

Mortification of Sin

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And every man that has this hope
purifies himself —1 John 3:3

My friend, I ask if you are intent on purification of heart and life: If not—you are not a Christian. You are deceiving yourself. I promise you that without holiness no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). You ask, what is it to purify oneself? To purify an object one has to remove all that is impure. Romans 8:13 presents this purification in terms of mortification.

For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live.

The text can be divided as follows:

- 1 The work to be done *mortification of indwelling sin*
- 2 The workers *those who believe*
- 3 The method employed *through the Holy Spirit*
- 4 The condition attached *if you keep on mortifying*
- 5 The promise assured *you will live!*

At the outset we should note that mortification is not an option. It is a necessity. If you do not mortify the misdeeds of the body you will be lost! Many today are tempted to think they can compromise with mortification of sin. They opt to take a middle way. This results either in complete apostasy, and we have observed some take that tragic route, and in others it has resulted in extreme pain like it did with king David. The terrible pain has directed them into the path of mortification they should have taken in the first place.

The Christian life is one of mixed experiences: joy, love, peace, trials of faith, temptation, and sometimes frustration and grief. Many different spiritual experiences are described in Scripture—especially in the Psalms. Sometimes these experiences run concurrently. Hence Paul out of his own experience declares, 'Beaten and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything' (2 Cor 6:10). It is needful to assert this as it is wrong to think of the Christian life as all temptation and mortification on the one hand or all joy and gladness on the other. When Paul laments, 'Oh wretched man that I am' he is pointing to the reality of remaining sinful trends and it certainly does not mean that he went around in a ludicrous state of being miserable.

With regard to mortification the person who learns how to handle this area of spiritual experience really well: decisively and effectively, will as a result, enjoy peace and comfort.

1 The work to be done—*mortification of indwelling sin*

This work is a killing work (Col 3:5). To kill an animal, say a mammal, is to deprive it of its life so that it no longer has breath and so that there is no possibility of its living again. I remember witnessing the slaughter of a

pig in which a long knife was used to pierce its heart. It was a violent affair with great squealing. Our old nature can squeal and squirm when the knife of mortification is plunged into it.

The term body and flesh is sometimes used in the New Testament in a very disparaging way. The KJV and the NJKV and the NASB translate the word *sarx* in Greek as flesh. The NIV translates *sarx* as sinful nature. Both translations have merit. I do not need to sin with my body as is made very clear in Romans 6:15-23. But in order to avoid all sin with my body I must submit it entirely to the service of Christ. And the reason is that remaining sin is dangerous. The acts of the sinful nature (flesh) are obvious says Paul in Galatians 5:19: 'sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.'

Sin is like the poison of a mamba snake. It's exceedingly deadly. It kills. Every sin if permitted will become imperious in its demands and every lust will aim at its maximum expression. Sin is like the Devil its originator. It is limitless in its capacity for evil. No expositor that I know has brought this out more powerfully than John Owen:

'Sin aims always at the utmost; every time it rises up to tempt or entice, if it has its own way it will go out to the utmost sin in that kind. Every unclean thought or glance would be adultery if it could, every thought of unbelief would be atheism if allowed to develop. Every rise of lust, if it has its way reaches the height of villainy; it is like the grave that is never satisfied. The deceitfulness of sin is seen in that it is modest in its first proposals but when it prevails it hardens mens' hearts, and brings them to ruin.' Owen quotes Hebrews 3:13 which tells us that sin deceives, 'the deceitfulness of sin!' Remember how sin deceived the Israelites in the wilderness when they hardened their hearts.

Therefore sin must be mortified in its beginnings, in its roots. Success in this business of mortification lies in cutting off the source. This leads to our great peace and happiness.

2 Who is to do this work? —*those who believe*

The work of mortification is intensely personal. It is a work that only you can do and there are no short cuts or easy ways. It can involve pain but there is no other way. Sin is like a tooth which is diseased, has developed abscesses and is beyond repair. It must be extracted if infection is to be avoided.

In recent years there has been a revived interest in the sovereignty of God and the doctrines of God's sovereign grace. These truths serve to strengthen the faith of God's people. However the truth of human responsibility must not be diminished. Everywhere in Scripture there is emphasis on the theme that man will give account of himself. And Christians are called upon to make right decisions. Great doctrinal statements are followed by appeals to duty. We are to count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God (Rom 6:11). We are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1). We must engage in spiritual warfare. We must put on the whole armour of God (Eph 6:12). We must put to death the misdeeds of the body.

Note well that all believers without exception are to engage in this work. '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' (Owen). Note how Paul, the choicest believer, was heartily and actively engaged in this work. Paul declared, 'I beat my body and make it my slave (1 Cor 9:27) (beat: *hupopiazō* meaning to pommel, to treat severely, to strike under the eye so as to make it black and blue. By violent and repeated blows I subdue the flesh to bring it into subjection).

3 The method employed—*through the Holy Spirit*

Every method put to use to mortify sin which is not by the Holy Spirit is doomed to failure. Every system which attempts to deal with sin without Christ and the Holy Spirit is legalistic and miserable. The Pharisees failed completely. Luther tried the Roman system but became more and more miserable. Owen writes: 'The greatest

part of popish religion consists of mistaken means of mortification—their vows, orders, fastings, penances, are all built on this ground; they are for the mortifying of sin. Their preachings, sermons, and books of devotions, they look all this way.'

Owen goes on to explain why these endeavours can never mortify one sin. He shows that they were never appointed of God. He cites the text, 'In vain do ye worship me, teaching for doctrines the traditions of men.'

Mortification of sin is Trinity centred and not self-centred. The child of God is motivated by a desire to please his Father and is set on honouring Christ to whom he is joined and from whom he derives his strength. But especially is mortification enabled by the indwelling working and power of the Holy Spirit. The work of mortification is a work of partnership in which we exercise our mind and wills to mortify sin. But we do so through the Holy Spirit who works in us. The Holy Spirit has given us a new heart and mind and has written God's laws on our hearts and inscribed them in our minds. We understand and love that writing and the Holy Spirit enables us by the power of a new affection to drive out that which is alien and opposed to God's mind and will.

The Holy Spirit is depicted in Scripture by emblems: water which fertilises and heals (Eze 47), wind which regenerates (Eze 37), and fire which purifies. The Holy Spirit who is jealous over us burns out the dross like fire burns (Isa 4:4). He is the One who baptises with fire (Matt 3:11).

4 The condition attached —*if you keep on mortifying*

There is no such thing as completed or perfect holiness in this life. Progress yes! Perfection no! When we have made progress in mortification, further battles will ensue which will be made more clear when I come to expound the question of secret sin and presumptuous sin. As we have seen, sin is deceptive and powerful. Just when we think we have rooted out a sin it can appear in a different form. Sin is insatiable in its desires. The sin of sexual lust lies buried in the flesh and therefore no believer can afford to be careless about the need to mortify that sin.

Mortification of sin takes place in the context of the arena of life. It is intensely practical. It involves daily devotion and watchfulness. Guard your heart with all diligence. Keep your conscience sensitive and alert. Avoid occasions of sin. Remove sources of sin. In terms of watching television this means strict control by way of selective viewing. American and Australian TV is so dominated by adverts and what is puerile that it is virtually useless. Now with channel five in the UK the trend is in that direction. There has been a steady increase in blasphemy, mockery of what is right, crude language, sexual perversity, corruption, violence and crime. With Philippians 4:8 in mind, the best option is make one's own videos and keep a library of valuable documentaries, travel, politics, music, ecology and especially children's' programs which are healthy.

5 The certainty attached —*you will live!*

Mortification is an essential part of progressive sanctification. It is the negative but a necessity. If handled wisely it is swift and decisive and opens the way for the major work of transformation into the likeness of Christ (Rom 12:1,2). The positive side of progressive sanctification is conformity to Christ and it is this positive work which takes up most of our time. To be in Christ is to be alive! We are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory (2 Cor 3:18).

Mortification of sin in the life of the believer leads to freedom. 'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36). Eternal life begins with union with Christ. 'I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10). The redeemed are described in revelation in a two-fold way. They did not defile themselves with sin and kept themselves pure. But these are the ones who enjoy the company and the activities of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem and on the new earth and in the new heavens.

Secret sins and presumptuous sins

Mortification of sin involves irreconcilable spiritual warfare: the flesh against the Spirit and the Spirit against

the flesh (Gal 5:17). Sin is not only deceitful, it is variable and subtle in its forms. Always present to some degree is pride. Sin is pervasive. Psalm 19:12,13 refers to hidden or secret sins and wilful or presumptuous sins.

Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins. (KJV).

Who can understand his errors? Who can truly and rightly assess his sins and understand their roots and ramifications? Who can assess justly the guilt of sin? As we have seen sin is deceitful. Its trend always is to make excuses. Sin's behaviour is to call evil good and good evil, and put darkness for light and light for darkness (Isa 5:20).

Cleanse thou me from secret sins. Secret sins are the sins known to us but not known to others. It is clear that nothing is hidden from God. 'For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths' (Prov 5:21). The Psalmist declares, 'You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar' (Psa 139:2). Ezekiel was shown the detestable practices carried on in darkness in the Temple in Jerusalem. This was supposed to be secret but it was seen by the Lord who saw fit to share what was going on with Ezekiel (Eze ch 8). The public expects a good example from religious leaders who profess to be righteous. When they are exposed for scandalous sin, that disgraces the cause the religious leaders stand for.

Sedgwick uses the illustration of a fire in the chimney. Though you do not see it yet it burns. Secret sins are dangerous because they make the way for open sin as James says, 'For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death (James 1:13-15).

Sedgwick suggests that secret sins are more likely to deceive us because often we make light of secret sin. He suggests that sin can be likened to the roots of a tree. The life of the tree is in its roots. The axe has to be laid to the root of the tree. To hate a man in our hearts is secret and nobody can observe that, but if you were to set out to kill that man it would become a public matter and a notorious sin condemned by the world.

A constraining motive to be rid of secret sin is that such sin nurtured will destroy my life of prayer, 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me' (Psa 66:18 KJV). Appropriate therefore is the prayer, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting' (Psa 139:23,24).

A further motive to mortify secret sin is that secret sins will be judged as well as visible and public sins, 'For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil' (Eccl 12:14). Joseph lived in God's presence and therefore was able to say to Potiphar's wife, 'How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' (Gen 39:9).

To be cleansed from secret sins is not only to be forgiven those sins but to cure them, to be rid of them.

Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins. Presumptuous sins are sins which arise out of pride and lead to presumption. This is illustrated by King Uzziah of whom we read, 'But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered into the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense.' Clearly this was a work confined strictly to the priesthood and although he was the King, Uzziah was trespassing on holy ground. The priests did their best to restrain King Uzziah, but it was too late for he was struck with leprosy immediately.

Apostasy is a sin of presumption. It is a very deliberate sin which keeps on sinning in spite of knowing the truth. It is a terrible sin to treat as unholy the blood of the covenant. For a person to turn back from his testimony is being entangled in his sins, and to be overcome in that state is worse for that poor soul than the beginning (2 Pet 2:20).

The glory of Christ in taking away our sins

The sheer magnitude of what was involved to come into this world and conquer sin for us was daunting to Christ. We see that in his words in the garden of Gethsemene, 'Father if it is possible let this cup pass from me.' Such was the perfection of his active obedience in his life and passive obedience in his atoning propitiatory death that the vastness of his glorious achievement can be summed up in these words: By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy' (Heb 10:14).

No celestial being could have done what Jesus did. The finality and glory of his accomplishment is expressed in the words 'he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven'. There is no more atoning work to be done. When he cried on the Cross, 'It is finished' it was indeed the end of his suffering. It is his unique achievement that we remember at the Lord's table. Because of his humility even to the death of the Cross, the Father has exalted Him to the highest place and has given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. The name Jesus points especially to his human nature. It is a man, one man, the last Adam, who has accomplished this stupendous work of deliverance from the guilt and power and ultimately from the presence of sin.

Human accomplishments fade into insignificance in comparison with this extraordinary work of salvation. And to think that he did it not for friends but for sinners who hated him. 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: 'While we were still sinners Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).

The highest praise in the coming new world is the song of acclamation, 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!' To him be glory forever and ever!

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