here is not to impersonal theological studies but rather to life-changing encounters with Yahweh.

One of the great promises of God is that he will preserve his people. In fact, the idea of the “perseverance of the saints” is frequently misunderstood, according to Owen, for so often discussion about remaining in the faith focuses on human efforts, as if it is up to us to avoid losing our salvation. In truth, the Christian hope rests not ultimately upon our own diligence, but on God’s faithfulness.<sup>30</sup> It is *God*, not us, who will ultimately persevere, and that is why he is able to promise us eternal life: “where the promise is, there is all

<sup>26</sup> E.g., *Works*, 2:34-35; 6:377, 570-72; 7:521; 9:37-39; 11:389-390, 581, etc.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., *Works*, 1:441; 2:180-181; 3:323, 634; 8:536; 11:379-424, etc.

<sup>28</sup> *Works*, 6:222.

<sup>29</sup> *Works*, 6:225.

<sup>30</sup> This is the argument made at great length in Owen’s massive book, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* (1654), *Works*, 11:1-666.



## 32 INTRODUCTION

this assistance. The faithfulness of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Spirit, all are engaged in our preservation.”<sup>31</sup> Christians can be confident about their growth in sanctification and eternal security because they are confident in the God who promises it.

Ever deepening communion with God occurs as the Spirit draws us to the Father through the Son.<sup>32</sup> The Father will allow none to be snatched from his hand, the Son incarnate is a truly sympathetic high priest who is the lover of our souls, and the Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ to us. Thus, Owen reminds believers to keep these truths in mind as they face temptation, bringing their “lust to the gospel,” lest they lose sight of the sufficient sacrifice and restorative grace found in God’s work. “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?”<sup>33</sup> Notice that the love is preexistent, the blood shed, and the grace extended. The believer is *not* working to secure these realities, but seeking to live in light of them. Christians stand in the shadow of the cross, having experienced the tender mercy of God. They aim not to convince God that they are worthy of his love, but to grow in their knowledge and fellowship with him. It is through this ever-growing communion with the Father, Son, and Spirit that the believer is most able to resist sin and temptation. “Let a soul exercise itself to a communion with Christ in the good things of the gospel—pardon of sin, fruits of holiness, hope of glory, peace with God, joy in the Holy Ghost, dominion over sin—and he shall have a mighty preservative against all temptations.”<sup>34</sup>

### THE WORK OF SANCTIFICATION

How should the Christian understand the work of sanctification? Is the call of believers to holiness God’s work or their own? There are two extremes often found in the church when dealing with these questions. On the one hand, there are those who seem to believe that we are saved by grace and sanctified by works: here grace is problematically reduced to the initial work of salvation. On the other hand, in an effort to avoid “works righteousness,” others tend to collapse justification and sanctification; the danger here is that

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<sup>31</sup> *Works*, 6:142.

<sup>32</sup> Owen unpacks the idea of fellowship with God within a Trinitarian framework in his *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (1657; *Works*, 2:1-274). To place Owen’s approach within the larger context of his thought, see Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen*, especially chapter 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Works*, 6:58.

<sup>34</sup> *Works*, 6:144.

the biblical call to active, faithful obedience by the believer can be nullified, and inappropriate passivity can set in. Rather than these two extremes, Owen follows the more traditional Reformed perspective that upholds another model of sanctification.<sup>35</sup>

True and lasting resistance to sin comes not through willpower and self-improvement but through the Spirit who empowers believers with a knowledge and love of God. Throughout his writings Owen is always quick to highlight the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.<sup>36</sup> Not only does the Spirit of God bring life to those who are dead in sin, thus causing a new birth, but he also continues the work of God in the renewing of that person in the image of Christ. The fundamental difference between Owen's proposal and self-help programs is that he believes that only as the Spirit communicates the grace and love of the Father to us can we experience genuine relief.<sup>37</sup> Mortification of sin is "the gift of Christ" to believers, and this is given by the Spirit of the Son.<sup>38</sup> Efforts apart from the Spirit do not bring sanctification, even if they do produce changed behavior. Although the Spirit often uses beneficial activities such as "fasting and watching," rituals and human effort without the Spirit cannot ultimately bring liberation from sin and temptation.<sup>39</sup>

So is the work of sanctification God's work or our work? Or is it some combination of the two? Maybe such questions are themselves problematic. John Murray, writing several centuries after Owen, fairly communicates the kind of approach Owen employs, although Murray here states it more concisely:

God's working in us [in sanctification] is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required result. God works in us and we also work. But the relation is that *because* God works we work.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Owen warns, for example, against the extremes of rigid legalism on the one hand and false liberty on the other (*Works*, 6:14).

<sup>36</sup> Owen's fullest exploration of the person and work of the Spirit is found in volumes 3 and 4 of his works. Volume 3 contains a massive treatise on the Holy Spirit, and volume 4 contains four shorter explorations of aspects of the work of the Spirit (e.g., the Spirit and prayer, or spiritual gifts).

<sup>37</sup> *Works*, 6:7, 10, 16.

<sup>38</sup> *Works*, 6:19.

<sup>39</sup> *Works*, 6:61, 224-232.

<sup>40</sup> John Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955; reprint, 1992), 148-149, emphasis original.

Owen's own view is similar, seeing sanctification as the work of God in and through the life of the believer. This is not passivity, but active living empowered by the Spirit of life.<sup>41</sup>

Two concepts commonly appear in early Reformed approaches to sanctification: mortification and vivification. Building on the language and imagery of Colossians 3:9-10, the idea of *mortification* was understood as a putting off of the "old man," and *vivification* was conceived as the reality of being made alive by the Spirit.<sup>42</sup> Although the actual language of "vivification" is found less often in Owen than in earlier theologians like John Calvin or the renowned Puritan Thomas Goodwin, the idea is clearly present.<sup>43</sup> These twin ideas of sanctification require not only the shedding of sin but also renewal in grace. A practical example of how this works out may prove helpful.

Consider a man who is struggling with inappropriate sexual thoughts about one of his female coworkers. What does holiness look like in this case? Very often Christians have a truncated view of sanctification, which stops far too short of true righteousness. Although it would be a good thing for this man to get to the point that he no longer looks at this woman as an object of lust, that is not all that is hoped for in sanctification. Rather, in the power of the Spirit the goal is to move to a life-affirming position. Thus, the objective is not the absence of thoughts about this woman but the presence of a godly appreciation for her. Under normal circumstances this man should not simply try to deny her existence by avoiding her, but rather begin treating her with dignity, offering words that build her up instead of dehumanizing her with his thoughts. Ultimately lust will be replaced by genuine and appropriate respect and love. Similarly, the goal of dealing with gossip is not merely the absence of slander (which is the good work of mortification), but eventually the creating of an environment of encouragement, peace, and trust (further fruits of the Spirit's enlivening presence and work). Following

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<sup>41</sup> Owen puts it thus: "The Holy Spirit works in us and upon us, as we are fit to be wrought in and upon; that is, so as to preserve our own liberty and free 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" (*Works*, 6:20).

<sup>42</sup> See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), 196, 328-329.

<sup>43</sup> For a helpful comparison between Calvin and Owen on these topics, see Randall C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality*, Studies in Church History (New York: Peter Lang, 1995). Calvin employs this language more often than Owen, but Owen does use it for bringing and sustaining life to people who are spiritually dead (e.g., *Works*, 3:209, 282, 329, 334; 15:585). Thomas Goodwin, a friend of Owen, would be an example of a Puritan who employs the language much more frequently, in his slightly older treatise, *The Trial of a Christian's Growth in Mortification, or Purging Out Corruption; and Vivification, or Bringing Forth More Fruit . . .* (1643), *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 12 vols. (James Nichol: 1861-1866; reprint, Eureka, Calif.: Tanski, 1996), 3:432-506.

the trajectory of thought of theologians like Calvin and Owen, sanctification involves both putting sin to death and becoming free to love and obey.

## CONCLUSION

We have briefly explored a few themes from Owen's thought that might help prepare readers for what they are about to encounter in his writings on sin, mortification, and temptation. Several things will quickly become apparent, such as recognizing that the language, sentence structure, and sometimes his sensitivities are not modern. As you read, do not be surprised to feel a certain amount of historical distance between yourself and Owen—to deny such differences would be naïve and problematic. The goal is not to create romantic views of the past, hoping to usher Christians back to some sort of “pure” seventeenth-century setting. Owen makes it perfectly clear that the power of sin and Satan were just as real then as now. Believers should read Owen not to return to the past but to gain insight into how they might more faithfully live in the present and prepare for the future.

“Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Culture has changed, but sinful human nature has not. For centuries Owen's works have challenged Christians to think afresh about how they face the reality of sin and temptation. Now Owen serves yet another generation of believers, calling us to wake from sleepy and apathetic attitudes toward holiness, demanding that we engage in honest self-reflection. But he doesn't stop there, for he intends to excite in us a renewed sense of the tender mercy of God who delights to commune with his people. Owen's thoughts are before you. You stand at the threshold of Dr. John Owen's office. Will you enter and receive the diagnosis, and stay to hear your cure?



OVERVIEW OF JOHN OWEN'S

**OF THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN  
IN BELIEVERS**

JUSTIN TAYLOR

JOHN OWEN'S *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* is divided into three parts.<sup>1</sup> Part 1 begins by explaining the necessity of mortification through an exposition of Romans 8:13—"If you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body you shall live"—a foundational text in Owen's theology of mortification. Owen then sets forth three foundational principles for the mortification of sin: first, believers, who are free from the *condemning* power of sin, ought to make it their daily work to mortify the *indwelling* power of sin; second, only the Holy Spirit is sufficient for this work; and third, the life, vigor, and comfort of the believer's spiritual life depends much upon this work of mortifying sin.

In Part 2 Owen seeks to define the mortification of sin and to set forth directions for this duty. He begins by explaining what mortification is *not*. Mortification is not the utter destruction of sin, nor is it the concealing of sin. Mortification has not occurred just because one's disposition has been improved, or because the sin has been diverted, or because the believer experiences an occasional conquest. So what *is* mortification? Owen argues that mortification is a habitual, successful weakening of sin that involves constant warfare and contention against the flesh.

Having defined mortification, Owen then turns to pastoral counsel on *how* to mortify sin. But first he sets forth some necessary conditions for mortification, namely, that one must be a believer, and that one must seek for universal mortification, before a single sin will be mortified.

Owen then offers nine particular directions for the soul with regard to

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<sup>1</sup>A detailed outline of this book is found at the end of this volume.

mortification: (1) consider whether the sin you are contending with has any dangerous symptoms attending it; (2) get a clear and abiding sense upon your mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin; (3) load your conscience with the guilt of it; (4) get a constant longing for deliverance from the power of it; (5) consider whether the sin is rooted in your nature and exacerbated by your temperament; (6) consider what occasions and advantages your sin has taken to exert and put forth itself, and watch against them all; (7) rise mightily against the first actings and conceptions of your sin; (8) meditate in such a way that you are filled at all times with self-abasement and thoughts of your own vileness; (9) listen to what God says to your soul and do not speak peace to yourself before God speaks it, but hearken what he says to your soul.

Finally, in Part 3 Owen explains that the foregoing is really *preparation* for the work of mortification. When we turn to the work of mortification itself, Owen offers two exhortations: first, we must set our faith on the cross-work of Christ for the killing of sin; second, the entire work of mortification must be done in the power of the Spirit.

Of The  
**MORTIFICATION**  
of SINNE in  
**BELIEVERS:**

The { 1. NECESSITY  
      2. NATURE, and  
      3. MEANES of it.

With a Resolution of fundry cases of  
Conscience, thereunto  
belonging.

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By  
**JOHN OWEN D. D.** *a Servant*  
*of Jesus Christ in the worke*  
*of the Gospell.*

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## PREFACE

CHRISTIAN READER,

I shall in a few words acquaint you with the reasons that obtained my consent to the publishing of the ensuing discourse. The consideration of the present state and condition of the generality of professors<sup>1</sup>—the visible evidences of the frame of their hearts and spirits—manifesting a great disability of dealing with the temptations, from the peace they have in the world and the divisions that they have among themselves, they are encompassed—holds the chief place among them. This I am assured is of so great importance, that if hereby I only occasion others to press more effectually on the consciences of men the work of considering their ways, and to give more clear direction for the compassing<sup>2</sup> of the end proposed, I shall well esteem of my lot in this undertaking. This was seconded by an observation of some men's dangerous mistakes, who of late days have taken upon them to give directions for the mortification of sin, who, being unacquainted with the mystery of the gospel and the efficacy of the death of Christ, have anew imposed the yoke of a self-wrought-out mortification on the necks of their disciples, which neither they nor their forefathers were ever able to bear [cf. Acts 15:10]. A mortification they cry up and press, suitable to that of the gospel neither in respect of nature, subject, causes, means, nor effects; which constantly produces the deplorable issues<sup>3</sup> of superstition, self-righteousness, and anxiety of conscience in them who take up the burden which is so bound for them.

What is here proposed in weakness, I humbly hope will answer the spirit and letter of the gospel, with the experiences of them who know what it is to walk with God, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace. So that if not this, yet certainly something of this kind, is very necessary at this season for the promotion and furtherance of this work of gospel mortification in the hearts of believers, and their direction in paths safe, and wherein they may find rest to their souls. Something I have to add as to what in particular relates unto myself. Having preached on this subject unto some comfortable success, through the grace of him that administers seed to the sower, I was pressed by sundry<sup>4</sup> persons, in whose hearts are the ways of God, thus to publish

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<sup>1</sup> those who make a religious confession; professing Christians

<sup>2</sup> attaining, achieving

<sup>3</sup> results, outcomes

<sup>4</sup> various

what I had delivered, with such additions and alterations as I should judge necessary. Under the inducement of their desires, I called to remembrance the debt, wherein I have now, for some years, stood engaged unto sundry noble and worthy Christian friends, as to a treatise of *Communion with God*, some while since promised to them;<sup>5</sup> and thereon apprehended, that if I could not hereby compound for the greater debt, yet I might possibly tender<sup>6</sup> them this discourse of variance<sup>7</sup> with themselves, as interest for their forbearance of that of peace and communion with God. Besides, I considered that I had been providentially engaged in the public debate of sundry controversies in religion, which might seem to claim something in another kind of more general use, as a fruit of choice, not necessity. On these and the like accounts is this short discourse brought forth to public view, and now presented unto you. I hope I may own<sup>8</sup> in sincerity that my heart's desire unto God, and the chief design of my life in the station wherein the good providence of God has placed me, are that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and ways of others, to the glory of God; that so the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things: for the compassing of which end, if this little discourse (of the publishing whereof this is the sum of the account I shall give) may in anything be useful to the least of the saints, it will be looked on as a return of the weak prayers wherewith it is attended by its unworthy author,

—John Owen

<sup>5</sup> See John Owen, *Communion with God*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2, ed. William H. Goold (1850–1855; reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968). *Communion with God* was published in 1657, one year after the publication of *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*.

<sup>6</sup> offer

<sup>7</sup> dissent, discord

<sup>8</sup> admit, acknowledge, confess to be true

PART 1:  
**THE NECESSITY OF  
MORTIFICATION**



## [CHAPTER 1]

### THE FOUNDATION OF MORTIFICATION: ROMANS 8:13

[So] that what I have of direction to contribute to the carrying on of the work of mortification in believers may receive order and perspicuity,<sup>1</sup> I shall lay the foundation of it in those words of the apostle, “If you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body you shall live” (Rom. 8:13), and reduce the whole to an improvement<sup>2</sup> of the great evangelical truth and mystery contained in them.

The apostle having made a recapitulation of his doctrine of justification by faith, and the blessed estate and condition of them who are made by grace partakers thereof, verses 1-3 of this chapter proceed to improve it to the holiness and consolation of believers.

Among his arguments and motives unto holiness, the verse mentioned contains one from the contrary events and effects of holiness and sin: “If you live after the flesh, you shall die.” What it is to “live after the flesh,” and what it is to “die,” that being not my present aim and business, I shall not otherwise explain than as they will fall in with the sense of the latter words of the verse, as before proposed.

In the words peculiarly<sup>3</sup> designed for the foundation of the ensuing discourse, there is:

1. A duty prescribed: “Mortify the deeds of the body.”
2. The persons denoted to whom it is prescribed: “You”—“if you mortify.”
3. A promise annexed to that duty: “You shall live.”
4. The cause or means of the performance of this duty—the Spirit: “If you through the Spirit.”
5. The conditionality of the whole proposition, wherein duty, means, and promise are contained: “If you,” etc.

#### *The Conditionality: A Certain Connection*

The first thing occurring in the words as they lie in the entire proposition is the conditional note, *ei de*: “but if.” Conditionals in such propositions may denote two things—

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<sup>1</sup> clarity

<sup>2</sup> exposition, application

<sup>3</sup> particularly, characteristically

The *uncertainty* of the event or thing promised, in respect of them to whom the duty is prescribed. And this takes place where the condition is absolutely necessary unto the issue,<sup>4</sup> and depends not itself on any determinate<sup>5</sup> cause known to him to whom it is prescribed. So we say, “If we live, we will do such a thing.” This cannot be the intention of the conditional expression in this place. Of the persons to whom these words are spoken, it is said (verse 1 of the same chapter), “There is no condemnation to them.”

The *certainty* of the coherence and connection that is between the things spoken of; as we say to a sick man, “If you will take such a potion, or use such a remedy, you will be well.” The thing we solely intend to express is the certainty of the connection that is between the potion or remedy and health. And this is the use of it here. The certain connection that is between the *mortifying* of the deeds of the body and *living* is intimated in this conditional particule.

Now, the connection and coherence of things being manifold, as of cause and effect, of way and means and the end, this between mortification and life is not of cause and effect properly and strictly—for “eternal life is the gift of God through Jesus Christ” (Rom. 6:23)—but of means and end. God has appointed this means for the attaining of that end, which he has freely promised. Means, though necessary, have a fair subordination to all end of free promise. A gift, and procuring cause in him to whom it is given, are inconsistent. The intention, then, of this proposition as conditional is 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 do mortify, you shall live. And herein lies the main motive unto and enforcement of the duty prescribed.

### *The Persons: Believers*

The next thing we meet with in the words [of Rom. 8:13] is the persons to whom this duty is prescribed, and that is expressed in the word “you,” in the original included in the verb, *thanatoute*, “if you mortify”—that is, you believers; you to whom “there is no condemnation” (v. 1); you that are “not in the flesh, but in the Spirit” (v. 9); who are “quickened by the Spirit of Christ” (vv. 10-11); to you is this duty prescribed. The pressing of this duty immediately on any other is a notable fruit of that superstition and self-righteousness that the world is full of—the great work and design of devout men ignorant of the gospel (Rom. 10:3-4; John 15:5). Now, this description

<sup>4</sup> result, outcome

<sup>5</sup> resolved, settled

of the persons, in conjunction with the prescription of the duty, is the main foundation of the ensuing discourse, as it lies in this thesis or proposition:

The choicest believers,  
 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 Cause and Means: The Holy Spirit*

The principal efficient cause<sup>6</sup> of the performance of this duty is the Spirit: *ei de pneumati*—“if by the Spirit.” The Spirit here is the Spirit mentioned [in Rom. 8] verse 11, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God, that “dwells in us” (v. 9), that “quickens us” (v. 11); “the Holy Ghost” (v. 14); the “Spirit of adoption” (v. 15); the Spirit “that makes intercession for us” (v. 26). All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit. Men, as the apostle intimates (Rom. 9:30-32), may attempt this work on other principles, by means and advantages administered on other accounts, as they always have done, and do; but, says he, “This is the work of the Spirit; by him alone is it to be wrought,<sup>7</sup> 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. And this is a second principle of my ensuing discourse.

*The Duty: Mortify the Deeds of the Body*

The duty itself, “Mortify the deeds of the body,” is next to be remarked upon. Three things are here to be inquired into: (1) What is meant by the body? (2) What by the deeds of the body? (3) What by mortifying of them?

*The body.* “The body” at the close of the verse is the same with “the flesh” in the beginning; “If you live after the flesh you shall die; but if you . . . mortify the deeds of the body”—that is, of the flesh. It is that which the apostle has all along discoursed of under the name of “the flesh,” which is evident from the prosecution<sup>8</sup> of the antithesis between the Spirit and the flesh, before and after. “The body,” then, here is taken for that corruption and depravity of our natures whereof the body, in a great part, is the seat and instrument,

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) classified four distinct types of causes, each of which answers a different question: (1) *material cause* (What is it made from?); (2) *formal cause* (What is its form or essence?); (3) *efficient cause* (Who made it?); (4) *final cause* (For what purpose?).

<sup>7</sup> shaped, molded, fashioned

<sup>8</sup> carrying out, execution



the very members of the body being made servants unto unrighteousness thereby (Rom. 6:19). It is *indwelling sin, the corrupted flesh or lust*, that is intended. Many reasons might be given of this metonymical expression<sup>9</sup> that I shall not now insist on. The “body” here is the same with *palaios anthrōpos* and *sōma tēs hamartias*, the “old man” and the “body of sin” (Rom. 6:6); or it may synecdochically<sup>10</sup> express the whole person considered as corrupted, and the seat of lusts and distempered affections.

*The deeds of the body.* The word is *praxeis*, which, indeed, denotes the outward actions chiefly, “the works of the flesh,” as they are called, *ta erga tēs sarkos* (Gal. 5:19); which are there said to be “manifest” and are enumerated. Now, though the outward deeds are here only expressed, yet the inward and next causes are chiefly intended; the “axe is to be laid to the root of the tree” [Matt. 3:10]—the deeds of the flesh are to be mortified in their causes, from whence they spring. The apostle calls them *deeds*, as that which every lust tends unto; though they do but conceive and prove abortive, they aim to bring forth a perfect sin.

Having, both in the seventh and the beginning of this chapter, treated indwelling lust and sin as the fountain and principle of all sinful actions, he here mentions its destruction under the name of the effects which it does produce. *Praxeis tou sōmatos* [works of the body] are, as much as *phronēma tēs sarkos* [mind of the flesh] (Rom. 8:6), the “wisdom of the flesh,” by a metonymy of the same nature with the former; or as the *pathēmata* and *epithumiai*, the “passions and lusts of the flesh” (Gal. 5:24), whence the deeds and fruits of it do arise; and in this sense is “the body” used: “The body is dead because of sin” (Rom. 8:10).

*To mortify. Ei thanatoute*—“if you put to death”—[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 or put forth any proper actings of his own; so it is in this case. Indwelling sin is compared to a person, a living person, called “the old man,” with his faculties and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, strength; this, says the apostle, must be killed, put to death, mortified—that is, have its power, life, vigor, and strength to produce its effects taken away by the Spirit. It is, indeed, meritoriously, and by way of

<sup>9</sup> A metonymical expression is a figure of speech in which one term is substituted for another term closely associated with it. For example, we might say “wheels” to refer to an automobile, “crown” to refer to a monarchy, or “Washington” to refer to the U.S. government.

<sup>10</sup> Similar to a metonymical expression, a synecdoche is a figure of speech in which—among other uses—the part stands for the whole or the whole stands for the part. In this case, Owen is suggesting that “body” stands for the whole person.

example, utterly mortified and slain by the cross of Christ; and the “old man” is thence said to be “crucified with Christ” (Rom. 6:6), and ourselves to be “dead” with him (Rom. 6:8), and really initially in regeneration (Rom. 6:3-5), when a principle contrary to it and destructive of it (Gal. 5:17) is planted in our hearts; but the whole work is by degrees to be carried on toward perfection all our days. Of this more in the process of our discourse. The intention of the apostle in this prescription of the duty mentioned is that:

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.

*The Promise: You Shall Live*

The promise unto this duty is life: “you shall live.” The life promised is opposed to the death threatened in the clause foregoing, “If you live after the flesh, you shall die”; which the same apostle expresses, “You shall of the flesh reap corruption” (Gal. 6:8), or destruction from God. Now, perhaps the word may not only intend eternal life, but also the spiritual life in Christ, which here we have; not as to the essence and being of it, which is already enjoyed by believers, but as to the joy, comfort, and vigor of it: as the apostle says in another case, “now we live, if you stand fast” (1 Thess. 3:8)—“Now my life will do me good; I shall have joy and comfort with my life”—“You shall live, lead a good, vigorous, comfortable, spiritual life while you are here, and obtain eternal life hereafter.”

Supposing what was said before of the connection between mortification and eternal life, as of means and end, I shall add only, as a second motive to the duty prescribed, that:

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

[CHAPTER 2]

**BELIEVERS OUGHT TO MAKE THE MORTIFICATION OF  
INDWELLING SIN THEIR DAILY WORK**

Having laid this foundation, a brief confirmation of the aforementioned principal deductions will lead me to what I chiefly intend, that:

The choicest believers, 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. So the apostle, “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth” (Col. 3:5). To whom does he speak? Such as were “risen with Christ” (v. 1); such as were “dead” with him (v. 3); such as whose life Christ was and who should “appear with him in glory” (v. 4).

Do you mortify;  
do you make it your daily work;  
be always at it while you live;  
cease not a day from this work;  
be killing sin or it will be killing you.

Your being dead with Christ virtually, your being quickened with him, will not excuse you from this work. And our Savior tells us how his Father deals with every branch in him that bears fruit, every true and living branch. “He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit” (John 15:2). He prunes it, and that not for a day or two, but while it is a branch in this world. And the apostle tells you what was his practice: “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection” (1 Cor. 9:27). “I do it,” says he, “daily; it is the work of my life: I omit it not; this is my business.” 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<sup>11</sup> an exemption from this work and duty while we are in this world? Some brief account of the reasons hereof may be given.

*Indwelling Sin Always Abides, Therefore It Must Always Be Mortified*

Indwelling sin always abides while we are in this world; therefore it is always to be mortified. The vain, foolish, and ignorant disputes of men about perfectly keeping the commands of God, of perfection in this life, of being wholly and perfectly dead to sin, I meddle not now with. It is more than probable that the men of those abominations never knew what belonged to the keeping of any one of God’s commands and are so much below perfection of degrees that they never attained to a perfection of parts in obedience or universal obedience in sincerity. And, therefore, many in our days who have talked

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<sup>11</sup> found, base (find a basis for)

of perfection have been wiser and have affirmed it to consist in knowing no difference between good and evil. Not that they are perfect in the things we call good, but that all is alike to them, and the height of wickedness is their perfection. Others who have found out a new way to it, by denying original, indwelling sin, and tempering the spirituality of the law of God unto men's carnal hearts, as they have sufficiently discovered themselves to be ignorant of the life of Christ and the power of it in believers, so they have invented a new righteousness that the gospel knows not of, being vainly puffed up by their fleshly minds. For us, who dare not be wise above what is written, nor boast by other men's lines of what God has not done for us, we say that indwelling sin lives in us, in some measure and degree, while we are in this world. We dare not speak as "though we had already attained, or were already perfect" (Phil. 3:12). Our "inward man is to be renewed day by day" while here we live (2 Cor. 4:16), and according to the renovations of the new are the breaches<sup>12</sup> and decays of the old. While we are here we "know but in part" (1 Cor. 13:12), having a remaining darkness to be gradually removed by our "growth in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18); and "the flesh lusts against the Spirit . . . so that we cannot do the things that we would" (Gal. 5:17), and are therefore defective in our obedience as well as in our light (1 John 1:8). We have a "body of death" (Rom. 7:24), from whence we are not delivered but by the death of our bodies (Phil. 3:20). Now, it being our duty to mortify, to be killing of sin while it is in us, we must be at work. He that is appointed to kill an enemy, if he leave<sup>13</sup> striking before the other ceases living, does but half his work (Gal. 6:9; Heb. 12:1; 2 Cor. 7:1).

### *Indwelling Sin Not Only Abides, But Is Still Acting*

Sin does not only still abide in us, but is still acting, still laboring to bring forth the deeds of the flesh. When sin lets us alone we may let 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. Sin does not only abide in us, but "the law of the members is still rebelling against the law of the mind" (Rom. 7:23); and "the spirit that dwells in us lusts to envy" (James 4:5). It is always in continual work; "the flesh lusts against the Spirit" (Gal. 5:17); lust is still tempting and conceiving sin (James 1:14); in every moral action it is always either inclining to evil, or

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<sup>12</sup> gaps, broken areas

<sup>13</sup> cease

hindering from that which is good, or disframing<sup>14</sup> the spirit from communion with God. It inclines to evil. “The evil which I would not, that I do,” says the apostle (Rom. 7:19). Whence is that? Why, “Because in me (that is, in my flesh) dwells no good thing.” And it hinders from good: “The good that I would do, that I do not” (v. 19)—“Upon the same account, either I do it not, or not as I should; all my holy things being defiled by this sin.” “The flesh lusts against the Spirit . . . so that you cannot do the things that you would” (Gal. 5:17). And it unframes our spirit, and thence is called “the sin that so easily besets us” (Heb. 12:1); on which account are those grievous complaints that the apostle makes of it (Romans 7). So that sin is always acting, always conceiving, always seducing and tempting. Who can say that he had ever anything to do with God or for God, that indwelling sin had not a hand in the corrupting of what he did? And this trade<sup>15</sup> will it drive more or less all our days. If, then, sin will be always acting, if we be not always mortifying, we are lost creatures. He that stands still and suffers<sup>16</sup> his enemies to double blows upon him without resistance will undoubtedly be conquered in the issue. 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 event?<sup>17</sup> There is not a day but sin foils or is foiled, prevails or is prevailed on; and it will be so while we live in this world.

I shall discharge him from this duty who can bring sin to a composition,<sup>18</sup> to a cessation of arms in this warfare; if it will spare him any one day, in any one duty (provided he be a person that is acquainted with the spirituality of obedience and the subtlety of sin), let him say to his soul, as to this duty, “Soul, take your rest.” The saints, whose souls breathe after deliverance from its [i.e., sin’s] perplexing rebellion, know there is no safety against it but in a constant warfare.

*Indwelling Sin Is Not Only Active, But Will Produce  
Soul-Destroying Sins If Not Mortified*

Sin will not only be striving, acting, rebelling, troubling, disquieting, but if let alone, if not continually mortified, it will bring forth great, cursed, scandalous, soul-destroying sins. The apostle tells us what the works and fruits of it

<sup>14</sup> dismantling, undoing

<sup>15</sup> course, path, way or manner of life

<sup>16</sup> allows, permits, tolerates

<sup>17</sup> result, outcome

<sup>18</sup> truce, cessation of hostilities

are. “The works of the flesh are manifest, which are, adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,<sup>19</sup> idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations,<sup>20</sup> wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings, and such like” (Gal. 5:19-21). You know what it did in David and sundry<sup>21</sup> others. Sin aims always at the utmost; every time it rises up to tempt or entice, might it 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, might it grow to its head.<sup>22</sup> Men may come to that, that sin may not be heard speaking a scandalous word in their hearts—that is, provoking to any great sin with scandal in its mouth; but yet every rise of lust, might it have its course, would come to the height of villainy: it is like the grave that is never satisfied. And herein lies no small share of the deceitfulness of sin, by which it prevails to the hardening of men, and so to their ruin (Heb. 3:13)—it is modest, as it were, in its first motions and proposals, but having once got footing in the heart by them, it constantly makes good its ground, and presses on to some farther degrees in the same kind. This new acting and pressing forward makes the soul take little notice of what an entrance to a falling off from God is already made; it thinks all is indifferently well if there be no further progress; and so far as the soul is made insensible<sup>23</sup> of any sin—that is, as to such a sense as the gospel requires—so far it is hardened: but sin is still pressing forward, and that because it has no bounds but utter relinquishment of God and opposition to him; that it proceeds toward its height by degrees, making good the ground it has got by hardness, is not from its nature, but its deceitfulness. Now nothing can prevent this but mortification; that withers the root and strikes at the head of sin every hour, so that whatever it aims at, it is crossed in. There is not the best saint in the world but, if he should give over this duty, would fall into as many cursed sins as ever any did of his kind.

*Indwelling Sin Is to Be Opposed by the Spirit and the New Nature*

This is one main reason why the Spirit and the new nature are given unto us—that we may have a principle within us whereby to oppose sin and lust. “The flesh lusts against the Spirit.” Well! and what then? Why, “the Spirit also lusts

<sup>19</sup> wantonness, inclination to lust

<sup>20</sup> jealousies, especially of power and position

<sup>21</sup> various

<sup>22</sup> ultimate outcome

<sup>23</sup> apathetic, callous, uncomprehending

against the flesh” (Gal. 5:17). There is a propensity in the Spirit, or spiritual new nature, to be acting against the flesh, as well as in the flesh to be acting against the Spirit (2 Pet. 1:4-5). It is our participation of the divine nature that gives us an escape from the pollutions that are in the world through lust; and there is a law of the mind (Rom. 7:23), as well as a law of the members. Now this is, first, the most unjust and unreasonable thing in the world, when two combatants are engaged, to bind one and keep him up from doing his utmost and to leave the other at liberty to wound him at his pleasure; and, secondly, the most foolish thing in the world to bind him who fights for our eternal condition and to let him alone who seeks and violently attempts our everlasting ruin. The contest is for our lives and souls. Not to be daily employing the Spirit and new nature for the mortifying of sin is to neglect that excellent succor<sup>24</sup> which God has given us against our greatest enemy. If we neglect to make use of what we have received, God may justly hold his hand from giving us more. His graces, as well as his gifts, are bestowed on us to use, exercise, and trade with. Not to be daily mortifying sin is to sin against the goodness, kindness, wisdom, grace, and love of God, who has furnished us with a principle of doing it.

### *The Results of Neglecting the Mortification of Indwelling Sin*

Negligence in this duty casts the soul into a perfect contrary condition to that which the apostle affirms was his: “Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16). In these the inward man perishes, and the outward man is renewed day by day. Sin is as the house of David, and grace as the house of Saul. *Exercise* and *success* are the two main cherishers of grace in the heart; when it is suffered to lie still, it withers and decays: the things of it are ready to die (Rev. 3:2); and sin gets ground toward the hardening of the heart (Heb. 3:13). This is that which I intend: by the omission of this duty grace withers, lust flourishes, and the frame of the heart grows worse and worse; and the Lord knows what desperate and fearful issues it has had with many. Where sin, through the neglect of mortification, gets a considerable victory, it breaks the bones of the soul (Ps. 31:10; 51:8), and makes a man weak, sick, and ready to die (Ps. 38:3-5), so that he cannot look up (Ps. 40:12; Isa. 33:24); and when poor creatures will take blow after blow, wound after wound, foil after foil, and never rouse up themselves to a vigorous opposition, can they expect anything but to be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and that their souls should bleed to death (2 John 8)? Indeed, it is

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<sup>24</sup> assistance, relief

a sad thing to consider the fearful issues of this neglect, which lie under our eyes every day. See we not those, whom we knew humble, melting, broken-hearted Christians, tender and fearful to offend, zealous for God and all his ways, his Sabbaths and ordinances, grown, through a neglect of watching unto this duty, earthly, carnal, cold, wrathful, complying with the men of the world and things of the world, to the scandal of religion and the fearful temptation of them that know them? The truth is, what between placing mortification in a rigid, stubborn frame of spirit—which is for the most part earthly, legal, censorious,<sup>25</sup> partial, consistent with wrath, envy, malice, pride—on the one hand, and pretenses of liberty, grace, and I know not what, on the other, true evangelical mortification is almost lost among us: of which afterward.

*It Is Our Duty to Perfect Holiness in the Fear of God and Grow in Grace Every Day*

It is our duty to be “perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1); to be “growing in grace” every day (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18); to be “renewing our inward man day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16). Now, this cannot be done without the daily mortifying of sin. Sin sets its strength 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 toward his journey’s end. He who finds not opposition from it, and who sets not himself in every particular to its mortification, is at peace with it, not dying to it.

This, then, is the first general principle of our ensuing discourse: Notwithstanding the meritorious mortification, if I may so speak, of all and every sin in the cross of Christ; notwithstanding the real foundation of universal mortification laid in our first conversion, by conviction of sin, humiliation for sin, and the implantation of a new principle opposite to it and destructive of it—yet *sin does so remain, so act and work in the best of believers, while they live in this world, that the constant daily mortification of it is all their days incumbent on them.* Before I proceed to the consideration of the next principle, I cannot but by the way complain of many professors<sup>26</sup> of these days, who, instead of bringing forth such great and evident fruits of mortification as are expected, scarce bear any leaves of it. There is, indeed, a broad light fallen upon the men of this generation, and together therewith many spiritual gifts communicated, which, with some other considerations, have

<sup>25</sup> critical

<sup>26</sup> those who make a religious confession; professing Christians



wonderfully enlarged the bounds of professors and profession; both they and it are exceedingly multiplied and increased. Hence there is a noise of religion and religious duties in every corner, preaching in abundance—and that not in an empty, light, trivial, and vain manner, as formerly, but to a good proportion of a spiritual gift—so that if you will measure the number of believers by light, gifts, and profession, the church may have cause to say, “Who has born me all these?” But now if you will take the measure of them by this great discriminating grace of Christians, perhaps you will find their number not so multiplied. Where almost is that professor<sup>27</sup> who owes his conversion to these days of light, and so talks and professes at such a rate of spirituality as few in former days were, in any measure, acquainted with (I will not judge them, but perhaps boasting what the Lord has done in them), that does not give evidence of a miserably unmortified heart? If vain spending of time, idleness, unprofitableness in men’s places, envy, strife, variance, emulations, wrath, pride, worldliness, selfishness (1 Corinthians 1) be badges of Christians, we have them on us and among us in abundance. And if it be so with them who have much light, and which, we hope, is saving, what shall we say of some who would be accounted religious and yet despise gospel light, and for the duty we have in hand, know no more of it but what consists in men’s denying themselves sometimes in outward enjoyments, which is one of the outmost branches of it, which yet they will seldom practice? The good Lord send out a spirit of mortification to cure our distempers, or we are in a sad condition!

There are two evils which certainly attend every unmortified professor—the first, in himself; the other, in respect of others.

*In himself.* Let him pretend what he will, he has *slight thoughts of sin*; at least, of sins of daily infirmity. The root of an unmortified course is the digestion of sin without bitterness in the heart. When a man has 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. Neither is there a greater evidence of a false and rotten heart in the world than to drive such a trade. To use the blood of Christ, which is given to *cleanse* us (1 John 1:7; Titus 2:14); the exaltation of Christ, which is to give us *repentance* (Acts 5:31); the doctrine of grace, which teaches us to *deny all ungodliness* (Titus 2:11-12), to countenance<sup>28</sup> sin is a rebellion that in the issue<sup>29</sup> will break the bones. At this door have gone out

<sup>27</sup> Where, I wonder, is that professor

<sup>28</sup> approve, condone

<sup>29</sup> outcome

from us most of the professors that have apostatized in the days wherein we live. For a while most of them were under convictions; these kept them unto duties, and brought them to profession; so they “escaped the pollutions that are in the world, through the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 2:20); but having got an acquaintance with the doctrine of the gospel, and being weary of duty, for which they had no principle, they began to countenance themselves in manifold neglects from the doctrine of grace. Now, when once this evil had laid hold of them, they speedily tumbled into perdition.<sup>30</sup>

*To others.* It has an evil influence on them on a twofold account: It *hardens* them, by begetting in them a persuasion that they are in as good condition as the best professors. Whatever they see in them is so stained for want<sup>31</sup> of this mortification that it is of no value with them. They have a zeal for religion; but it is accompanied with want of forbearance and universal righteousness. They deny prodigality,<sup>32</sup> but with worldliness; they separate from the world, but live wholly to themselves, taking no care to exercise lovingkindness in the earth; or they talk spiritually, and live vainly; mention communion with God, and are every way conformed to the world; boasting of forgiveness of sin, and never forgiving others. And with such considerations do poor creatures harden their hearts in their unregeneracy.

They *deceive* them, in making them believe that if they can come up to their condition it shall be well with them; and so it grows an easy thing to have the great temptation of repute in religion to wrestle with, when they may go far beyond them as to what appears in them, and yet come short of eternal life. But of these things and all the evils of unmortified walking, afterward.

### [CHAPTER 3]

#### THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE GREAT SOVEREIGN CAUSE OF THE MORTIFICATION OF INDWELLING SIN

The next principle relates to the great sovereign cause of the mortification treated of; which, in the words laid for the foundation of this discourse [Rom. 8:13], is said to be the Spirit—that is, the Holy Ghost, as was evinced.<sup>33</sup>

He only is sufficient for this work; all ways and means without him are

<sup>30</sup> ruin, damnation, destruction

<sup>31</sup> lack

<sup>32</sup> reckless extravagance, especially with money

<sup>33</sup> proven, evidenced, made manifest

as a thing of naught; and he is the great efficient<sup>34</sup> of it—he works in us as he pleases.

*Other Remedies Are Sought in Vain*

In vain do men seek other remedies; they shall not be healed by them. What several ways have been prescribed for this, to have sin mortified, is known. The greatest part of popish<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> Their vows, orders, fastings, penances, are all built on this ground; they are all for the mortifying of sin. Their preachings, sermons, and books of devotion, they look all this way. Hence, those who interpret the locusts that came out of the bottomless pit (Rev. 9:3), who are said to torment men so “that they should seek death and not find it” (Rev. 9:6), to be the friars of the Romish<sup>37</sup> church, think that they did it by their stinging sermons, whereby they convinced them of sin, but being not able to discover the remedy for the healing and mortifying of it, they kept them in such perpetual anguish and terror, and such trouble in their consciences, that they desired to die. This, I say, is the substance and glory of their religion; but what with their laboring to mortify dead creatures, ignorant of the nature and end of the work—what with the poison they mixed with it, in their persuasion of its merit, yea, supererogation<sup>38</sup> (as they style their unnecessary merit, with a proud, barbarous<sup>39</sup> title)—their glory is their shame [cf. Phil. 3:19]: but of them and their mortification more afterward (chapter 7).

That the ways and means to be used for the mortification of sin invented by them are still insisted on and prescribed, for the same end, by some who should have more light and knowledge of the gospel, is known. Such directions to this purpose have of late been given by some, and are greedily caught at<sup>40</sup> by others professing themselves Protestants, as might have become popish devotionists three or four hundred years ago. Such outside endeavors, such

<sup>34</sup> i.e., efficient cause (see note 6, above)

<sup>35</sup> negative label for Roman Catholicism, relating to belief in papal supremacy

<sup>36</sup> an allusion to Zechariah 13:4, where rough garments, or hairy cloaks, were deceptively used by false prophets in order to fool the people into thinking they were true prophets

<sup>37</sup> of or relating to the Roman Catholic Church

<sup>38</sup> According to the Roman Catholic doctrine of *opera supererogationis*, supererogatory acts—that is, actions that go beyond the call of duty and the requirements for salvation—produce a superabundance of merit that is deposited in a spiritual treasury of the Church and can be used by ordinary sinners for the remission of their sins.

<sup>39</sup> uncivilized

<sup>40</sup> grasped, sought

bodily exercises, such self-performances, such merely legal duties, without the least mention of Christ or his Spirit, are varnished over with swelling words of vanity, for the only means and expedients for the mortification of sin, as discover<sup>41</sup> a deep-rooted unacquaintedness with the power of God and mystery of the gospel. The consideration hereof was one motive to the publishing of this plain discourse.

Now, the reasons why the papists<sup>42</sup> can never, with all their endeavors, truly mortify any one sin, among others, are:

*Because many of the ways and means they use and insist upon for this end were never appointed of God for that purpose.* (Now, there is nothing in religion that has any efficacy for compassing<sup>43</sup> an end, but it has it from God's appointment of it to that purpose.) Such as these are their rough garments, their vows, penances, disciplines, their course of monastical life, and the like; concerning all which God will say, "Who has required these things at your hand?" [Isa. 1:12] and, "In vain do you worship me, teaching for doctrines the traditions of men" [Matt. 15:9]. Of the same nature are sundry self-vexations<sup>44</sup> insisted on by others.

*Because those things that are appointed of God as means are not used by them in their due place and order—such as are praying, fasting, watching, meditation, and the like.* These have their use in the business at hand; but whereas they are all to be looked on as streams, they look on them as the fountain. Whereas they effect and accomplish the end as means only, subordinate to the Spirit and faith, they look on them to do it by virtue of the work wrought. If they fast so much, and pray so much, and keep their hours and times, the work is done. As the apostle says of some in another case, "They are always learning, never coming to the knowledge of the truth" [2 Tim. 3:7]; so they are always mortifying, but never come to any sound mortification. In a word, they have sundry means to mortify the natural man, as to the natural life here we lead; none to mortify lust or corruption.

This is the general mistake of men ignorant of the gospel about this thing; and it lies at the bottom of very much of that superstition and will-worship that has been brought into the world. What horrible self-macerations<sup>45</sup> were practiced by some of the ancient authors of monastical devotion! What violence did they offer to nature! What extremity of sufferings did they put

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<sup>41</sup> uncover, reveal, demonstrate

<sup>42</sup> negative label for Roman Catholics, relating to belief in papal supremacy; from the Latin *papa* ("pope")

<sup>43</sup> attaining, achieving

<sup>44</sup> annoyances

<sup>45</sup> self-inflicted starvation, emaciation

themselves upon! Search their ways and principles to the bottom, and you will find that it had no other root but this mistake, namely, that attempting rigid mortification, they fell upon the natural man instead of the corrupt old man—upon the body wherein we live instead of the body of death.

Neither will the natural popery that is in others do it. Men are galled with the guilt of a sin that has prevailed over them; they instantly<sup>46</sup> promise to themselves and God that they will do so no more; they watch over themselves and pray for a season until this heat waxes<sup>47</sup> cold and the sense of sin is worn off—and so mortification goes also, and sin returns to its former dominion. Duties are excellent food for an unhealthy soul; they are no physic<sup>48</sup> for a sick soul. He that turns his meat into his medicine must expect no great operation. Spiritually sick men cannot sweat out their distemper with working. But this is the way of men who deceive their own souls; as we shall see afterward.

That none of these ways are sufficient is evident from the nature of the work itself that is to be done; it is a work that requires so many concurrent actings in it as no self-endeavor can reach unto, and is of that kind that an almighty energy is necessary for its accomplishment; as shall be afterward manifested.

### *Why Mortification Is the Work of the Spirit*

It is, then, the work of the Spirit. For—

*He is promised of God to be given unto us to do this work.* The taking away of the stony heart—that is, the stubborn, proud, rebellious, unbelieving heart—is in general the work of mortification that we treat of. Now this is still promised to be done by the Spirit, “I will give my Spirit, and take away the stony heart” (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26), and by the Spirit of God is this work wrought when all means fail (Isa. 57:17-18).

*We have all our mortification from the gift of Christ, and all the gifts of Christ are communicated to us and given us by the Spirit of Christ:* “Without Christ we can do nothing” (John 15:5). All communications of supplies and relief, in the beginnings, increasings, actings of any grace whatsoever, from him, are by the Spirit, by whom he alone works in and upon believers. From him we have our mortification: “He is exalted and made a Prince and a Savior, to give repentance unto us” (Acts 5:31); and of our repentance our mortification is no small portion. How does he do it? Having “received . . .

<sup>46</sup> insistently, constantly, faithfully

<sup>47</sup> grows, becomes

<sup>48</sup> remedy, relief, medicine

the promise of the Holy Ghost,” he sends him abroad for that end (Acts 2:33). You know the manifold promises he made of sending the Spirit, as Tertullian speaks, “*Vicariam navare operam*,”<sup>49</sup> to do the works that he had to accomplish in us.

The resolution of one or two questions will now lead me nearer to what I principally intend.

### *How the Spirit Mortifies Sin*

The first [question] is: How does the Spirit mortify sin? I answer, in general, three ways.

*By causing our hearts to abound in grace and the fruits that are contrary to the flesh, and the fruits thereof and principles of them.* So the apostle opposes the fruits of the flesh and of the Spirit: “The fruits of the flesh,” says he, “are so and so” (Gal. 5:19-21); “but,” says he, “the fruits of the Spirit are quite contrary, quite of another sort” (vv. 22-23). Yea; but what if these are in us and do abound, may not the other abound also? No, says he, “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” (v. 24). But how? Why, “by living in the Spirit and walking after the Spirit” (v. 25)—that is, by the abounding of these graces of the Spirit in us and walking according to them. For, says the apostle, “these are contrary one to another” (v. 17); so that they cannot both be in the same subject in any intense or high degree. This “renewing of us by the Holy Ghost,” as it is called (Titus 3:5), is one great way of mortification; he causes us to grow, thrive, flourish, and abound in those graces which are contrary, opposite, and destructive to all the fruits of the flesh, and to the quiet or thriving of indwelling sin itself.

*By a real physical efficiency on the root and habit of sin, for the weakening, destroying, and taking it away.* Hence he is called a “spirit of judgment and . . . burning” (Isa. 4:4), really consuming and destroying our lusts. He takes away the stony heart by an almighty efficiency; for as he begins the work as to its kind, so he carries it on as to its degrees. He is the fire which burns up the very root of lust.

*He brings 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: of the manner whereof more afterward.*

<sup>49</sup> May be translated: “to perform the work on his behalf.” This quote is also found in Owen’s *Communion with God* (Works, 2:148). Owen may be quoting Tertullian’s “De Praescriptionibus Haereticis (On Prescription Against Heretics),” found in *Anti-Nicene Fathers: Volume 3* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 249. For similar uses of the “vicariam” in connection with Tertullian and the Holy Spirit see Richard Baxter’s *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London, 1838), 2:266; and Thomas Manton’s *Eighteen Sermons on the Second Chapter of the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (Achill, 1842 [1679]), 49.

*If the Spirit Alone Mortifies Sin, Why Are We Exhorted to Mortify It?*

Secondly, if this be 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 left wholly to him.

*It is no otherwise the work of the Spirit but as all graces and good works which are in us are his.* He “works in us to will and to do of his own good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13); he works “all our works in us” (Isa. 26:12)—“the work of faith with power” (2 Thess. 1:11; Col. 2:12); he causes us to pray, and is a “spirit of supplication” (Rom. 8:26; Zech. 12:10); and yet we are exhorted, and are to be exhorted, to all these.

*He does not so work our mortification in us as not to keep it still an act of our obedience.* The Holy Ghost works in us and upon us, as we are fit to be wrought in and upon; that is, so as to preserve our own liberty and free 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<sup>50</sup> us; so that his assistance is an encouragement as to the facilitating of the work, and no occasion of neglect as to the work itself. And, indeed, I might here bewail the endless, foolish labor of poor souls, who, being convinced of sin and not able to stand against the power of their convictions, do set themselves, by innumerable perplexing ways and duties, to keep down sin, but, being strangers to the Spirit of God, all in vain. They combat without victory, have war without peace, and are in slavery all their days. They spend their strength for that which is not bread, and their labor for that which profits not [Isa. 55:2].

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 has 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 go to the battle again; and the lust which they thought to be slain appears to have had no wound.

And if the case be so sad with them who do labor and strive, and yet enter not into the kingdom, what is their condition who despise all this; who

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<sup>50</sup> outside of

are perpetually under the power and dominion of sin and love to have it so; and are troubled at nothing, but that they cannot make sufficient provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof [cf. Rom. 13:14]?

[CHAPTER 4]

**THE LIFE, VIGOR, AND COMFORT OF OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE DEPEND MUCH ON OUR MORTIFICATION OF SIN**

The last principle I shall insist on (omitting, first, the necessity of mortification unto life, and, secondly, the certainty of life upon mortification) is that the life, vigor, and comfort of our spiritual life depend much on our mortification of sin. Strength and comfort, and power and peace, in our walking with God, are the things of our desires. Were any of us asked seriously what it is that troubles us, we must refer it to one of these heads<sup>51</sup>—either we want strength or power, vigor and life, in our obedience, in our walking with God; or we want peace, comfort, and consolation therein. Whatever it is that may befall a believer that does not belong to one of these two heads does not deserve to be mentioned in the days of our complaints.

Now, all these do much depend on a constant course of mortification, about which observe:

*Life, Vigor, and Comfort Are Not Necessarily Connected to Mortification*

I do not say they proceed from it, as though they were necessarily tied to it. A man may be carried on in a constant course of mortification all his days; and yet perhaps never enjoy a good day of peace and consolation. So it was with Heman (Psalm 88); his life was a life of perpetual mortification and walking with God, yet terrors and wounds were his portion all his days. But God singled out Heman, a choice friend, to make him an example to them that afterward should be in distress. Can you complain if it be no otherwise with you than it was with Heman, that eminent servant of God? And this shall be his praise to the end of the world. God makes it his prerogative to speak peace and consolation (Isa. 57:18-19). “I will do that work,” says God, “I will comfort him” (v. 18). But how? By an immediate work of the new cre-

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<sup>51</sup> headings, categories



ation: “I create it,” says God (v. 19). The *use of means* for the obtaining of peace is ours; the *bestowing* of it is God’s prerogative.

*Adoption and Justification, Not Mortification, Are the Immediate Causes of Life, Vigor, and Comfort*

In the ways instituted by God to give us life, vigor, courage, and consolation, mortification is not one of the immediate causes of it. They are the privileges of our adoption made known to our souls that give us immediately these things. “The Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are the children of God” [Rom. 8:16], giving us a new name and a white stone, adoption and justification, that is, as to the sense and knowledge of them—are the immediate causes (in the hand of the Spirit) of these things. But this I say:

*In the Ordinary Relationship with God, the Vigor and Comfort of Our Spiritual Lives Depend Much on Our Mortification of Sin*

In our ordinary walking with God, and in an ordinary course of his dealing with us, the vigor and comfort of our spiritual lives depend much on our mortification, not only as a *causa sine qua non*,<sup>52</sup> but as a thing that has an effectual influence thereinto. For:

*This alone keeps sin from depriving us of the one and the other.* Every unmortified sin will certainly do two things: It will *weaken the soul* and deprive it of its vigor. It will *darken the soul* and deprive it of its comfort and peace.

*It weakens the soul and deprives it of its strength.* When David had for a while harbored an unmortified lust in his heart, it broke all his bones and left him no spiritual strength; hence he complained that he was sick, weak, wounded, faint. “There is,” says he, “no soundness in me” (Ps. 38:3); “I am feeble and sore broken” (v. 8); “yea, I cannot so much as look up” (Ps. 40:12). An unmortified lust will drink up the spirit and all the vigor of the soul, and weaken it for all duties. For:

*It untunes and unframes the heart itself by entangling its affections.* It diverts the heart from the spiritual frame that is required for vigorous communion with God; it lays hold on the affections, rendering its object beloved and desirable, so expelling the love of the Father (1 John 2:15; 3:17); so that the soul cannot say uprightly and truly to God, “You are my portion,” having something else that it loves. Fear, desire, hope, which are the choice

<sup>52</sup> a necessary cause or an essential condition—lit., “a cause without which not”

affections of the soul, that should be full of God, will be one way or other entangled with it.

*It fills the thoughts with contrivances about it.* Thoughts are the great purveyors of the soul to bring in provision to satisfy its affections; and if sin remain unmortified in the heart, they must ever and anon<sup>53</sup> be making provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof. They must glaze, adorn, and dress the objects of the flesh, and bring them home to give satisfaction; and this they are able to do, in the service of a defiled imagination, beyond all expression.

*It breaks out and actually hinders duty.* The ambitious man must be studying, and the worldlying must be working or contriving, and the sensual,<sup>54</sup> vain person providing himself for vanity, when they should be engaged in the worship of God.

Were this my present business, to set forth the breaches, ruin, weakness, desolations, that one unmortified lust will bring upon a soul, this discourse must be extended much beyond my intention.

*As sin weakens, so it darkens the soul.* It is a cloud, a thick cloud, that spreads 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: of which afterward.

Now, in this regard does the vigor and power of our spiritual life depend on our mortification: It is the only means of the removal of that which will allow us neither the one nor the other. Men that are sick and wounded under the power of lust make many applications for help; they cry to God when the perplexity of their thoughts overwhelms them, even to God do they cry, but are not delivered; in vain do they use many remedies—"they shall not be healed." So, "Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound" (Hos. 5:13), and attempted sundry remedies: nothing will do until they come to "acknowledge their offense" (v. 15). Men may see their sickness and wounds, but yet, if they make not due applications, their cure will not be effected.

*Mortification prunes all the graces of God and makes room for them in our hearts to grow.* The life and vigor of our spiritual lives consists in the vigor and flourishing of the plants of grace in our hearts. Now, as you may see in a garden, let there be a precious herb planted, and let the ground be untilled, and weeds grow about it, perhaps it will live still, but be a poor,

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<sup>53</sup> again, i.e., reoccurring

<sup>54</sup> perceived by the senses (not necessarily sexual)

withering, unuseful thing. You must look and search for it, and sometimes can scarce find it; and when you do, you can scarce know it, whether it be the plant you look for or not; and suppose it be, you can make no use of it at all. When, let another of the same kind be set in the ground, naturally as barren and bad as the other, but let it be well weeded, and everything that is noxious<sup>55</sup> and hurtful removed from it—it flourishes and thrives; you may see it at first look into the garden, and have it for your use when you please. So it is with the graces of the Spirit that are planted in our hearts. That is true; they are still, they abide in a heart where there is some neglect of mortification; but they are ready to die (Rev. 3:2), they are withering and decaying. The heart is like the sluggard's field—so overgrown with weeds that you can scarce see the good corn. Such a man may search for faith, love, and zeal, and scarce be able to find any; and if he does discover that these graces are there yet alive and sincere, yet they are so weak, so clogged with lusts, that they are of very little use; they remain, indeed, but are ready to die. But now let the heart be cleansed by mortification, the weeds of lust constantly and daily rooted up (as they spring daily, nature being their proper soil), let room be made for grace to thrive and flourish—how will every grace act its part, and be ready for every use and purpose!

*As to our peace; as there is nothing that has any evidence of sincerity without it, so I know nothing that has such an evidence of sincerity in it—which is no small foundation of our peace. Mortification is the soul's vigorous opposition to self, wherein sincerity is most evident.*

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<sup>55</sup>injurious, harmful, unwholesome

PART 2:

**THE NATURE OF  
MORTIFICATION**



“John Owen’s wisdom is the missing link in our culture’s confusion about sexual sin. Kapic and Taylor’s matchless edition renders transparent the practical theology of one of the great Puritan thinkers. Every believer should read this book.”

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PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, *President, Wheaton College*

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