

The Christian Life (22): Sanctification (Part 7)

Having considered the source (Christ), cause (Spirit), and means (faith), we come now to the activity of sanctification. This has historically been summarized as mortification and vivification. "Mortification is the first part of sanctification. It is the wasting away of sin. Vivification is the second part of sanctification. It is the restoration of the image or life of God in man" (Ames).¹ Mortification is the promotion of death and vivification the promotion of life. "Sanctification consists of two parts: mortification, or a dying unto sin, and vivification, or a living unto God" (Love).²

The two actings of the Christian in mortification and vivification need to be distinctly explained. The order in which we should consider them is obvious: we must die to sin (relatively speaking) before we can live (in any measure) to God...Disease must be subdued before health can be enjoyed; the lamp must be cleansed before its light can shine forth clearly; rags must be discarded before new apparel is put on. This order is uniformly insisted on throughout the Scriptures: "Cease to do evil" comes before "learn to do well" (Isa 1:16-17). "Hate the evil, and love the good" (Amo 5:15): the latter is impossible without the former. Self must be denied before Christ can be followed (Mat 16:24).³

I. Mortification: Its Mistakes and Necessity

1. *Its mistakes.* Before learning what mortification is we must be clear what it is not. (1) It is not the alteration of the flesh. Scripture uses the term "flesh" to refer to man's corrupt soul in opposition to God. By nature we are all flesh. Our entire nature is corrupt and in opposition to God. "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh" (Rom.8:4). "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom.8:8). By nature we are "in the flesh." We are controlled by the flesh. Thus, the ability to mortify the deeds of the body presupposes a radical change. This takes place in our regeneration and initial (definitive) sanctification. "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal.5:24). This is a past fact equally true of every Christian. The flesh has been crucified with respect to its reigning power. Thus, mortification is necessarily dependent upon this initial act. "But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds" (Col.3:8-9). Because we have put off the old man (regeneration), we are to put off his deeds or works (mortification). Thus, Scripture exhorts us to mortify "the deeds of the flesh" (Rom.8:13), and "make no provision for the flesh" (Rom.13:14), but Christians are not technically told to mortify the flesh. As so, we can speak of the ongoing mortification of the flesh as it's starved (not fed) and its deeds mortified.

Though the whole of the Christian's soul is renewed by the Spirit, and all the faculties are renovated, there is no operation of grace upon the flesh, so that its evil is expelled: the 'flesh' or principle of indwelling sin is neither eradicated nor purified nor made good. Our flesh is 'corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,' and remains so till the end of our earthly pilgrimage, ever striving against the 'spirit' or principle of holiness. As the soul at the very first moment of its union with the body (in the womb) became sinful, so it is not

¹ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 170

² Christopher Love, *The Mortified Christian*, 89

³ A.W. Pink, *Free Grace Broadcaster*, 215:28

until the moment of its dissolution from the body that the soul becomes inherently sinless.⁴

(2) It is not the eradication of the flesh. Though the flesh no longer reigns it still remains. And to the extent that the flesh remains it remains corrupt. In other words, remaining flesh in neither changed nor removed. It remains evil. "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Rom. 7:18). All flesh is only and always evil. This wicked and evil principle, called the flesh, remains in every Christian until they die or Christ returns. This necessitates that our sanctification will never be perfect in this life. "Mortification is a constant duty because of the abiding in us of a principle of sin while we are in the body, which, with its fruits, is that which is to be mortified. This the Scripture calls the 'sin that dwells in us,' and the 'evil that is present with us'" (Owen).⁵ "Mortification does not imply the total eradication of sin in believers, or the destruction of its very being and existence in them for the present; sanctified souls so put off their corruptions with their dead bodies at death. This will be the effect of our future glorification, not of our present sanctification. Sin does exist in the most mortified believer in the world" (Flavel).⁶

Mortification of sin does not reach so far in any regenerate man as to the utter abolition and removal of sin out of the soul. Never expect that it should extend this far. It is with sin in the soul as it was with the plague of leprosy in some cases: if the plague had spread in the walls of the house and was a fretting leprosy, it could not be gotten out by scraping or washing, but the house must be pulled down and demolished. So the leprosy of sin will cleave to you as long as you live in this world, until this body of yours is dissolved.⁷

Mortification of sin is a duty always incumbent on us in the whole course of our obedience. It is always a present duty. When it is no longer a duty to grow in grace, it is so not to mortify sin. No man under heaven can at any time say that he is exempted from this command, nor on any pretense; and he who ceases from this duty lets go all endeavors after holiness. And as for those who pretend unto an absolute perfection, they are of all persons living the most brazen, nor do they ever in this matter open their mouths but they give themselves the lie.⁸

(3) It is not the eradication of any particular sin. Mortification of sin is a constant process that needs daily performance. Our souls are like a garden which needs to constantly remove weeds. No sin is every mortified so as to be eradicated. Christians must mortify the same sins over and over again. Anger, unbelief, and lust must regularly be mortified. "You may cut off the branches of sin, but you can never fully eradicate and pluck it up by the roots. Do what you can, sin will vex you and disturb you as long as you live in this world" (Love).⁹ This doesn't deny that sin can be weakened and even defeated, but no sin will ever be so conquered so as to never (at least potentially) return and raise its ugly head.

The death of the cross was a lingering death. By loss of blood, the life is gradually exhausted. So it is with the death of sin. It does not die in an instant. At times the Christian imagines that he has gained at once a complete victory over some particular sin or sins.

⁴ A.W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification*, 147

⁵ John Owen, *Works*, 3:541

⁶ John Flavel, *Works*, 2:370-371

⁷ Christopher Love, *The Mortified Christian*, 26

⁸ John Owen, *Works*, 3:541

⁹ Christopher Love, *The Mortified Christian*, 25

But the conflict returns. The same passion which has slept for months and years may again be roused. Different circumstances present new and powerful temptations. And the believer may be called to the same conflict over and over again. The mortification of one sinful passion may cost you labor, constant watchfulness, and much time. With such lingering slowness is sin crucified, and the victory obtained.¹⁰

(4) It is not the cessation of any particular sin. A person may cease from a sin for a number of reasons. For example, he may have outgrown the temptation, lost the opportunity, or changed his preference. But true mortification doesn't merely change one sin for another, but aims to mortify every sin without exception. While mortification is concerned with particular sins, it isn't merely concerned with any single sin. It hates all sin. "Mortification is universal. Every member, every sense, and the whole body of sin must be attacked. The impenitent, when being driven from one sin, flies to another. Not so with the Christian. His warfare is with the whole body of sin" (Nettleton).¹¹

All cessation from some particular sin is not a mortification. A cessation from one sin may be but an exchange. It may be a divorce from a sin odious to the world, and an embracing another that is more accepting to the world. It may be a cessation from a sin merely because of the alteration of the constitution. Every age has particular sins which it inclines men to. A cessation from acts of sin may be for lack of an occasion, for lack of time, place, and materials. A man's will is not against sin, but he lacks an opportunity.¹²

(5) It is not merely concerned with the outward man. "It does not consist in the suppression of external acts merely. This may be done and yet the heart be in love with sin. The impenitent, through pride of character or fear of punishment, may abstain from external acts of wickedness. They may sustain a fair reputation among men and yet sin may hold the dominion over the heart" (Nettleton).¹³ In contrast to this, true mortification primarily focuses upon the inward man (or soul). It seeks to weaken sin at its root. "True mortification consists in weakening sin's root and principle. It is of little avail to chop off the heads of weeds while their roots remain in the ground; nor is much accomplished by seeking to correct outward habits while the heart be left neglected" (Pink).¹⁴ "The crucifixion of sin does not consist in the suppression of the external acts of sin only: for sin may reign over the souls of men, while it does not break forth into their lives in gross and open actions. Many a man shows a white and fair hand, who yet has a very foul and black heart" (Flavel).¹⁵

The mortification of sin does not consist solely in abstinence from outward transgressions in which we had previously indulged, but have abandoned by an effort upon ourselves. Of such an effort any man is capable by his natural powers, and without the influence of any moral consideration, when he is excited solely by a regard to reputation, to health, and to his secular interests. External purity, as our Lord has shown by the example of the Pharisees, may exist, while the heart is foul with the deepest stains of pollution.¹⁶

¹⁰ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons From the Second Great Awakening*, 170

¹¹ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons From the Second Great Awakening*, 170-171

¹² Stephen Charnock, *Works*, 5:218-219

¹³ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons From the Second Great Awakening*, 169

¹⁴ A.W. Pink, *The Holy Spirit*, 106

¹⁵ John Flavel, *Works*, 2:371

¹⁶ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 3:427

2. *Its necessity.* Older writers (and Scripture) distinguish between original and actual sin, or the flesh and its fruit. The first is the source of the second. There is the flesh and the desires and deeds of the flesh. While the flesh itself cannot be mortified it can be starved (not fed), and its lusts (desires) and works (deeds) can and must be mortified. "Mortification is 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" (Owen).¹⁷ "The work of mortification is a very difficult one, especially considering the prevalence of corruption and the multitude of temptations we are exposed to; the deceitfulness of Satan; the instability of our resolutions and the fickleness of our affections. Now it is this that renders it so *essential* that we make a right use of those methods that God has prescribed for the mortification of sin" (Pink).¹⁸ "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col.3:5). By "members" is meant the members of our physical body as instruments of the flesh. Thus he tells us to mortify "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness. These are the works of the flesh. He tell them again in verse 8, "But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, and filthy language." To "put off" is another way to say mortify.

Strange it is, that believers of so eminent a rank should need calling upon to mortify such gross and foul sins as these; and yet it is no more than necessary: the best Christians on earth have a stock of corruption in them, which does habitually dispose them unto these sins, as great and heinous as they are; and the devil will so suit his temptations, as will certainly draw forth his corruption into act, unless they keep a strict hand and a strict watch over themselves in the constant exercise of mortification. As we presume upon the pardoning mercy of God in the commission of small sins, so we are apt to presume upon our own strength to preserve us from the commission of great and crying sins; and so, by their security and carelessness, the best do sometimes find themselves surprised by them. If we should be earnest in exhorting you to beware that you murder not, that you blaspheme not, that you turn not apostates from the profession of your religion: would you not reply with Hazael, are we dogs that we should do this great wickedness? Yes, certainly, this great wickedness you would do, yea there is no abomination so abominable which you would not do if you do not bring the cross of Christ into your hearts by a daily mortification.¹⁹

(1) The flesh tempts. While Satan (Matt.4:1-11) and the world (Prov.7:21) tempts us, all they can do is tempt us to tempt ourselves. "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (Jas.1:14). We are tempted by ourselves: "he is drawn away by his own desires." By "he" is meant the new man and by "his own desires" is meant his flesh. While these can be distinguished they cannot be severed. Simply put, we tempt ourselves. The worst part of us (flesh) tempts the best part of us (new man). "There is not a greater enemy than our own flesh" (Manton).²⁰ It's for this reason, we are ultimately responsible for our own sin. "Alas! If there were no Satan to tempt we should tempt ourselves. His suggestions and temptations would not work were there not some intervening thought, and that makes us guilty. Besides, some sins have their sole rise from our own corruption. And so it is useless to cast it upon others—I was tempted of others. Actions cannot be accomplished without our own concur-

¹⁷ John Owen, *Works*, 6:9

¹⁸ A.W. Pink, *Free Grace Broadcaster*, 215: 24-25

¹⁹ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 3:85-86

²⁰ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 4:93

rence, and we must bear the guilt" (Manton).²¹ The flesh has desires that long to be fulfilled or satisfied. Both the desiring and fulfilling are sin. "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh" (Gal.5:16). "The corruption of nature, during this life, does remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be through Christ pardoned and mortified, yet both itself, and the first motions thereof, are truly and properly sin (2LBC).²²

It's for this reason, regardless of the origin of the temptation, every sin implies self-temptation. And so, Peter asked Ananias, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit," and then said, "Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4). In other words, while the original temptation came from Satan, it didn't become sin until Ananias internalized the temptation and tempted himself. This doesn't excuse external sources of temptation, but it simply explains why we are guilty of every sin. The guilt of every sin we commit is ultimately laid at our own feet because, ultimately speaking every sin is the product of our own hearts, in response to the enticement of the flesh. "The cause of evil is in a man's self, in his own lusts, the Eve in our own bosoms. Corrupt nature is not capable of an excuse. Sin knows no mother but your own hearts" (Manton).²³

We may, if we would, shun sin; and we sin, simply because we choose sin. To think of God as the author of sin is blasphemy: devils and wicked men can do you moral harm only by your consenting to let the evil into your hearts: with *yourselves* rests the blame; and you cannot cover your responsibility with abstract principles regarding human nature; you cannot hide yourselves among the crowd of a fallen race: *each individual* among you is tempted, and that by *his own lust*.²⁴

(2) The flesh hinders. The flesh not only tempts or entices, but actively opposes the positive work of the Spirit. "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal.5:17). "Christ dwells in our heart by faith; but the flesh lusts against the Spirit. Were it not for the former, we would serve God with the zeal and devotedness of an angel of light, and were it not for the latter, we would be led captive by the devil at his will" (Haldane).²⁵ The flesh fights against our spirit as energized and empowered by His Spirit. "When God transforms us by His Holy Spirit and makes us new creatures, then we can use the word 'spirit,' for our minds have been enlightened to understand that which was hidden from us in our natural state" (Calvin).²⁶ "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1Pet.2:11). "If I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me" (Rom.7:20). The new man wills or desires to obey God, but the flesh wills or desires to sin. Both are true at the same time. The latter (flesh) fights against and hinders the former (new man). Thus Paul could say, "For what I will to do, that I do not do; but what I hate that I do" (Rom.7:15). The new man desired to love God and his neighbor, but the flesh hindered him. But it not only hindered him, but enticed him, "what I hate I do."

It is true that the devil is our chief enemy, and the one who orchestrates the terrible attacks made against us. Yet also our thoughts, our affections, and our desires are as many

²¹ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 4:83-84

²² 2LBC, 6:5

²³ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 4:95

²⁴ Robert Johnstone, *Lectures on the Epistle of James*, 105-106

²⁵ James Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians*, 249

²⁶ John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 525-526

mortal enemies seeking to lead us into perdition. If they fight against God, then they are also opposed to our salvation. If Christians are asleep or indifferent, and seek to serve God at their leisure, they are mistaken. No, they have repeated and endless battles to face, for day and night Satan tempts them through his wiles and treacherous ways. Even when we are resolved upon full submission to the Word of God and to His righteousness, the devil still has many ropes to drag us in one direction or another. He will surprise us by showing us that our carnal desires are always there to hinder us; not only so, but he will also pull us in a completely opposite direction.²⁷

(3) The flesh defiles. "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (Jud.1:23). The phrase "the garment defiled by the flesh" uses OT imagery to figuratively refer to a defiled heart and life. Defilement refers to our relationship with God. It hinders our relationship with Him. This is largely due to a troubled and condemning conscience. It's for this reason, when we confess our sins "God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1Jn.1:9). That is, He cleanses us from a defiled conscience. Thus, previous to sinning we must labor to keep ourselves free from sin's defiling effects. "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2Cor.7:1). We must keep ourselves from all filthiness which defiles the body and soul (mortification), while "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (vivification). "God cannot in any wise delight in an unmortified soul. Sin is a mire; the more miry we are, the less can God embrace us. It is a plague; the more it spreads, the less will He be conversant with us. The more of a swinish, viperous, serpentine nature, the less of God's affections. Sin represents us more monstrous in God's eyes than the filthiest things in the world can do in man's." (Charnock).²⁸

By the flesh we are not to understand the body alone but that corruption of nature which has defiled both body and soul, being spread and mixed with every part of both, even as the light is mingled with darkness in the twilight or dawning of the day; whereby we are made prone to all sin, and ready to entertain all temptations, which promise the satisfying of any of the lusts thereof. This secret traitor conspiring with Satan and the world to work our destruction, does entertain and further all their temptations; it fights and lusts against the spirit, it rebels against the law of our minds, and leads us captive to the law of sin, it hinders us from doing the good we would, and makes us commit the evil which we hate.²⁹

²⁷ John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 531-532

²⁸ Stephen Charnock, *Works*, 5:222

²⁹ John Downname, *The Christian Warfare*, 37