

STUDY GUIDE
FOR
JOHN OWEN'S
THE MORTIFICATION
OF SIN

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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The page numbers in this Study Guide follow the page numbers in John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin, Abridged and Made Easy to Read* by Richard Rushing (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004)

Preface

While studying *The Mortification of Sin* by John Owen there are a couple of things to keep in mind.

First, this short book is focused on the doctrine of sanctification, to be distinguished from the doctrine of justification. In justification, the Christian is declared righteous, not because he is, in himself, righteous to any degree, but because of the righteousness of Christ alone. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:1 that ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.’ This is the foundation on which the Christian begins the struggle against personal sin, which is the focus of sanctification. It is in sanctification that God begins to *make* the Christian into what he has already *declared* the Christian to be, righteous.

If this distinction between justification and sanctification is forgotten, we will either hesitate to look seriously at sin or will despair if we do. Remembering that through justification the righteousness of Christ is freely reckoned to

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be ours through faith gives the Christian great freedom to look at sin and all of its expressions without and within. And only as we look seriously at sin, as Owen instructs us to do, will we truly learn to set ourselves against it through sanctification. To study what John Owen wrote on justification, read *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* in volume 5 of his collected *Works* or *Of the Death of Christ and Of Justification* in volume 12.¹

A second thing to keep in mind is that this short work has as its focus the negative side of sanctification, namely mortification. In answering the question, ‘What is sanctification?’ the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* teaches that ‘Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.’ The pattern of sanctification is death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul says, speaking of Christ, that ‘the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus’ (*Rom. 6:10-11*) It is just because of Christ’s death and resurrection that sanctification takes this shape in us.

As the title of his work clearly implies, Owen here devotes his attention to the death of sin, which has as its foundation the death of Christ. As one considers the suffering and death of Christ described in the Gospels, this

¹*The Works of John Owen* are published by The Banner of Truth Trust in 16 vols. See our website for more details about these and many other helpful publications: www.banneroftruth.co.uk

is the dark side of sanctification. Jesus tells his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, feeling the burden of his coming crucifixion, ‘Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation’ (*Matt. 26:41*). Owen describes the working of sin in our lives and counsels us to watch for it and pray against it. Yet we must remember that there is *resurrection* as well! Sanctification cannot be restricted to death. God intends new life to come forth from the grave. If *mortification* is the negative side of sanctification, then *vivification* is its positive counterpart. To study what John Owen wrote about this new life, read his work *On Spiritual-Mindedness* in volume 7 and *Of Communion with God* in volume 2 of his collected *Works*.

John Owen does not intend to say all that there is to say about the gospel in his short treatise on Mortification. Its focus is on sanctification, and in particular on that aspect of sanctification that deals with the *remaining presence of sin within us*. As you work your way through this book remember that Christ is your righteousness. Take to heart these two vital truths—that his death is at work within you as you struggle against sin, and that his resurrection is bringing new life to you so that you may live to God.

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Introduction

In the first chapter, Owen outlines the foundation for mortification found in Romans 8:13, ‘For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.’

It would be a good idea for you to read Romans 8:1-17 to see the broader context for this particular verse, paying attention to the work of the Spirit as it relates to the work of Christ and to the Christian life.

This opening chapter breaks down the second half of Romans 8:13 (‘if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live’) to show that mortification is both necessary and central in the Christian life.

Owen points out five important things from Romans 8:13—

(1.) The first thing is that the duty of mortifying sins is given to specific individuals, namely ‘you’ (pp. 1-2).

Who is meant by ‘you’ in Romans 8:13?

Why is it important to know who is included in the 'you'?

(2.) The second point Owen brings out is how we are to make sense of the seeming condition placed upon 'life'—'if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, [then] you will live' (p. 2).

Does this mean that our salvation—'life'—depends on our work of mortifying sin?

What is the relationship between mortification and life?

Where do you see grace operating in Romans 8:13?

(3.) The third point is the dynamic that makes mortification an active part of the Christian life. Owen says the 'efficient cause' is the Holy Spirit (pp. 2-3).

What are the various ways the Spirit is described in Romans 8 that better help us understand his role in the mortification of sin?

What is the result of attempting mortification apart from the Holy Spirit?

(4.) Owen then talks about the duty of mortification and what it entails (pp. 3-4).