

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 7: THE SPIRIT AND SANCTIFICATION

Lesson 20

Mortification and Vivification

Killing Sin and Coming Alive in the Spirit

The Double Work of Sanctification

Key Texts: Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:1–17; Galatians 5:16–17; Romans 6:11–14; 1 John 1:8–10

“If by the Spirit You Are Putting to Death the Deeds of the Body, You Will Live”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

Lessons 18 and 19 established the framework and the product of the Spirit's sanctifying work: progressive sanctification as the Spirit's lifelong program of conforming the believer to Christ, and the fruit of the Spirit as the unified Christlike character that program produces. Lesson 20 now examines the specific mechanics of that sanctifying program in its day-to-day operation, the double work that the Spirit performs in the believer's practical struggle with remaining sin: mortification and vivification.

The terms come from the Latin tradition of Reformed pneumatology, but the realities they describe are entirely scriptural. Mortification (Latin: *mortificatio*, from *mors*, death, and *facere*, to make, to cause death) is the Spirit-empowered, active killing of sin in the believer's life. Vivification (Latin: *vivificatio*, from *vita*, life, and *facere*, to make, to bring to life) is the Spirit's corresponding work of bringing new desires, new affections, and new patterns of obedience to life in the place of the sin that mortification is putting to death. The two are inseparable: mortification without vivification produces the barrenness of legalism, the killing of sin without the replacing of it with the Spirit's life; vivification without mortification produces the sentimentalism of antinomianism, the celebrating of new life without the hard work of putting off the old. Together, they constitute the complete, double-edged mechanism of the Spirit's practical sanctifying work.

John Owen, the seventeenth-century Puritan divine and the most sustained and most practically useful theologian of mortification in the history of the English-speaking church, captured the urgency of this doctrine in a dictum that has lost none of its pastoral force in four centuries: "Be killing sin, or it will be killing you." The words are from his 1656 treatise *The Mortification of Sin*, and they encapsulate the Reformed conviction that the war against remaining sin is not an optional spiritual discipline for the particularly conscientious but a life-or-death necessity for every genuinely regenerate person. The Spirit who has given the believer new life in regeneration continues His work in the daily, active, Spirit-empowered mortification of the sin that threatens to choke that new life at its root.

This lesson will define mortification and vivification from their primary scriptural texts, examine the theological ground in Romans 6 that makes both possible, study the Colossians pattern as the most comprehensive scriptural description of the double work in practice, address the danger of moralism that perpetually threatens to reduce mortification to mere human willpower, identify the specific means through which the Spirit empowers the mortification of sin, and close with the realistic pastoral expectation that sin will not be finally eradicated before glorification but must be persistently and seriously engaged by every believer who takes the Spirit's sanctifying work seriously.

I. Mortification Defined

The Active, Spirit-Empowered Killing of Sin

A. Romans 8:13, The Definitive Text

The definitive New Testament text on mortification is Romans 8:13: “For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (NASB 1995). The verse is the pneumatological heart of Paul’s sustained argument about life in the Spirit in Romans 8, and it makes several exegetically precise claims about the nature and necessity of mortification. First, the necessity is absolute: the alternative to mortification is death. Not spiritual stagnation, not reduced spiritual vitality, not occasional failure, death. The person who lives according to the flesh and does not mortify the flesh’s deeds will die. Second, the agent is the Spirit: “by the Spirit”. Mortification is not the believer’s own solo project of sin-management by willpower; it is the Spirit-empowered, Spirit-dependent, Spirit-enabled war against sin. The believer engages the war; the Spirit provides the power for it.

Third, the object is specific: “the deeds of the body.” The deeds of the body are the specific behaviors, habits, and patterns that the sinful nature produces through the physical body, the concrete, particular manifestations of remaining sin in the believer’s daily experience. Mortification is not a vague, general disposition against sinfulness in the abstract; it is the specific, targeted, Spirit-empowered engagement with particular sins in their particular forms in the particular body of the particular believer. The mortification that is not specific is not mortification; it is the general impression of spiritual seriousness without the hard work of actually identifying and engaging the specific sinful patterns that need to be put to death.

Fourth, the result is life: “you will live.” The promise is remarkable: the one who mortifies the flesh’s deeds by the Spirit’s power will live, will experience the increasing vitality of the Spirit’s life in the believer’s soul, the progressive deepening of communion with God, the growing fruitfulness of the sanctified life. Mortification and life are causally connected: the more sin is put to death, the more the Spirit’s life flourishes in the place that sin had occupied. The spiritual vitality that every genuine believer desires is not produced by seeking experiences or feelings but by the hard, daily, specific work of putting to death the deeds of the body through the Spirit’s power.

B. Owen’s Dictum: Be Killing Sin or It Will Be Killing You

John Owen’s dictum, “Be killing sin, or it will be killing you”, is not a piece of Puritan hyperbole but a precise theological description of the spiritual stakes of mortification. Owen’s point, developed at length in *The Mortification of Sin* (1656), is that sin is never static: it is either being actively weakened and dying, or it is actively strengthening and growing. There is no neutral spiritual territory in which sin is merely present but not advancing; sin is a living power that, if not actively opposed, will progressively assert its dominion over the believer’s soul. The believer who is not actively killing sin is not in a stable holding pattern; he is losing ground.

Owen’s definition of mortification is precise and demands quotation: “The habitual weakening of the principle of sin, and the improvement of the principle of grace.” Two things are

happening simultaneously in genuine mortification: the principle of sin is being weakened, its grip on the believer's affections, its hold over the believer's will, its dominance in the believer's patterns of thought and behavior is progressively loosened; and the principle of grace is being improved, the new nature created in regeneration is being strengthened, its desires are being deepened, its capacity for God-oriented living is being enlarged. Both dimensions belong to the double work of mortification and vivification.

Owen is also careful to note what mortification is not. It is not the suppression of sin's external expression without the death of sin's internal power: "The putting sin to death is not the making of it quiet." The sin that has been quieted by willpower or by changing external circumstances is not dead; it is merely dormant. When the willpower lapses or the circumstances change, the dormant sin resurfaces, often with greater force than before. Genuine mortification goes to the root: it weakens sin's internal principle, reduces the heart's desire for sin's pleasures, and increasingly replaces the old nature's orientation with the new nature's orientation toward God and righteousness.

II. Vivification Defined

The Spirit's Bringing to Life of New Desires and New Affections

Vivification is the Spirit's positive, life-giving counterpart to mortification's negative, death-dealing work. Where mortification puts sin to death, vivification brings new life to the new nature, awakening, strengthening, and intensifying the new desires, new affections, and new patterns of obedience that the Spirit created in regeneration and that mortification progressively frees from the competition of remaining sin. Vivification is the Spirit's work of making the new nature increasingly alive and increasingly dominant in the believer's experience.

The Pauline term for vivification is the same verb we encountered in the context of regeneration (Lesson 12): *suōpoieō* (to make alive, to vivify), used in Ephesians 2:5 ("made us alive together with Christ") and Colossians 2:13 ("making you alive together with Him"). In the sanctification context, vivification describes the Spirit's ongoing work of deepening and strengthening the spiritual life that regeneration created: bringing the new nature's desires to greater clarity, the new nature's love for God to greater warmth, the new nature's capacity for obedience to greater strength. The life that regeneration planted is the life that vivification is cultivating, and it flourishes in the space that mortification progressively creates by weakening and killing the sin that previously occupied that space.

The relationship between mortification and vivification is the relationship between removing weeds and planting crops: the weeds must be removed (mortification) if the crops are to have the space, the light, and the nutrients they need to grow (vivification). But removing weeds without planting crops produces not a garden but a field of bare soil that will soon be reoccupied by the weeds it was temporarily cleared of. Mortification without vivification is not genuine sanctification; it is the temporary suppression of sin without the positive growth of godliness. The Spirit's sanctifying work is always double: taking away and giving, putting to death and bringing to life, the off with the old and the on with the new.

III. The Theological Ground: Romans 6:11–14

Dead to Sin, Alive to God, The Indicative That Enables the Imperative

The most important pneumatological insight about mortification is that it is not the believer's attempt to achieve a death to sin that has not yet occurred; it is the believer's working out, in daily experience, of a death to sin that has already occurred in union with Christ. Romans 6:11–14 establishes this theological ground with decisive clarity: “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:11–14, NASB 1995).

The structure of verses 11–14 is the definitive statement of the indicative-imperative relationship in sanctification. The indicative (“consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus”, v. 11) describes the theological reality of the believer's position in Christ: the believer has, in union with Christ's death and resurrection, died to sin and been made alive to God. This is not an aspiration or an exhortation; it is the description of what is already true of every genuine believer in Christ. The imperatives (vv. 12–13) flow from and are grounded in the indicative: do not let sin reign (v. 12), do not present your members to sin (v. 13a), but present yourselves to God as alive from the dead (v. 13b). The imperatives are not the conditions for achieving the indicative; they are the believer's Spirit-enabled working out of the indicative that is already his in Christ.

The pneumatological significance of this structure for mortification is decisive and practically transformative. Mortification is not the believer's desperate attempt to kill a sin that still has full legal authority over him; it is the Spirit-empowered assertion of the death that Christ has already accomplished and that is already the believer's position in Christ. When the Spirit convicts the believer of sin and calls him to mortify that sin, He is not asking the believer to do something unprecedented and without foundation; He is calling the believer to work out, in the specific experience of the specific moment, the death to sin that is already the believer's reality in Christ. The mortification that is grounded in this indicative is fighting from a position of victory, not toward it; the Spirit is empowering the expression of what is already true, not the achievement of what is still aspirational.

This Romans 6 foundation is also the basis for verse 14's confidence: “for sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.” The assurance that sin cannot ultimately maintain its dominion over the believer is not grounded in the believer's consistency in mortification but in the theological reality of the believer's position under grace. The law demands obedience and provides no power to produce it; grace both declares the believer righteous and provides the Spirit's power to live righteously. Sin's mastery was the condition of the law-bound soul; grace has broken that mastery, and the Spirit's sanctifying work, including mortification, is the progressive expression of that liberation in daily experience.

“If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” | “Put to death the members of your earthly body” | “Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus”

Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5; Romans 6:11, NASB 1995

IV. The Colossians Pattern: Off with the Old, On with the New

Colossians 3:1–17 as the Most Complete Description of the Double Work

A. The Theological Orientation: Set Your Mind on Things Above

Colossians 3:1–17 is the most complete and most practically detailed description of the double work of mortification and vivification in the New Testament, and it establishes the theological orientation of the double work in its first two verses: “If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (vv. 1–3, NASB 1995). The double work is grounded in the double reality of union with Christ: the believer has died with Christ (v. 3, the indicative of mortification) and has been raised with Christ (v. 1, the indicative of vivification). The imperatives that follow (mortify, put off, put on) are the working out of these two indicatives in daily life.

The command to “set your mind on the things above” is the pneumatological orientation of all effective mortification. The person whose mind is set on earthly things, whose attention, affections, and aspirations are predominantly directed toward the things of the flesh and the world, will find mortification impossible. The person whose mind is set on the things above, who has reoriented his attentiveness toward Christ, the gospel, the promises of God, and the eschatological reality of the hidden life that is with Christ in God, will find mortification not only possible but increasingly natural, as the desires of the new nature progressively displace the desires of the old. Romans 8:5–6 makes the same connection: “For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”

B. Mortification: The Putting Off

The mortification side of the Colossians pattern is presented in two movements. The first, verses 5–9, is the explicit mortification command: “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry” (v. 5, NASB 1995). Note the specificity: Paul does not call believers to mortify sin in general but to mortify specific sins, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed (the first list, dealing with inwardly oriented sins), and then anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech (v. 8), and lying (v. 9). The specific, named, particular character of the mortification command is the application of what Romans 8:13 established: mortification is not a vague spiritual disposition but a specific, targeted engagement with particular sins.

The radical language of verse 5, “consider the members of your earthly body as dead”, is the Pauline equivalent of Jesus’ instruction to pluck out the eye and cut off the hand that causes sin (Matthew 5:29–30). Both are hyperbolic not in their seriousness but in their literalness: the point is not that physical self-mutilation is required, but that the seriousness of the mortification must be such that it actually removes the capacity for sin’s expression, not merely reduces its frequency. A sin that is limited but not killed is a sin that is resting, not dying; and a resting sin, as Owen observed, is not a dead sin but a dormant one.

Verses 9–10 add the temporal dimension: “Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.” The past tense of “laid aside” and “have put on” describes the definitional reality of conversion: at conversion, the believer definitively laid aside the old self and put on the new. The ongoing imperatives of mortification and vivification are the working out of that decisive, conversion-moment reality in the daily experience of the Christian life.

C. Vivification: The Putting On

The vivification side of the Colossians pattern is the explicit counterpart of the mortification: “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:12–17, NASB 1995).

The vivification list of Colossians 3:12–17 is the positive filling of the space that mortification has created. The specific virtues listed are the Spirit’s fruit (examined in Lesson 19) viewed from the angle of deliberate, habitual, Spirit-enabled choosing: they are put on, the way one deliberately and intentionally puts on clothing each morning. The word “put on” (*enduo*) is the same word Paul uses in Romans 13:14 (“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”) and Ephesians 4:24 (“put on the new self”), suggesting that the specific virtues of Colossians 3:12–17 are dimensions of Christ Himself being “put on” through the Spirit’s vivifying work. Vivification is not the cultivation of abstract virtues but the progressive clothing of the believer with the character of the Lord Jesus Christ.

V. The Danger of Moralism

Mortification as Gospel-Grounded Warfare, Not White-Knuckled Self-Discipline

The most persistent and most spiritually destructive distortion of mortification is the reduction of it to moralism: the treatment of sin-killing as an essentially human enterprise of self-discipline, willpower, and moral resolve, pursued by the believer on his own in the power of his

own determination. Moralism produces two equally destructive outcomes. The moralist who succeeds, who manages, by force of personality and strength of will, to suppress the external expression of a particular sin, produces pride: the pride of one who believes he has defeated sin by his own spiritual effort, who looks down on those who struggle with what he has conquered, and who mistakes the temporary quieting of sin for its genuine mortification. The moralist who fails, whose willpower is exhausted by the demands of sustained self-denial, produces despair: the crushing sense that the sin is stronger than any effort to resist it, that the Christian life is an impossibility, and that the promises of sanctification are fraudulent.

Both outcomes, pride and despair, are the symptoms of moralism, and both are healed by the same corrective: the gospel. Mortification is not a war fought in the believer's own strength, from a neutral position, toward the distant goal of sin's eventual defeat. It is a war fought in the Spirit's power, from the position of the victory that Christ has already accomplished, toward the experiential expression of the death to sin that is already the believer's reality in Christ. The believer who mortifies sin in the gospel's power does not fight for acceptance before God; he fights from acceptance before God. The difference between fighting for acceptance and fighting from acceptance is the difference between exhausting, pride-producing, despair-inducing moralism and the joyful, Spirit-empowered, gospel-grounded warfare of genuine mortification.

Owen captures the gospel-grounding of mortification with characteristic precision: "Unless a man be a believer, that is, unless he have faith in Christ, he can have no true mortification of sin, in a gospel sense." The mortification that does not flow from faith in Christ's accomplished redemption, from the assurance of the believer's accepted standing in Christ, and from the power of the Spirit who applies that redemption, is not genuine mortification but moralism, sin management by human willpower, which changes behaviors without transforming the heart. The person who has not yet understood that the war against sin is fought from a position of forensic victory, not toward it, is the person who will exhaust himself in the effort and either conclude that he has achieved what he has not (moralistic pride) or that it is impossible to achieve (moralistic despair).

The Galatians 5:16–17 framework provides the pneumatological corrective: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another." Walking by the Spirit is the pneumatological mode of mortification, the daily, moment-by-moment, Spirit-dependent engagement with the Spirit's direction that enables the progressive victory over the flesh's desires. This is not passive acquiescence to whatever the Spirit happens to be doing; it is the active, deliberate, Spirit-dependent choosing of the Spirit's way in each specific moment of temptation and trial. The believer who walks by the Spirit does not carry out the desire of the flesh, not because his willpower is sufficient but because the Spirit's power is greater than the flesh's desire.

VI. The Means of Mortification

The Spirit's Instruments in the Death-Dealing Work

If mortification is the Spirit's work and not primarily a human achievement, the question naturally arises: what is the believer's active role in the process? The answer is the same as the answer given for sanctification in general (Lesson 18): the believer's role is to place himself in the context of the Spirit's working by engaging the means through which the Spirit accomplishes His mortifying work. Several specific means are particularly important for mortification.

First, the Word of God. The Word is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17), the specific instrument through which the Spirit fights the war against sin. Hebrews 4:12 describes the Word's penetrating, sin-exposing power: "the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Word exposes the specific sinful thoughts, motivations, and patterns that the Spirit is calling the believer to mortify; it supplies the specific promises and truths that the Spirit uses to displace sin's appeal; and it presents Christ in His fullness as the alternative that makes sin's pleasures look shallow and temporary by comparison.

Second, prayer. The prayer of specific confession and specific petition is the Spirit's means of applying the gospel's power to the specific sin that mortification is targeting. Confession (1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness") brings the sin into the light of God's presence, where the Spirit can deal with it in the power of the cross. Petition ("Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil", Matthew 6:13) expresses the believer's dependence on the Spirit's power rather than his own for the resistance of temptation. The person who does not pray about the specific sins he is mortifying is the person who is attempting mortification in his own strength.

Third, accountability in the Christian community. The isolation of sin, the characteristic instinct of the fallen nature to hide its struggles from the sight of other believers, is one of sin's most effective strategies for maintaining its power. James 5:16 ("Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed") connects the communal confession of sin to the Spirit's healing work. The person who brings a specific, persistent sin into the light of a trusted, Spirit-filled believer's knowledge, and who asks for that believer's prayer and accountability, is using the community as the Spirit's instrument for the work that isolation prevents. Genuine Christian community, the community in which sins can be named, prayers can be specific, and accountability can be real, is one of the Spirit's most powerful mortification instruments.

Fourth, the preaching of the gospel to oneself. Owen's most distinctive contribution to the theology of mortification is his insistence that the power of mortification flows from the believer's constant, faith-filled contemplation of the cross. The specific application is this: when the specific temptation arises, the specific gospel answer to that specific temptation is the Spirit's primary weapon. Christ died for this sin; the penalty is paid; the power of sin over the believer is broken by the cross; the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead dwells within the believer and is greater than the sin that is assaulting him. These are not vague encouraging thoughts; they are the specific, targeted, Spirit-wielded truths of the gospel, applied to the specific moment of temptation, that produce the specific mortification of the specific sin. The

person who preaches the gospel to himself in the moment of temptation is the person who is fighting with the Spirit's sword rather than his own willpower.

VII. The Realistic Expectation and the Pastoral Encouragement

Sin Will Not Be Eradicated Before Glorification, But It Must Be Persistently Engaged

First John 1:8–10 provides the realistic theological baseline for all Christian experience of mortification: “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us” (NASB 1995). The claim of sinlessness, whether the claim that one no longer has sin (v. 8) or the claim that one has not sinned (v. 10), is identified not as spiritual maturity but as self-deception. The honest, realistic, gospel-grounded Christian is the one who knows himself to be a sinner, who confesses that sin specifically and honestly, and who receives the forgiveness and cleansing that God's faithfulness and righteousness provide through Christ's atoning blood (v. 7).

The realistic expectation of mortification is therefore this: sin will not be fully eradicated in this life. The war between the flesh and the Spirit (Galatians 5:17) will continue until glorification. The remaining sin of the old nature will assert itself regularly, sometimes powerfully, and the mortification of one pattern of sin will often reveal another pattern previously hidden beneath it. The believer who expects that sustained mortification will eventually produce a state of sinlessness is the believer who will be periodically deceived by his own apparent progress and then devastated by the sin that he thought he had finally killed. Sin is more deeply rooted and more comprehensively present in the fallen nature than any finite program of mortification can fully address before the day of glorification.

But this realistic expectation is not a counsel of passivity or accommodation. The fact that sin cannot be fully eradicated before glorification does not mean that mortification is futile or that specific sins cannot be genuinely weakened and progressively overcome. Owen's careful formulation is helpful: the goal of mortification is not the eradication of sin but its habitual weakening, the progressive reduction of its dominance, the diminishing of its power over the believer's affections and choices, and the growing replacement of its expression with the Spirit's fruit. A sin that once had complete dominance over the believer's behavior may, through sustained mortification, come to have only occasional influence; that is genuine progress, even if it is not eradication.

The pastoral encouragement with which Unit 7 closes is identical to the encouragement with which Lesson 18 closed: the Spirit who began the good work will complete it (Philippians 1:6). The mortification and vivification that the Spirit is working in the believer's life are not the believer's solo project of sin-management; they are the Spirit's ongoing, faithful, unrelenting work of conforming the believer to the image of Christ, a work that will not be abandoned before it reaches its eschatological completion. The believer who is fighting the war against sin

by the Spirit's power, from the gospel's position of forensic victory, through the means of grace that the Spirit has ordained, with the realistic expectation that the war will be long, the progress uneven, and the victories real, that believer is the believer who is genuinely cooperating with the Spirit's sanctifying work. And the Spirit who calls him to that cooperation is the Spirit who guarantees that it will arrive, in the fullness of time, at the complete and perfect mortification of all remaining sin in the day of glorification.

*“For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die;
but if by the Spirit you are putting to death
the deeds of the body, you will live.”*

Romans 8:13, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Mortification	From Latin mortificatio (mors, death + facere, to make): the act of causing death. The active, Spirit-empowered killing of sin in the believer's life, the Spirit-dependent, targeted, specific engagement with particular sinful patterns, habits, and affections in order to weaken and progressively destroy their power over the believer's will and behavior. Defined by Romans 8:13 ("If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live") and described in practice by Colossians 3:5–9 ("Put to death the members of your earthly body"). Distinguished from moralism (sin-management by willpower) as Spirit-empowered warfare from the position of gospel-established forensic victory, not human self-discipline toward a victory not yet achieved.
Vivification	From Latin vivificatio (vita, life + facere, to make): the act of bringing to life. The Spirit's positive counterpart to mortification's negative work, the bringing to life of new desires, new affections, and new patterns of obedience in the believer's soul as the space vacated by sin's mortification is filled with the Spirit's life. Described in practice by Colossians 3:12–17 ("Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... put on love"). The inseparable partner of mortification: mortification without vivification is the killing of sin without the planting of godliness; vivification without mortification is the cultivating of godliness in soil still occupied by competing sin.
Owen's Dictum	"Be killing sin, or it will be killing you", John Owen, <i>The Mortification of Sin</i> (1656). The Puritan formulation of the spiritual urgency of mortification: sin is never static; it is either being actively weakened and dying, or it is actively strengthening and growing. Owen's broader definition of mortification is "the habitual weakening of the principle of sin, and the improvement of the principle of grace", encompassing both the negative (weakening of sin's principle) and the positive (improvement of the principle of grace) dimensions of the double work. Owen's critical observation: mortification must be the work of genuine believers in Christ, "Unless a man be a believer... he can have no true mortification of sin, in a gospel sense."
Indicative-Imperative	The grammatical and theological structure of New Testament ethical instruction in which the imperative (the command) is grounded in and flows from the indicative (the theological declaration of what is already true). In sanctification, the indicative is the believer's position in Christ: dead to sin, alive to God (Romans 6:11). The imperatives of mortification and vivification flow from this indicative: do not let sin reign; present yourselves to God as alive from the dead (Romans 6:12–13). The believer does not mortify sin in

Term	Definition
	order to achieve death to sin; he mortifies sin as the Spirit-empowered expression of the death to sin that is already his in union with Christ.
The Deeds of the Body	The specific, concrete, particular manifestations of remaining sin in the believer's daily experience, the object of mortification in Romans 8:13 ("putting to death the deeds of the body"). Not sin in general or sinfulness in the abstract, but the specific behavioral patterns, habits, and tendencies through which the sinful nature expresses itself in the physical body. Owen's insistence that mortification must be specific, targeted at particular sins in their particular forms, rather than a vague spiritual disposition against sinfulness in general.
The Colossians Pattern	The most complete New Testament description of the double work of mortification and vivification in Colossians 3:1–17, structured around two movements: (1) the mortification movement ("put to death the members of your earthly body", vv. 5–9, with specific sins named), and (2) the vivification movement ("put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... put on love", vv. 12–17, with specific virtues to be deliberately donned). Both movements are grounded in the indicative of vv. 1–3: the believer has died with Christ and been raised with Christ, and the imperatives of mortification and vivification are the working out of these twin realities in daily experience.
Moralism	The distortion of mortification that reduces it to a human enterprise of sin-management by willpower, moral resolve, and self-discipline, pursued without reliance on the Spirit's power or grounding in the gospel's forensic victory. Moralism produces two outcomes: pride (in the person who appears to succeed by suppressing sin's expression without killing its internal principle) and despair (in the person who finds his willpower exhausted by the demands of sustained self-denial). Both are healed by the gospel corrective: mortification is Spirit-empowered warfare, fought from the position of accepted standing in Christ, not for acceptance before God.
Preaching the Gospel to Oneself	The mortification practice of applying the specific gospel truths of Christ's redemption to the specific temptation being faced in the specific moment, displacing sin's appeal with the Spirit-wielded truth of what Christ has accomplished. Owen's insight: the power of mortification flows from the believer's constant, faith-filled contemplation of the cross and its specific application to the specific temptation at hand. The person who preaches the gospel to himself in the moment of temptation, "Christ died for this sin; its penalty is paid; the Spirit who raised Christ is greater than this sin", is fighting with the Spirit's sword rather than his own willpower.
Habitual Weakening	Owen's description of the goal of mortification: not the eradication of sin in this life (1 John 1:8) but the habitual weakening of sin's principle, the progressive reduction of its dominance, the diminishing of its power over the believer's affections and choices, and the growing replacement of its

Term	Definition
	expression with the Spirit's fruit. A sin that once had complete dominance may, through sustained mortification, come to have only occasional influence; that is genuine progress, even if not eradication. The realistic expectation of mortification: the war continues until glorification, but specific sins can be genuinely and progressively weakened through Spirit-empowered, means-of-grace-engaged, gospel-grounded mortification.
Fighting from Victory	The theological posture of genuine mortification, grounded in the Romans 6 indicative: the believer mortifies sin not toward a forensic victory that has not yet been achieved but from the forensic victory that has already been accomplished in Christ's death and resurrection. Death to sin and life to God are the believer's position in Christ (Romans 6:11); mortification is the Spirit-empowered expression of that position in daily experience. Contrasted with moralism's posture of fighting for acceptance (trying to earn a standing that is not yet secure) as the difference between Spirit-empowered gospel warfare and exhausting, pride-producing, despair-inducing self-effort.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that mortification is the Spirit's work, not our achievement, that the war against sin is fought in the Spirit's power, from the gospel's position of forensic victory, through the means of grace that the Spirit has ordained. This conviction is the essential correction to moralism: the moment the believer begins to think of mortification as primarily a matter of his own determination and willpower, he has begun fighting the wrong war with the wrong weapons. The Spirit's power, the gospel's grace, and the means the Spirit has ordained are the weapons of genuine mortification; willpower, self-discipline, and moral resolution are the weapons of moralism. The former can genuinely kill sin; the latter can only suppress it.

We must also believe the double work's inseparability: mortification without vivification is incomplete. The person who is engaged in serious, Spirit-empowered killing of specific sins but who is not simultaneously cultivating the specific virtues that replace them, who is not putting on love, patience, and kindness where impatience and unkindness are being put off, is doing half the work that sanctification requires. The full Colossians pattern is the model: put to death the specific sins, and put on the specific virtues in their place. The space that mortification clears must be filled with vivification's positive growth, or it will be reoccupied by the sin that has not been permanently displaced.

B. For the Heart: *What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let Owen's dictum land with its full spiritual weight: "Be killing sin, or it will be killing you." The choice he presents is not between a comfortable neutral position and the strenuous effort of mortification; it is between two active processes, the believer killing sin or sin killing the believer. There is no middle ground, no sustainable coexistence, no treaty available between the regenerate soul and the remaining sin of the old nature. The seriousness of Owen's dictum should produce in every genuinely regenerate believer the Spirit-given urgency for the mortification of specific, named, persistent sins, not the anxious despair of one who fears he is losing the war, but the Spirit-confident urgency of one who knows that the war must be fought, that the Spirit's power is sufficient, and that the price of passivity is spiritual atrophy.

Desire the gospel-grounded freedom of fighting from victory rather than for it. The person who is fighting for acceptance before God, who is mortifying sin in order to become acceptable to God, will find the effort exhausting and ultimately futile, because the standard is too high and the motivation is fear rather than love. The person who is fighting from acceptance before God, who is mortifying sin because he is already fully accepted in Christ and because sin is an affront to the grace that has redeemed him and an offense to the Spirit who indwells him, will find the effort motivated by the love that makes holiness not a burden but a delight. Desire to be that person: the one who mortifies sin not in order to earn God's favor but in order to honor the God whose favor is already, by grace, fully and permanently bestowed.

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Identify one specific, persistent sin in your life that most clearly needs to be mortified, not a general category (pride, selfishness) but a specific, named, behaviorally concrete manifestation (the specific way pride expresses itself in your specific relationships; the specific form of selfishness that appears in your specific daily choices). Then apply the four specific means of mortification to this specific sin: (1) What specific Word of God speaks to this specific sin? (2) What specific prayer of confession and petition would engage the Spirit's power against it? (3) Who in your Christian community could provide specific accountability for it? (4) What is the specific gospel truth that most directly displaces its appeal?
- Read Romans 6:1–14 as the theological foundation of mortification. Note the three rhetorical questions Paul asks in verses 1–3, 15–16 (“Shall we sin...? May it never be!”) as his response to the antinomian inference from grace. Then trace the movement from indicative (vv. 1–10, you have died with Christ) to the first imperative (v. 11, consider yourselves dead to sin) to the active imperatives (vv. 12–13, do not let sin reign; do not present; but present). How does the progression from indicative to imperative protect mortification from both moralism (fighting for victory) and antinomianism (grace makes mortification unnecessary)?
- Read Colossians 3:1–17 with the Colossians pattern in mind: the theological orientation (vv. 1–3: set your minds on things above), the mortification list (vv. 5–9: specific sins to be put to death), and the vivification list (vv. 12–17: specific virtues to be put on). For the specific sin you identified in the first application point, identify the corresponding virtue in the vivification list: if impatience is being mortified, patience is being vivified; if unkind speech is being mortified, kindness and edifying speech are being vivified; if sexual immorality is being mortified, purity and honor of the body as the Spirit's temple are being vivified. The corresponding virtue is the Spirit's positive answer to the negative work of mortification.
- Evaluate your current approach to mortification against the moralism test: Are you fighting this sin primarily in your own strength (relying on willpower, resolution, and self-discipline), or primarily in the Spirit's strength (through the Word, prayer, community, and the gospel preached to yourself in the moment of temptation)? If you are fighting in your own strength, the likely outcomes are either the suppression of the sin without its actual weakening (moralistic pseudo-victory) or the exhaustion of your willpower and the despairing conclusion that the sin is unconquerable (moralistic failure). Identify the specific shift from willpower to Spirit-power that your specific mortification practice needs.
- Spend time in specific confession and prayer using 1 John 1:9 as the pneumatological model: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Name the specific sin specifically before God. Receive the specific forgiveness. Then ask the Spirit specifically for the power to put this sin to death by the Spirit's power, not your own. This is the prayer that engages the Spirit's mortifying work rather than the believer's willpower; it is the prayer that fights

from the gospel's position of accepted standing rather than for a standing not yet secure.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Owen said “Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.” Before examining the doctrine, which of these two processes most accurately describes your current relationship to the specific, named, persistent sins in your own life: are you actively engaged in the Spirit-empowered mortification of specific sins, or are specific sins actively gaining ground in your affections, habits, and patterns of thought and behavior? What would the honest observer of your daily life say about which process is currently dominant?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Romans 8:12–13. Verse 12 says believers are “not debtors to the flesh.” What does it mean to be in “debt” to the flesh? And note the two specific conditions in verse 13: (1) living according to the flesh produces death, and (2) mortifying the deeds of the body by the Spirit produces life. The relationship between the Spirit and life in verse 13 is the same relationship established throughout Romans 8 (cf. vv. 6, 11). How does the promise of “you will live” function as motivation for mortification, is it a promise of physical life, spiritual vitality, eternal life, or all three?
3. Read Romans 6:1–14 carefully. Paul establishes the theological ground of mortification in verses 1–10 (the indicative of union with Christ in death and resurrection) before giving the imperatives of verses 11–14. Map the specific correspondence between each indicative and each imperative: what aspect of the believer’s position in Christ (vv. 1–10) grounds each command in verses 11–14? And note that verse 14 (“sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace”) is a statement of assurance, not a command. What is the theological function of this assurance at the conclusion of the passage?
4. Read Colossians 3:1–17 and identify the double structure: the two lists of mortification (vv. 5, 8–9) and vivification (vv. 12–16), and the theological orientation (vv. 1–3) that grounds both. For each item in the mortification list (vv. 5, 8–9), identify a corresponding item in the vivification list (vv. 12–16), the virtue that is the positive answer to the vice being mortified. What does the completeness of the correspondence suggest about the Spirit’s sanctifying work: is it primarily negative (killing sin) or primarily positive (producing godliness), or genuinely double?
5. Read Galatians 5:16–17. Paul presents “walking by the Spirit” as the condition that prevents the carrying out of the flesh’s desire. Note that he does not say “striving against the flesh” or “resolving not to sin” but “walk by the Spirit.” What does “walking by the Spirit” mean in practical terms? Is it a passive dependence on the Spirit, an active

pursuit of the Spirit's direction, or something more nuanced? And what is the relationship between "walking by the Spirit" and the specific means of mortification identified in this lesson (Word, prayer, community, gospel preaching to oneself)?

6. Read 1 John 1:5–10. John distinguishes between claiming fellowship with God while walking in darkness (v. 6, a lie), claiming to have no sin (v. 8, self-deception), and claiming not to have sinned (v. 10, making God a liar) from the realistic, honest, gospel-grounded response of confessing sins and receiving forgiveness (v. 9). What does this passage contribute to the realistic expectation of mortification? And how does the specific promise of verse 9 ("He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness") function as both a motivation for confession and an instrument of mortification?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson distinguishes mortification (the Spirit-empowered killing of sin) from moralism (sin-management by willpower). In practice, the two can look identical from the outside: both involve the believer refusing a temptation, confessing a failure, or changing a behavior. What distinguishes genuine Spirit-empowered mortification from moralism from the inside, from the perspective of the one doing it? Is it primarily a matter of motivation (why the person is resisting sin), mechanism (how the resistance is being maintained), or result (what the resistance produces over time)?
8. The lesson presents the indicative-imperative structure as the theological ground that makes mortification genuinely possible: the believer mortifies sin as the Spirit-empowered expression of the death to sin that is already his in Christ. But a possible objection is that this makes the imperatives superfluous: if the believer is already dead to sin in Christ, why does he need to be commanded to mortify sin? How does the lesson address this objection? And what would be lost in the theology of sanctification if the indicative-imperative structure collapsed in either direction, toward pure indicative (the believer's position automatically produces the outcome without human engagement) or pure imperative (the believer achieves the outcome by his own effort)?
9. Owen argued that genuine mortification requires genuine faith in Christ, that the unregenerate person cannot mortify sin in the gospel sense, only suppress it. This claim has a significant pastoral implication: a morally reformed, externally disciplined, religiously observant person who is not regenerate is not genuinely mortifying sin but suppressing it. Does this distinction hold up under scrutiny? Is there no genuine good in the moral self-discipline of unregenerate persons? And what does Owen's claim mean for the pastoral evaluation of external moral improvement in an unregenerate person?
10. The lesson presents "preaching the gospel to oneself" as one of the primary means of mortification, the practice of applying the specific gospel truths to the specific temptation being faced. Describe what this practice looks like in concrete, moment-by-moment terms. When a specific temptation arises, what specific gospel truths are most relevant? How does the Spirit use these truths to weaken the temptation's appeal? And

what is the difference between this gospel-application and the moralist's alternative of simply reminding himself of the negative consequences of sinning?

11. The realistic expectation of mortification is that sin will not be fully eradicated before glorification (1 John 1:8). But the lesson also insists that specific sins can be genuinely and progressively weakened through sustained mortification. How does the believer navigate between two errors: the Wesleyan perfectionism that expects complete eradication of sin in this life (which leads to self-deception) and the fatalistic passivity that concludes that sin cannot be genuinely overcome until glorification (which leads to accommodation)? What is the Reformed realistic expectation that avoids both errors?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson asks believers to identify one specific, persistent sin and apply four specific means of mortification to it: Word, prayer, community accountability, and gospel preaching to oneself. Having identified your specific sin: (1) What specific Scripture most directly addresses it? (2) What specific confession and petition would you pray? (3) Who in your community would you invite into accountability for it? (4) What is the specific gospel truth that most directly undermines its appeal in the moment of temptation?
13. The moralism test: honestly evaluate your current approach to the specific sin you identified. Are you primarily relying on willpower (resolution not to do it, self-discipline in avoiding it, shame when you fail) or on Spirit-power (Word, prayer, community, gospel)? If you are relying primarily on willpower, name the specific shift that would be needed to move to Spirit-empowered mortification. And what outcome would you expect from that shift, not immediately, but over six to twelve months of sustained Spirit-dependent mortification?
14. The vivification counterpart: for the specific sin you are mortifying, identify the specific virtue from the Colossians 3 vivification list that is its positive counterpart. Describe specifically what it would look like for the Spirit to produce this virtue in the relational context where the sin is most active. For example: if unkind speech is being mortified, what would genuinely kind speech look like in the specific relationship where unkind speech is most frequent? The specificity of the vivification vision is as important as the specificity of the mortification target.
15. Owen's dictum applies directly to the closing question of Unit 7: "Be killing sin, or it will be killing you." Looking back over the three lessons of Unit 7, progressive sanctification (Lesson 18), the fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 19), and mortification and vivification (Lesson 20), what single conviction or practice from these three lessons is most urgently needed in your life right now? And what specific, concrete change in your daily pattern of life would implement that conviction or practice?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson, the final lesson of Unit 7, with the reading of Romans 6:1–14, followed by a moment of corporate honesty. Ask the gathered community to bring to mind the specific, named, persistent sin that Owen’s dictum most urgently addresses in their own lives: the sin that is not being mortified, that is quietly gaining ground in the affections and habits of the person who has not faced it with the Spirit’s full mortifying power. This is not a moment for public confession of specific sins; it is a moment for private honesty before God about the specific sin that most needs the Spirit’s mortifying work. After a moment of silence, read verse 11 aloud as the pneumatological foundation: “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” This is the position from which the war is fought. You are already dead to sin in Christ. Now mortify what Christ has already killed.

Begin the corporate prayer with an extended act of confession, structured by 1 John 1:9’s assurance: “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Invite each participant to bring the specific sin before God in specific, honest confession, not a vague “I have not been what I should have been” but the naming of the specific sin in the specific form it has taken in the specific relationships and contexts of the specific week just past. The specificity of confession is the beginning of the specificity of mortification. After the confession, receive together the promise of verse 9: specific forgiveness, specific cleansing, specific restoration. The gospel that grounds the mortification is the gospel that forgives the failures of the mortification that was not yet complete.

Pray then for the Spirit’s empowerment of the mortification that follows the confession. Not the prayer of someone asking for more willpower, “God, help me try harder”, but the prayer of someone asking for the Spirit’s specific, targeted, sin-directed power: “Spirit of God, You who raised Jesus from the dead and who dwell within me, by Your power, put to death this specific deed of this specific body. Not by my willpower but by Your power. Not from a position of weakness but from the position of Christ’s death and resurrection that is already mine in Him. Let the gospel truth that sin’s penalty has been paid in Christ’s blood be the sword that severs the appeal of this sin from its root.” Then pray for the vivification counterpart: for the Spirit to bring to life the specific virtue that is this sin’s positive replacement.

Close Unit 7 with the prayer of Philippians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24: the dual assurance that the Spirit who began the good work will complete it, and that the God of peace will sanctify entirely and preserve the whole person until the day of Christ. The mortification and vivification that the Spirit is working are not the believer’s solo project; they are the Spirit’s faithful, persistent, unrelenting work of conforming the believer to Christ. Close with the declaration that closes every unit of this series: the Spirit’s sanctifying work, through progressive sanctification, through the production of the fruit, and through the double work of mortification and vivification, is all to the glory of God who called, who justifies, and who will glorify. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

*“And do not go on presenting the members of your body to
sin
as instruments of unrighteousness;
but present yourselves to God
as those alive from the dead,
and your members as instruments of righteousness to
God.”*

Romans 6:13, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Romans 8:12–13; Romans 6:1–14; Colossians 3:1–17; Galatians 5:16–17; 1 John 1:5–10; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; James 5:16; Matthew 6:13; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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