

Mortification

from *The Way of Holiness* by Kenneth Prior

The actual word mortify occurs only twice in the New Testament. It gets right to the heart of the conflict in which Christians who would present their bodies as sacrifice are involved. We are not merely fighting here against temptation as an external foe, but we are facing the realities of sin in our own nature. Two verses show this:

If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. (Rom. 8:13 KJV) Put to death therefore what is earthly in you. (Col. 3:5)

Two different words are used for mortify in these two verses, but there is no need to look for varying shades of meaning. Both of them mean “to exterminate life” or “to put to death.” They speak of a violent contest and may be compared to the cutting off of hands and plucking out of eyes in Mark 9:43-48. Notice, too, that it is a continuous activity; the use of the present tense in both these verses implies that Christians should be constantly mortifying the sin within them.

A missionary once had in his garden a shrub that bore poisonous leaves. At that time his small son would put everything within reach into his mouth. Naturally the missionary dug out the dangerous shrub; but the shrub had very deep roots which he could not quite reach, and it sprang up again. Although he repeatedly dug it up, it would always sprout once more. All he could do was to inspect the ground regularly, and every time the shrub appeared above the surface, dig it up again. Indwelling sin is like that shrub. It is a constant problem to Christians, and therefore mortification is always incumbent upon us. John Owen wisely said: “He who ceases from this duty, lets go all endeavors after holiness.”¹

We must be exercising it every day, and in every duty. Sin will not die, unless it be constantly weakened. Spare it, and it will heal its wounds, and recover its strength. We must continually watch against the operations of this principle of sin: in our duties, in our calling, in conversation, in retirement, in our straits, in our enjoyments, and in all that we do. If we are negligent on any occasion, we shall suffer by it; every mistake, every neglect is perilous.²

The Function of God’s Law

God’s law plays a vital part in our sanctification and in the mortifying of our sinful nature. In Romans 7:7-13 Paul shows what the law meant to him before he became a Christian. Then in verse 14 the tense changes from the past to the present, and Paul goes on to tell what it means to him now as a Christian. Paul is not speaking of any lower state of Christian experience which he had left behind. He is writing as one who has learned to “delight in the law of God, in my inmost self” (v. 22). Paul is writing here out of a mature experience of God’s grace. As Handley Moule observed, “He who can truly speak thus of an inmost sympathy, a sympathy of delight, with the most holy law of God, is no half-Christian; certainly not in St. Paul’s view of things.”³

What the law cannot do. Much as we may glory in God’s law, however, we must never lose sight of its limitations. Not that there is anything inadequate about God’s law in itself; it is in men that the inadequacy lies—to use Paul’s words, it was “weakened by the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). Because of this, a set of rules, even from God himself, can neither justify nor sanctify.

In Pilgrim's Progress, Christian very early in his journey discovered that the law cannot justify. He learned this the hard way, foolishly following Mr. Worldly Wiseman's advice; he turned away from the road to the cross which he had been treading to call at Mr. Legality's house on Mount Sinai.

So Christian turned out of his way to go to Mr. Legality's house for help; but, behold...[when he arrived, he was hit hard by the hill,] it seemed so high, and also that side of it that was next to the wayside did hang so much over, that Christian was afraid to venture further, lest the hill should fall on his head; wherefore there he stood still, and...[waited not knowing what to do.] Also his burden now seemed heavier to him as he set him again on the right road. "No man was as yet ever rid of his burden by him; no, nor ever is like to be: ye cannot be justified by the works of the law."

We cannot in our weak flesh climb the mountain of God's rules; in fact, the more perfect his law, the more despair we experience in facing it. "A man is not justified by works of the law" (Gal. 2:16).

Nor can the law sanctify the believer. It can even have the opposite effect: "But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Rom. 7:8-9). Through the weakness of human flesh, the very law of God himself "which promised life proved to be death to me" (Rom. 7:10). Paul's observation is very realistic. A prohibition can indeed be very provocative, and the command "Thou shalt not" can produce an irresistible urge toward "But I will"; it can hardly be described as having a sanctifying effect!

Our hero in Pilgrim's Progress had this further lesson to learn, and he did so in Interpreter's House. He was taken into a large room full of dust. When a man began to sweep, the dust rose into the air and almost choked him. Before the room could be cleaned, water had to be sprinkled to keep the dust down. Interpreter explained:

This parlour is the heart of a man that was never sanctified by the sweet grace of the Gospel; the dust is his original sin, and inward corruptions, that have defiled the whole man. He that began to sweep at first, is the Law; but she that brought water, and did sprinkle it, is the Gospel. Now, whereas thou sawest, that so soon as the first began to sweep, the dust did so fly about that the room by him could not be cleansed, but that thou wast almost choked therewith; this is to show thee, that the law, instead of cleansing the heart [by its workings] from sin, doth revive, put strength into, and increase it in the soul, even as it doth discover and forbid it, for it doth not give power to subdue.

So Paul could say, "The power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56), for unless it is accompanied by the gospel, the law is precisely what chokes our lives.

Why is God's law unable to achieve either our justification or sanctification? The answer we give is no mere academic one, but is vital to a life of holiness. To use Paul's expression, the law was weakened by the flesh; that is, there is nothing deficient in the law itself: the weakness is in us. Paul confessed his own bitter experience of failure in Romans 7:14-23. Repeatedly he finds himself powerless to perform the very law of God in which he delights. At last he cries out in anguish, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (v. 24). And Paul's burden is not made any lighter by knowing the seriousness of sin and its tragic consequences.

What the law can and must do. We can see now the important role which God's law must play in our sanctification. Although it can never sanctify, it provides us an indispensable incentive for mortifying our sinful natures. As Herbert W. Cragg commented at the 1963 Keswick Convention:

Paul has discovered something which is absolutely fundamental to holy living. He has discovered, I believe, that this outcry of distress is written into the very fabric of a holy life. It is not a crisis to pass; it

*is part of the very fabric of holiness. He never looked at himself without shame, from which he turns in loathing to look again on Christ.*⁴

Here is one of the marks of growth in grace: not extravagant claims to victory, but a loathing of the sinful nature that remains.

John R. W. Stott has also commented pointedly on this theme in Romans 7.

*Indeed, an honest and humble acknowledgment of the hopeless evil of our flesh, even after the new birth, is the first step to holiness. To speak quite plainly, some of us are not leading holy lives for the simple reason that we have too high an opinion of ourselves. No man ever cries aloud for deliverance who has not seen his own wretchedness. In other words, the only way to arrive at faith in the power of the Holy Spirit is along the road of self-despair. No device exists to settle this issue for good. The power and subtlety of the flesh are such that we dare not relax one moment. The only hope is unremitting vigilance and dependence.*⁵

“Load thy conscience with the guilt of [sin],” demands John Owen. “Bring the holy law of God into thy conscience, lay thy corruption to it, pray that thou mayest be affected with it.”⁶

The Function of Gospel

We have already seen that the death of Christ is the only ground on which a person defiled by sin can be set apart for God. John Owen has called it the “meritorious cause” of our mortification as well, for it shows us what should be the Christian’s attitude to his sin.

Again we turn to the book of Romans. Chapter 6 begins with Paul anticipating a common objection to his gospel of free forgiveness—and especially his expression of it in the closing two verses of chapter 5. Indeed if, as he has just stated, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,” it would seem that the more we sin the more we experience God’s grace. Does this mean, he asks, that we can continue a life of sin because forgiveness is so easy?

Emphatically not. A proper understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ and the believer’s intimate relationship with them must result in a denial of such a suggestion. A Christian is in personal union with Christ, a state inwardly created by faith and outwardly signified by baptism, in which Christ’s death is reckoned as the Christian’s death. It is as if the Christian had suffered death, the penalty for sin. Because of this, sin and its penalty have no further claim on him or her. Because such a person has shown the attitude of God toward his past sinful life, he can and must regard this as a closed book.

How this relates to mortification we can see in the three logical steps of verse 6. The New English Bible translation is especially helpful here: “We know that the man we once were has been crucified with Christ, for the destruction of the sinful self, so that we may no longer be the slaves of sin.”

“The man we once were” is a fitting rendering of “our old man” (KJV), for this can hardly be the same thing as “the body of sin” (KJV), which comes later in the same sentence. Colossians uses the expression “our old man” similarly to mean the old pattern of life which the believer had followed in his or her pre-Christian days, a pattern which is now gone. Holy living is demanded of Christians on the assumption that they have “put off the old nature with its practices” (Col. 3:9). On what ground does Paul make this assumption? It is given in Romans 6:6: “Our old self was crucified with him.” Christ paid the penalty for our old way of life, and Christians, when they believe Christ, make that death their own.

Now, Paul goes on, the purpose of this death was that “the sinful body might be destroyed.” We know from other occurrences of this word in the New Testament that this does not mean our sinful nature is completely eradicated. Rather, its power is broken. This in turn means “that we may no longer be the slaves of sin” (NEB).

All this happened to our sins when Christ died. Now in verse 11 Paul says, “Consider yourselves dead to sin.” In other words, we should accept the fact and live accordingly. Of course, there is a paradox here, as F. F. Bruce points out.

This apparent paradox is one that we meet repeatedly in the Pauline writings, where believers are enjoined time and again to be what they are—to be in actual practice what they are as members of Christ. Thus they are said to “have put off the old man with his deeds” and to “have put on the new man” (Col. 3:9f.), while elsewhere they are exhorted to “put off . . . the old man” and “put on the new man” (Eph 4:22, 24).⁷

In the same way Paul calls Christians to crucify sin’s two allies, the flesh and the world:

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal. 5:24)

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

In the first of these, the crucifying is something the Christian has done, rather than something which has been done to him. The basic idea, however, is the same. Paul assumes by using the past tense that his readers, by virtue of their relation to Christ, have shared God’s attitude toward their sin, the flesh and the world in which they live. For a Christian to live a life dominated by the flesh or in fellowship with the world is a denial of his or her very relationship to a crucified Christ. The second verse underscores this.

Christians who are growing in their love for Jesus Christ are increasingly influenced by what their salvation cost. Aware that they have been “bought with a price,” they feel the obligation to glorify God in their bodies (1 Cor. 6:20). Let me state it the other way around: the more Christians consider what their sin cost the Savior, the more they will shrink from it.

Bring thy lust to the Gospel—not for relief, but for further conviction of its guilt; look on Him whom thou hast pierced, and be in bitterness. Say to thy soul “What have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for His love, to the Son for His blood, to the Holy Ghost for His grace?”⁸

The Way of Mortification

To mortify our indwelling sin is constantly to weaken it. We can do this in three ways: starve it out, cut it out or crowd it out. The world today offers plenty to feed a person’s sinful nature, such as periodicals, books, movies, television programs and even conversations. We have to remember that indwelling sin is nourished in the mind with its thoughts and imagination. It is there that our jealousies, resentments, lusts and selfishness are fostered. We can begin mortifying sin in us by depriving the mind—starving it—of the foods that feed its cancer. If there are pleasures, relationships or environments which add to our temptations, we shall wherever possible avoid them.

Sin also has to be cut out, just as the poisonous shrub had to be dug out every time it reappeared. Sin must be denied every opportunity for expression, or as Paul put it, we must “make

no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom. 13:14). Where sin does reassert itself, we must admit it, confess it and renounce it by the Spirit's help.

This is no easy undertaking, and we need to be realistic about it.

Some look upon it as an easy task. But is it for nothing that the Holy Spirit expresses it by mortification, or killing? Certainly this intimates a violent contest. Everything will do its utmost to preserve its life. Let no man think to kill sin with a few gentle strokes. He, who has once smitten the serpent, if he follow not his blow till it be slain, may repent that ever he began the quarrel; and so will he who undertakes to deal with sin, if he pursue it not constantly to death; sin will revive, and the man must die.⁹

Despite what some have taught, this is the proper attitude toward our sinful nature. It is far removed from the repression of which psychologists have warned us. The latter involves a refusal to face even the possibility of sin. "I am not the kind of person to do that, because I am not tempted in that way" expresses an attitude of repression. Mortification means that a Christian says, "I am the kind of person who can do that very sin, but by the grace of God I will not do it."

At the very heart of mortification is the denial of self. In our selves we find the very heart of sin: rebellion against God, putting self on the throne of one's life instead of him. It is self that spoils people's lives again and again, and it can even intrude into religious activity. How often Christian fellowship has been marred or ruined by petty squabbling, at the bottom of which lay an uncrucified self. Such strife and division were the symptoms of the carnality of the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor. 3:3). Little wonder that Jesus enjoins any would-be disciple, "Let him deny himself" (Mt. 16:24).

The third way to mortify our sinful nature is to strangle it with whatever is good and beautiful. A piece of wasteland soon becomes covered with weeds and wild grass. A well-planted garden, however, although still needing attention, has less room for weeds. The Bible encourages a Christian to be positive, even in the matter of mortification: "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). As Christians live in fellowship with the Holy Spirit of God and foster in their lives the things that please him, so the less worthy things are crowded out. Or, as John R. W. Stott puts it, mortification is to be accompanied by aspiration.¹⁰

John Owen calls this "the weakening of the flesh by the growth of positive graces," and he observes that every sin has a corresponding virtue by which it can be displaced. "So by the implanting and growth of humility is pride weakened, passion by patience, uncleanness by purity of mind and conscience, love of this world by heavenly-mindedness."¹¹ Ephesians 4:22-32 describes this transaction graphically. The apostle tells us what to "put off" side by side with what corresponding virtues to "put on." For example, a Christian is not only to refrain from stealing, but, "Let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need" (v. 28). In other words, we are not to have holes where sin used to be, but godly virtues.

One of the ways in which a Christian can be positive is in the way that he feeds his thought life. "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7 KJV). Having "starved" our minds of what would tempt us to sin, we need to feed it with what tends to righteousness. The Christian mind is filled with what is lovely. Let us affirm the well-known advice of the apostle Paul in this connection: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil. 4:8).

The Hope of Victory

We must be realistic about the Christian life. In doing so we must acknowledge the severity of the conflict in which Christians are involved, the subtlety of the foe that we face and the extreme difficulty of the mortification that God commands us to undertake. However, we must not imagine that this is a hopeless struggle.

Satan may indeed be a subtle and deadly foe, but we must remind ourselves of the promise that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20). We must echo Paul’s defiant cry, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom. 8:31). The fight of the Christian against the world, the flesh and the devil is not like the hopeless struggle of the unregenerate person who is still under sin’s bondage. The Christian certainly has to fight sin day by day, and sometimes it will get the better of him, but no longer does “sin . . . reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions” (Rom. 6:12).

Sin in the Christian is no longer master. The devil is already a defeated foe; his doom was settled forever by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we decide to mortify sin in our lives and do it by the Spirit, we have the assurance of God’s Word that we will live (Rom. 8:13). In our hope lies much incentive.

Notes:

1 John Owen, *On the Holy Spirit* (1674; reprinted, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), p. 307.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 310.

3 Handley C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Glasgow: Pickering and Inglis, 1956), p. 192.

4 Herbert W. Cragg, *Keswick Week*, 1963, p. 51.

5 John R. W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 74.

6 John Owen, *Temptation and Sin* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 56-57.

7 F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 44.

8 Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, p. 58.

9 Owen, *On the Holy Spirit*, p. 311.

10 Stott, *Men Made New*, pp. 91-92.

11 Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, p. 32.