

“Naked & Ashamed”

Sermon Notes

➤ **The wages of sin is death, so *be killing sin or it will be killing you***

-John Owen (1656)

**After we give in to temptation, death echoes deep in the soul...*

1. We feel shame, and look for covering (v.7)

2. We feel fear, and long for shelter (v.8)

Next Week: Genesis 3:9-13 - “Where Are You?”

MEFC Community Group Study Guide

For the week of October 12th-18th

Interview with John Owen on the Subject of the Mortification of Sin

Pastor Dave: Pastor John, thank you for joining us for one last week of conversation. Today we take a little time to explore what is perhaps your most well-known work: *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*.¹ Right off the bat, it's important for us to recognize that the content of this book which we commonly think of as for world-class theologians only was originally simply a series of classroom talks you gave to teen-age boys². What is your purpose in these messages?

Owen: "...I hope I may own 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 adored in all things."³

Pastor Dave: Amen. That does raise the question, of course: what *is* mortification...and what are we talking about when we refer to the mortification of sin? Paul speaks of it in Romans 8:13 and Colossians 3:5, and it's captured in the phrase "put to death" the deeds of the body (ESV). What does it mean?

¹ There are a number of editions of this work of Owen's, but a good one-stop shop would be *Overcoming Sin & Temptation: Three Classic Works By John Owen*. Edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor. Crossway: Wheaton. 2006. Each of the quotations from Owen in this study guide are drawn from this edition. This paperback carries with it a forward by John Piper, carefully outlined chapter breakdowns, and helpful footnotes that define a number of older words common to Owen's vocabulary. Three of Owen's great works on these themes are included: *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It* (1658), and *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (1667).

² Owen himself began at Queen's College in Oxford in 1628 when he was just 12 years old (which was a bit younger than average, but not terribly unusual in those days). The content of this book was first taught to students of Christ Church (the premier college at Oxford) while Owen served as the Vice-Chancellor of the university. His students likely ranged from 15-18 years of age.

³ Owen, p.42.

Owen: “To mortify a sin is not utterly to kill, root it out, and destroy it...that... should not be in this life expected...it is not [simply pretence or the concealment of one’s thoughts or character⁴]...The mortification of sin consists not in the improvement of a quiet, sedate nature...A sin is not mortified when it is only diverted⁵...Occasional conquests of sin do not amount to a mortifying of it...”⁶

Pastor Dave: So...this is helpful to clear away the brush. You’re beginning to give us a picture of what mortification *is* by assuring us of what it is *not*. Knowing in some measure what mortification is not, can you now tell us what it is?

Owen: “[Mortification consists in a habitual weakening of sin...in constant fighting and contending against sin...[and] mortification consists in frequent success over sin].”⁷

Pastor Dave: Tell us more...

Owen: “[The mortification of sin] is the constant duty of believers...The vigor, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh...cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you...Indwelling sin always abides while we are in this world; therefore it is always to be mortified...When sin lets us alone we may let sin alone...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...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.”⁸

⁴ Owen uses the phrase: “dissimulation of a sin” to get this concept across. However, the editors of his complete works in the 2024 edition of the book suggest the words used in the bracket above.

⁵ He means here *avoided* or even *exchanged* for another sin. This is what Owen refers to as “the case of bartering of lusts, and leaving to serve one that a man may serve another. He that changes pride for worldliness, sensuality for Pharisaism, vanity in himself to the contempt of others, let him not think that he has mortified the sin that he seems to have left. He has changed his master, but is a servant still.” (Owen, p.71).

⁶ Owen, pp.69-71.

⁷ This definition is drawn from the editors’ titles of chapter 7 (see Owen, pp.73-78).

⁸ Owen, pp.49-54.

Pastor Dave: This sounds incredible...inspiring...even desirable...but utterly exhausting. Paul is crystal clear that we on our own do not have the strength for this in our own power. Talk to us about what it means to “put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit.”

Owen: “All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit...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...[The Holy Spirit] only is sufficient for this work; all ways and means without him are as a thing of naught; and he is the great efficient [cause] of it - he works in us as he pleases.”⁹

Pastor Dave: This brings a question to my mind. Oftentimes, even unbelievers have a desire to turn over a new leaf or develop certain habits or put away destructive ones. What hope does someone who is not savingly united to Jesus Christ have of engaging in the mortification of sin?

Owen: “I say, then, mortification is not the present business of unregenerate men. God calls them not yet to it as yet; conversion is their work - the conversion of the *whole* soul - not the mortification of this or that particular lust...The root must be dealt with, the nature of the tree changed, or no good fruit will be brought forth...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. Be sure to get an interest in Christ - if you intend to mortify any sin without it, it will never be done.”¹⁰

Pastor Dave: Clarifying and helpful. Okay, so walk us through this. What does it look like to engage in the mortification of sin? What sorts of directions would you have for us?

Owen: “1. Consider what dangerous symptoms your lust has attending or accompanying it...2. Get a clear and abiding sense upon your mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin wherewith you are perplexed...3. Load your conscience with the guilt of it...4. Get a constant longing, breathing after deliverance from the power of it...5. Consider whether the distemper with which you are perplexed be not rooted in your nature, and cherished, fomented, and heightened from your constitution...6. Consider what

⁹ Owen, pp. 47, 57-63.

¹⁰ Owen, pp. 81 and 83.

occasions, what advantages your distemper has taken to exert and put forth itself, and watch against them all...7. Rise mightily against the first actings of your distemper, its first conceptions; suffer it not to get the least ground...8. Use and exercise yourself to such meditations as may serve to fill you at all times with self-abasement and thoughts of your own vileness...9. Take heed you speak not peace to yourself before God speaks it..."¹¹

Pastor Dave: Nine directions for the mortification of sin. That's it?

Owen: "...the considerations which I have hitherto insisted on are rather of things *preparatory* to the work aimed at than such as will *effect* it. It is the heart's due preparation for the work itself, without which it will not be accomplished, that hitherto I have aimed at."¹²

Pastor Dave: That's incredible. Okay...so talk to us, then, about the work of the mortification of sin itself. How do we (to use Paul's words again): "...put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit..." (Romans 8:13)?

Owen: "Directions for the work itself are very few; I mean peculiar to it, And they are as follows: 1. *Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of your sin.* His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and you will die a conqueror; yea, you will, through the good providence of God, live to see your lust dead at your feet."¹³

Pastor Dave: Unpack this for us. How do we "set faith at work on Christ for the killing of" our sin?

Owen: "By faith fill your soul with a due consideration of that provision which is laid up in Jesus Christ for this end and purpose, that all your lusts, this very lust wherewith you are entangled, may be mortified."¹⁴

Pastor Dave: Keep talking...

Owen: "2. *Raise up your heart by faith to an expectation of relief from Christ...* To whom will you go [John 6:68]? So there are in the Lord Jesus innumerable things to encourage and engage you to this expectation...Consider

¹¹ Owen, pp.89-127.

¹² Owen, p.131.

¹³ Owen, p.131.

¹⁴ Owen, p.131.

his mercifulness, tenderness, and kindness, as he is our great High Priest at the right hand of God...Consider his faithfulness who has promised; which may raise you up and confirm you in this waiting in an expectation of relief...It engages him to a full and speedy assistance...It engages the heart to attend diligently to all the ways and means whereby Christ is wont to communicate himself to the soul; and so takes in the real assistance of all graces and ordinances whatsoever..."¹⁵

Pastor Dave: That's beautiful. Any other specifics toward which you'd like to call our attention?

Owen: "Only some particulars relating thereunto may be mentioned - *First*, act faith peculiarly upon the death, blood, and cross of Christ; that is, on Christ as crucified and slain...*Secondly*, then act faith on the death of Christ...first in expectation of power; secondly, in endeavors for conformity [to Christ]."¹⁶

Pastor Dave: And, then, what about the Spirit? If we are to put our sin to death by the Spirit, how ought we to think of his role in this work?

Owen: "In one word: this whole work, which I have described as our duty, is effected, carried on, and accomplished by the power of the Spirit, in all the parts and degrees of it...He alone clearly and fully convinces the heart of the evil and guilt and danger of the corruption, lust, or sin to be mortified...The Spirit alone reveals unto us the fullness to Christ for our relief...The Spirit alone establishes the heart in expectation of relief from Christ...The Spirit alone brings the cross of Christ into our hearts with its sin-killing power...The Spirit is the author and finisher of our sanctification...It all the soul's addresses to God in this condition, it has support from the Spirit."¹⁷

Pastor Dave: Thank you, Pastor John. The conversations these last three weeks on the nature of temptation, indwelling sin, and the mortification of sin have been rich indeed. May the words and your mouth and the meditations of your heart in connection with the truth of God's Word through the power of the Spirit bring greater and greater degrees of conformity to Christ in our lives as a result. *Amen.*¹⁸

¹⁵ Owen pp.133-136.

¹⁶ Owen, pp. 136-138.

¹⁷ Owen, pp.138-139.

¹⁸ Each of these quotations from Owen really only serve as headings throughout certain sections of this book. If his descriptions seem frustratingly brief or too general in nature at any point, there is a great deal more that he unpacks under each section that may be of further help.