

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

HAMARTIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Sin

The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us

UNIT 8: SIN IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER THE ONGOING STRUGGLE, ITS REMEDY, AND ITS FINAL RESOLUTION

Lesson 22

The Mortification of Sin

The Believer's Lifelong Battle

Be Killing Sin, or It Will Be Killing You

"If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." — Romans 8:13

Key Texts: Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5–10; Romans 6:11–14; Galatians 5:24; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 12:1–2

"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

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

Lesson 21 established the theological reality of remaining sin in the life of the genuine believer: the simul justus et peccator condition of the person who is simultaneously righteous in Christ by imputation and sinful in herself by remaining corruption, whose ongoing struggle with sin is both real and expected, and whose grief over that sin is evidence of the Spirit's regenerating work rather than its contradiction. This lesson moves from the diagnosis to the discipline: if remaining sin is the ongoing condition of every genuine believer in the present age, what is the believer's specific calling in response to it? The answer that the Scriptures and the Reformed tradition together give is mortification, the Spirit-empowered, gospel-motivated, lifelong discipline of actively putting to death the specific patterns of remaining sin in one's specific life.

The lesson opens with John Owen's name and his 1656 *Mortification of Sin*, and Owen's presence at the opening is entirely appropriate. Owen's *Mortification of Sin* remains, nearly four centuries after its publication, the most important Protestant treatment of the subject ever written, more practically penetrating than anything published since, more theologically precise than most popular treatments of spiritual discipline, and more pastorally urgent than many sermons ever preached on the topic. Owen understood that the battle with remaining sin was not a peripheral spiritual concern but the central occupation of the Christian life in the present age, and that the specific strategies available for the engagement of that battle were both more specific and more dependent on the Spirit than any purely psychological or behavioral account of spiritual discipline could provide. This lesson draws extensively on Owen's analysis while grounding the entire discussion in the primary biblical texts.

Owen's governing principle captures the urgency of the subject in seven unforgettable words: "Be killing sin, or it will be killing you." The principle is not rhetorical hyperbole; it is the specific theological claim that there is no neutral ground in the battle with remaining sin. The believer who is not actively engaged in the mortification of sin is not standing still; she is losing ground to an enemy that is actively working against her. Sin in the believer's life is not a static condition that remains at a stable level of influence when not specifically addressed; it is a dynamic power that either diminishes through the active work of mortification or grows through the neglect of it. The urgency of Romans 8:13's conditional, "if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live", corresponds precisely to Owen's foundational principle: the putting-to-death is not an optional spiritual enrichment for the particularly devoted; it is the specific discipline by which the believer lives, in the full sense that Romans 8:13 intends.

This lesson examines the mortification of sin in six major sections. Section I establishes the biblical mandate for mortification from Romans 8:13, Colossians 3:5, Galatians 5:24, and Hebrews 12:1–2. Section II examines what mortification is, its character, its goal, and its mechanism, with sustained engagement with Owen's analysis. Section III examines what mortification is not, clearing away the common misunderstandings that substitute ineffective substitutes for the genuine discipline. Section IV develops the five specific means of mortification identified in the outline. Section V examines the progress of sanctification through mortification, its lifelong, incremental, battle-by-battle character. Section VI develops the eschatological horizon and the doxological implications of the entire discipline.

I. The Biblical Mandate for Mortification

Romans 8:13, Colossians 3:5, and the Active Killing of Sin

A. Romans 8:13 and the Conditional of Life

Romans 8:13 provides the New Testament's most direct and most theologically concentrated mandate for mortification: "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 a conditional statement with two branches, and the structure of the conditional is itself theologically significant: it is not "if the Spirit puts to death the deeds of the body for you, you will live" (which would eliminate the believer's active role) but "if by the Spirit you are putting to death", the Spirit as the enabling agency (instrumental dative: by means of the Spirit) and the believer as the active agent of the putting-to-death.

Three grammatical features of Romans 8:13 require specific attention. First, the agency: "by the Spirit" establishes the Spirit as the source of the power by which mortification is accomplished. No mortification of sin occurs by the force of human willpower alone; the specific power that enables the putting-to-death is the Spirit's power operating through the believer's activity. This is not passive resignation (the believer does nothing and waits for the Spirit to act) but active Spirit-dependence (the believer acts, and the Spirit empowers the acting). Second, the verb: "putting to death" (*thanatouō*) is a present active imperative, establishing the ongoing, habitual, daily character of the mortifying discipline. It is not an aorist (a decisive once-for-all act) but a present (a continuous, repeated, never-completed-until-glorification activity). Third, the object: "the deeds of the body" specifies the target of mortification as the specific behavioral expressions of the flesh's remaining corruption, the particular sins and patterns that the believer's body produces as instruments of the old nature's residual influence.

The verse's context within Romans 8:1–17 establishes the specific theological framework within which the mortification command is given. The chapter has established that the believer is "in the Spirit" (verse 9), that the Spirit of God dwells in her (verse 9), and that the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead gives life to her mortal body through His indwelling (verse 11). These are the presuppositions of the mortification command: mortification is the Spirit-empowered activity of a person who is already indwelt by the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead. The power available for the putting-to-death is therefore not merely the force of human determination but the resurrection power of the Spirit of God who indwells the believer. This is the specific reason why mortification's power exceeds all merely human spiritual discipline: it is the Spirit's power, not the believer's.

B. Colossians 3:5, Galatians 5:24, and Hebrews 12:1–2

Colossians 3:5's mortification command complements Romans 8:13 with the imperative mood of a decisive, definitive call: "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (NASB 1995). The Greek *nekrōsate* is aorist active imperative, more decisive than the present tense of Romans 8:13, but not in contradiction to it: the aorist imperative issues a definitive call to the decisive orientation toward the sin as already dead through the believer's co-crucifixion with Christ, while the present tense of Romans 8:13 establishes the ongoing, daily implementation of that decisive orientation. Together they capture the full character of the mortifying discipline: a definitive commitment of orientation (Colossians 3:5) expressed in ongoing, daily, never-completed activity (Romans 8:13).

Galatians 5:24 provides the Christological ground of the mortification mandate: "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (NASB 1995). The aorist "have crucified" describes a past-tense covenantal reality: in the believer's union with Christ, the flesh with its passions and desires has already been crucified. This is the indicative ground of the mortification imperative: the flesh is already crucified (Galatians 5:24's indicative), and therefore the believer is called to treat it as crucified (Colossians 3:5's imperative) in the ongoing, daily implementation of that crucifixion (Romans 8:13's present imperative). The mortification is not producing the crucifixion; it is implementing the crucifixion that has already occurred covenantally. The believer is not killing what is still fully alive; she is implementing the death of what has already been covenantally executed.

Hebrews 12:1–2 provides the athletic imagery that frames the entire mortification discipline within the eschatological context of the race: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (NASB 1995). The laying aside is the mortification command; the running with endurance is the vivification command; and the fixing of the eyes on Jesus is the christological orientation that gives both their direction and their power. The athlete lays aside every encumbrance not to prove her strength but to run the race effectively; the believer mortifies remaining sin not to earn merit but to run the specific race of the specific life to which she has been called with the maximum freedom and the maximum forward momentum toward the goal.

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.”

Hebrews 12:1–2, NASB 1995

II. What Mortification Is

Owen’s Analysis and the Character of Genuine Killing

A. The Goal: Habitual Weakening

John Owen’s definition of the goal of mortification is the most precise in the entire Reformed tradition: not the complete elimination of indwelling sin (that is perfectionism, and Owen is careful to distinguish mortification from it) but the habitual weakening of its power in the believer’s specific life. Mortification succeeds not when the particular sin never again exerts any pull (that will be glorification’s achievement) but when its pull is progressively weaker, its hold is progressively loosened, its deceitful self-justifications are progressively exposed and disarmed, and its characteristic behavioral expressions are progressively reduced. The success of mortification is measured not by the absence of temptation but by the diminishing power of temptation’s pull and the increasing ease with which the Spirit’s power enables the believer to resist it.

Owen’s specific language for the goal is illuminating: he speaks of the sin’s “habitual weakening,” suggesting that the process is gradual and accumulative rather than dramatic and instantaneous. The sin that has been mortified for thirty years has less power over the believer than the sin that has been mortified for thirty days, not because the flesh’s corruption has been eliminated but because the Spirit’s work of weakening has been progressively applied to a specific sin over a sustained period of engaged warfare. This is the specific model of spiritual progress that the present tense of Romans 8:13 describes: the ongoing, never-completed, progressively effective putting-to-death that weakens the sin’s power not all at once but battle by battle, day by day, across the full span of the believer’s earthly life.

B. The Mechanism: The Spirit, the Gospel, and the Believer’s Active Engagement

The mechanism of mortification in Owen’s analysis and in the biblical account is the cooperation of three active agents: the Holy Spirit as the efficient cause and the empowering presence without whom no genuine mortification occurs; the gospel of Christ as the specific word that breaks the power of specific sins by confronting their specific lies with the specific truth of the cross; and the believer’s own active engagement as the instrumental cause through whom the Spirit’s power is channeled into the specific, daily, practical disciplines of recognition, confession, renunciation, and accountability.

Owen’s most important contribution to the analysis of the mechanism is his insistence that the gospel, not merely the law, and not merely the general awareness of God’s disapproval, is the specific instrument that breaks the power of specific sins. The sin’s power rests on a specific lie: that the particular object of its desire will provide the satisfaction, the peace, the comfort, or the pleasure that the sin is promising. The law can declare the sin’s

wrongness, but it cannot provide the alternative. Only the gospel, the specific, cross-grounded proclamation of the sufficiency of Christ to satisfy every legitimate desire that the sin is perversely claiming to address, can undermine the sin's specific lie with the specific truth that disarms it. This is what Owen means by "preaching the cross to yourself daily": the daily, specific application of the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work to the specific deceits by which specific sins maintain their hold on the believer's affections and choices.

The believer's own active engagement in the mechanism of mortification is the specific counterpart to the Spirit's empowering work. The Spirit does not mortify sin in the believer without the believer's active participation; He mortifies sin through it. The believer who is "putting to death" (Romans 8:13's active voice) is the instrument through whom the Spirit's power operates, and the specific disciplines of her active engagement, honest recognition, genuine humiliation, specific gospel application, deliberate Spirit-dependence, and accountable community, are the specific channels through which the Spirit's mortifying power flows into the specific patterns of sin she is working to weaken. Neither the Spirit alone (waiting passively for the Spirit to act without one's own active engagement) nor the believer alone (attempting to mortify sin by the force of willpower without dependence on the Spirit's power) is the mechanism; it is the Spirit-empowered believer in active, dependent, gospel-motivated engagement.

"Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry... But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth."

Colossians 3:5, 8, NASB 1995

III. What Mortification Is Not

Clearing Away the Counterfeits

Owen's analysis of mortification spends considerable time on what genuine mortification is not, precisely because the counterfeits are so common and so persistently mistaken for the genuine article. The identification of the counterfeits is not a secondary concern but the specific preparation of the spiritual battlefield: the believer who is engaged in behavioral modification, suppression, or asceticism rather than genuine Spirit-empowered mortification is not merely less effective than the genuine article; she is engaged in a discipline that systematically misdirects her energy while giving her the false reassurance that the genuine work is being done.

A. Not Behavior Modification

The most common counterfeit of mortification is behavior modification: the external management of sinful behavior through the force of willpower, environmental control, or the modification of circumstances that trigger the sinful response. Behavior modification is not worthless, removing oneself from occasions of specific temptation, establishing healthy patterns of life that make specific sins less accessible, and cultivating habits that support rather than undermine the mortifying discipline are all legitimate and valuable components of the broader strategy. But behavior modification as a substitute for mortification misses the specific target: it addresses the behavior without addressing the heart from which the behavior flows (Matthew 15:18–19). The person who has modified the behavior but not mortified the heart has not killed the sin; she has merely denied the sin its characteristic expression while leaving its root intact.

Owen's extended discussion of the sin's "deceitfulness" is the specific warning against the false reassurance that behavior modification produces. The sin that is not being behaviorally expressed is not necessarily a sin that is being mortified; it may be a sin that has temporarily lost access to its characteristic expression while continuing to grow in its root. The person who has stopped drinking but has not mortified the specific idolatry of self-comfort that drove the drinking has not killed the sin; she has redirected it into other expressions or banked its energy for a future eruption. True mortification goes to the root; behavior modification addresses the fruit. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient without the other.

B. Not Suppression and Not Asceticism

The second counterfeit is suppression: the forced, white-knuckled, willpower-driven refusal to allow the sin expression. Suppression and mortification can look similar from the outside, in both cases, the characteristic behavioral expression of the sin may be absent. But they are fundamentally different in their mechanism and in their effects. Suppression drives the sin underground; it does not weaken the sin but forces it below the surface, where it builds pressure and waits for an opportunity to erupt when the suppressing force is relaxed. Mortification weakens the sin; it progressively reduces the sin's power over the believer's affections so that the desire for the sin's characteristic object genuinely diminishes rather than merely being denied expression.

The third counterfeit is asceticism: the production of physical pain, discomfort, or deprivation as a means of spiritual discipline. Asceticism has a long history in Christian spirituality, fasting, physical penances, deliberate self-denial of legitimate pleasures as spiritual training, and some forms of it represent genuine and valuable spiritual disciplines. But asceticism as a mortification strategy misunderstands both the nature of sin and the nature of the atonement. Sin's power does not reside in the body's physical comfort; it resides in the heart's disordered desires and the will's enslaved choices. And the atonement has already provided the specific payment for the sin's guilt; no further payment through the flesh's suffering can add to or supplement what the cross has already discharged. The ascetic who believes her physical discomfort is contributing to the mortification of sin has introduced a works-righteousness principle into the discipline of sanctification that the gospel specifically rules out.

The common thread running through all three counterfeits, behavior modification, suppression, and asceticism, is the attempt to address remaining sin by human effort rather than by the Spirit's power, and by targeting the sin's expression rather than its root. True mortification is always Spirit-empowered (by the Spirit, Romans 8:13), always gospel-motivated (applying the cross to the sin's specific lie, Owen), always heart-directed (targeting the sin's root rather than its expression), and always characterized by the specific humility of one who knows that the power for the killing is not her own.

IV. The Five Means of Mortification

The Specific Disciplines Owen Identifies for the Killing of Sin

A. Recognition and Humiliation

The first means of mortification is recognition: the honest, accurate, Spirit-illuminated identification of the specific sin being mortified, including its characteristic patterns, its typical triggers, its deceitful self-justifications, and the specific objects it claims will satisfy the desires it is exploiting. Owen's insistence that the first step in killing sin is accurately knowing what you are killing is the application of the biblical doctrine of the heart's self-deception (Jeremiah 17:9, Lesson 15) to the specific practice of mortification. The sin that is not accurately known is the sin that cannot be specifically targeted; and the sin that is not specifically targeted cannot be specifically weakened. The recognition is not merely intellectual categorization ("I have a problem with pride") but the honest, Spirit-illuminated, self-examination-produced knowledge of the specific form that pride takes in one's specific life, the specific occasions that trigger its expression, and the specific lies it deploys to justify itself.

The second means is humiliation: genuine, God-directed, new-nature-expressing grief before God over the specific sin and its specific offensiveness to the holy God who has been violated. Owen's analysis of humiliation is closely connected to Lesson 21's treatment of godly sorrow: the grief over sin that 2 Corinthians 7:10 calls *kata theon* *lupe* is both the evidence of the Spirit's work (Lesson 21's pastoral encouragement) and the second specific means of mortification. The humiliation that genuine mortification requires is not the self-lacerating despair of one who believes the sin disproves her regeneration but the specific, God-directed grief of one who has genuinely come to love the God whose honor the sin has violated, a grief that drives the person to the cross for the specific forgiveness and cleansing that 1 John 1:9 provides, and that fuels the renewed engagement with the mortifying discipline from the specific motivation of love rather than merely the specific motivation of shame.

B. The Gospel and the Spirit

The third means, and the one Owen regards as the most powerful specific instrument of mortification, is the gospel: the daily, specific, cross-directed application of the grace that Christ's atoning work provides to the specific sin being mortified. Owen's specific prescription is to "preach the cross to yourself daily", to confront the specific sin's specific lie with the specific truth of the gospel. Every specific sin maintains its power over the believer's affections and choices through a specific lie about what it will provide: the sexual temptation lies about the satisfaction it will produce; the temptation to pride lies about the security it will provide; the temptation to anxiety lies about the control it will create. The cross is the specific answer to each specific lie: in Christ, every legitimate desire that the sin is perversely claiming to satisfy has been truly and eternally satisfied. The mortification of the specific sin requires the preaching of this specific truth about the specific satisfaction that the cross provides as the specific alternative to the sin's specific lie.

The fourth means is the Spirit: the ongoing, active, deliberately sought dependence on the Spirit's empowering presence as the engine of the mortifying discipline. Romans 8:13's "by the Spirit" is not the background assumption of the mortification command but its specific, foregrounded, essential qualification: without the Spirit's power, no sin is genuinely mortified. The practical implication is that the believer who is engaged in the mortification of a specific sin must be specifically, persistently, urgently seeking the Spirit's power for the specific battle she is fighting. This means prayer for the Spirit's specific intervention in the specific battle; the deliberate, conscious orientation toward the Spirit's indwelling presence as the source of the power that the battle requires; and the specific resistance to the temptation to rely on one's own willpower, strategic thinking, or behavioral discipline as the primary resource. The Spirit is not a supplement to the human effort of mortification; He is its engine.

C. Accountability

The fifth means is accountability: the confessional, corrective, mutually supportive engagement of trusted members of the body of Christ who know the specific sin and who provide the community-based accountability that isolated spiritual warfare cannot sustain. James 5:16's command, "therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (NASB 1995), is the community-dimension of the mortification discipline: the sin that is confessed only in private between the sinner and God is the sin that lacks the specific form of help that the body of Christ provides. The confession of specific sin to a specific trusted brother or sister in Christ, with the specific vulnerability, the specific exposure, and the specific request for prayer and accountability that genuine confession involves, provides several specific benefits that private spiritual warfare alone cannot.

First, the confession breaks the secrecy that specific sins typically exploit for their sustaining power. Most specific sins maintain their hold partly through the isolation and secrecy in which they are practiced: the shame of exposure is the sin's ally, because the shame keeps the sin hidden, and the hiddenness keeps the sin powerful. The confession that brings the sin into the light of the trusted community removes the specific advantage that the secrecy provides. Second, the accountability provides specific, ongoing, Spirit-empowered prayer from a fellow believer who knows the specific battle and who intercedes specifically for the specific mortification that the battle requires. And third, the accountability provides the specific encouragement and correction of a fellow traveler who knows the terrain of the specific battle from her own experience with it and who can offer the specific wisdom, the specific warning, and the specific encouragement that the isolated warrior cannot provide for herself.

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

James 5:16, NASB 1995

V. The Progress of Sanctification

One Battle at a Time, Across a Lifetime

The title of this section, “one battle at a time, across a lifetime”, captures the specific character of the progress of sanctification through mortification that the biblical evidence and the Reformed tradition together describe. Mortification does not happen overnight, does not proceed in a straight line, and does not resolve all the battles of remaining sin with a single decisive engagement. It is the cumulative result of sustained, Spirit-empowered, gospel-motivated, daily warfare against specific patterns of remaining sin, progressively weakening their power through the habitual, ongoing, present-tense activity that Romans 8:13’s verb describes.

The specific character of the progress is incremental: each mortified battle reduces the sin’s habitual power by a specific, incremental amount. The pattern of progress is rarely the dramatic, instantaneous, experiential resolution that the Higher Life tradition has promised; it is the quiet, steady, accumulative weakening of a specific sin’s grip on the believer’s affections over months and years of sustained mortifying engagement. The believer who has been faithfully mortifying a specific pattern of pride for twenty years does not experience pride with the same intensity or the same frequency that she experienced it in the first year of her Christian life; the sin has been progressively weakened through the sustained application of the Spirit’s mortifying power. But she also does not experience the complete absence of pride that perfectionism promises; the progress is real, but its terminus is glorification rather than a pre-glorification second blessing.

The inevitable defeats that punctuate the progress of mortification are not evidence that the mortification has failed; they are evidence that State 3 is not State 4, that the battle is real and ongoing, and that the believer who has suffered a specific defeat in a specific battle has not thereby lost the war. Owen’s pastoral realism on this point is essential: the person who expects the progress of mortification to be linear and uninterrupted by defeat has not understood the character of the battle. The progress is real; the defeats are also real; and the specific response to defeat is not despair but the renewed engagement of 1 John 1:9’s confession, the renewed dependence on the Spirit’s power, and the renewed pressing-on of Philippians 3:12–14 from the specific starting point of the specific defeat.

The theological frame for understanding both the progress and the defeats is the Romans 8:18–25 structure of the already-and-not-yet: the mortification that is real and progressing in the present age is moving toward the glorification in which the battle will be permanently and completely resolved. Every day of genuine mortification is a day of movement toward the specific destination that Romans 8:30’s “and these whom He justified, He also glorified” guarantees: the State 4 non posse peccare in which no mortification will be necessary because no remaining sin will be present. The present battle is the specific evidence that State 4 is not yet, and the certain arrival at State 4 is the specific eschatological fuel that sustains the present battle’s daily engagement.

VI. The Eschatological Horizon and the Glory of the Discipline

When the Battle Will Be Over and What It Will Have Been For

A. *The Day When Mortification Will Be Unnecessary*

The eschatological horizon of mortification is the specific motivation that gives the daily battle its largest possible frame. The day is coming, guaranteed by Philippians 1:6, announced by Romans 8:30, and described by 1 John 3:2, when mortification will be permanently and completely unnecessary because the glorification of State 4 will have removed every trace of the remaining sin that mortification is currently pursuing. In State 4’s non posse peccare, there will be no more sin to kill, no more flesh to fight, no more defeats to confess, and no more tears to shed over the gap between the believer’s aspirations and her achievements. The battle will be over; the enemy will have been permanently defeated; and the mortifying discipline that occupied so much of the believer’s earthly life will have been rendered permanently and gloriously unnecessary.

This eschatological anticipation is not merely a pleasant consolation at the end of a difficult lesson; it is the specific theological motivation that Owen’s entire analysis of mortification requires and that the Puritans consistently

invoked as the fuel for the present-day battle. The runner does not run more slowly because she knows the finish line is coming; she runs faster because the certainty of the finish line gives every stride its forward momentum and its specific direction. The believer who is mortifying sin in the present age knows that the specific battle she is fighting today will someday, on the day of Christ Jesus' appearing, be permanently over; and the specific certainty of that permanent ending gives the specific present battle its maximum urgency and its maximum hope simultaneously.

B. The Doxological Significance of the Discipline

The doxological significance of the mortification of sin is the specific glory it gives to the Spirit whose power enables it and to the gospel whose truth motivates it. Every act of genuine mortification, every specific moment in which the Spirit's power overcomes the flesh's desire through the believer's Spirit-dependent, gospel-motivated engagement, is a specific display of the Spirit's power and the gospel's truth working together in the life of a specific redeemed person. The watching world may not see it; the believer herself may experience it as merely another small step in a very long and very slow battle. But the victory of the Spirit over the flesh in a specific moment of a specific mortifying engagement is the specific evidence that 2 Corinthians 3:18's promise is being fulfilled: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (NASB 1995).

The transformation from glory to glory is the doxological description of the progress of sanctification through mortification: not a dramatic instantaneous change but a gradual, Spirit-worked, glory-driven, progressive conformity to the image of Christ that is the specific goal of every act of mortification and the specific content of the glorification toward which every act of mortification is moving. Every specific sin that is progressively weakened through sustained mortification is a specific way in which the believer's image is being progressively conformed to the image of the One who was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). And the final glorification, the complete conformity of 1 John 3:2's "we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is", is the eschatological completion of the transformation that every act of mortification is beginning.

The glory of the mortifying discipline is therefore not the glory of the achiever who has vanquished a foe by the force of her own strength; it is the glory of the Spirit whose resurrection power enables the vanquishing, the glory of the cross whose sufficient grace motivates and grounds it, and the glory of the Father whose sovereign sanctifying purpose guarantees that what He has begun He will complete. The believer who has mortified a specific sin through years of sustained, Spirit-dependent, gospel-motivated engagement has not accomplished this by herself; she has been the instrument through whom the Spirit's mortifying power has been channeled into a specific battle in a specific life. And the credit belongs entirely to the Triune God who provided the power, the motivation, and the guarantee, *solī Deo gloria*, in the ongoing battle that will continue until the day when the battle is over and the glory is complete.

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

2 Corinthians 3:18, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Mortification	From the Latin mortificare (to put to death): the Spirit-empowered, gospel-motivated, daily, ongoing discipline by which the regenerate believer actively weakens the power of remaining sin in her life through the use of the means of grace. The term is drawn from Romans 8:13 (“if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body”) and Colossians 3:5 (“consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed”). Mortification is not the annihilation of the sinful nature (that awaits the final glorification) but its progressive weakening through the sustained, Spirit-dependent engagement with the specific patterns of remaining sin in the believer’s specific life. John Owen’s <i>Mortification of Sin</i> (1656), which remains the most important Protestant treatment of the subject, defines the goal of mortification as the habitual weakening of the power of indwelling sin: not its complete elimination (that is perfectionism) but its progressive reduction in the specific areas where the flesh’s desire most powerfully competes with the Spirit’s.
Vivification	The positive counterpart to mortification: the Spirit-empowered, gospel-motivated cultivation of the graces, virtues, and habits that replace the patterns of sin that mortification is putting to death. Where mortification focuses on the killing of sin, vivification focuses on the cultivation of righteousness, the putting on of the new self (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10–14) that corresponds to the putting off of the old self. The Reformed tradition has consistently insisted that mortification and vivification are inseparable components of sanctification: the merely negative discipline of putting to death specific sins without the positive cultivation of the corresponding virtues produces a vacuum in the life of the believer that the mortified sin will rush back to fill (cf. Matthew 12:43–45 on the return of the unclean spirit). True sanctification is always both the killing of sin and the cultivation of the grace that replaces it.
Owen’s Foundational Principle	John Owen’s most memorable formulation of the urgency of mortification: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” The principle establishes that there is no neutral ground in the battle with remaining sin: the believer who is not actively engaging the mortification of sin is not merely standing still; she is losing ground to an enemy that is actively advancing. Sin is not static; its power in the believer’s life either diminishes through the active work of mortification or grows through the neglect of it. The urgency of Owen’s formulation corresponds to the urgency of Romans 8:13’s conditional: “if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live”, the negative implication being that failure to put to death the deeds of the body is the path of death, not the path of neutral stasis.
Putting to Death the Deeds of the Body (Romans 8:13)	Paul’s description of mortification in Romans 8:13: “if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Three specific features of this formulation carry crucial theological weight. First, the agency: “by the Spirit”, the putting to death is a Spirit-empowered activity; the Spirit is the efficient cause of mortification, and no amount of human willpower or self-discipline can accomplish what only the Spirit can do. Second, the verb: “putting to death” (thanatouō, present active), an active, present, ongoing discipline. The present tense establishes the continuous, habitual, daily character of the mortifying activity; it is not a crisis experience but a lifelong engagement. Third, the object: “the deeds of the body”, the specific, behavioral expressions of the flesh’s remaining corruption, the particular sins and patterns that the believer’s body expresses as instruments of the old nature’s remaining influence.
Consider the Members as Dead (Colossians 3:5)	Paul’s mortification command in Colossians 3:5: “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry” (NASB 1995). The word translated “consider as dead” (nekrōsate) is an aorist active imperative, a decisive, definitive command to actively treat the listed patterns of sin as already dead through the co-crucifixion with Christ that Galatians 5:24 describes: “Now those

Term	Definition
	who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” The list in verse 5, immorality (porneia), impurity (akatharsia), passion (pathos), evil desire (epithumia kakē), and greed (pleonexia, which amounts to idolatry), is the catalogue of the flesh’s most characteristic expressions in the domain of disordered desire. The command to consider them dead is the command to act toward them as the covenantal, Christological, Spirit-sealed reality of the believer’s death and resurrection with Christ (verse 1–3) declares them to be.
The Five Means of Mortification	The outline’s practical taxonomy of the specific means by which mortification is accomplished in the believer’s life, derived primarily from Owen’s Mortification of Sin and the broader Reformed pastoral tradition: (1) Recognition, the honest identification of the specific sin, its patterns, triggers, and deceitful self-justifications; Owen’s insistence that the first step in killing sin is accurately knowing what you are killing; (2) Humiliation, genuine, God-directed, new-nature-generating grief before God over the specific sin and its offensiveness to Him; (3) The gospel, the daily, specific, cross-directed application of the grace that Christ’s atonement provides to the specific sin being mortified, breaking the sin’s power by the specific word of the gospel that addresses its specific deceit; (4) The Spirit, the ongoing, active, deliberately sought dependence on the Spirit’s power rather than on the willpower of the flesh as the engine of mortification; and (5) Accountability, the confessional, corrective, mutually supportive engagement of trusted brothers and sisters in Christ who know the specific sin and who provide the community-based accountability that isolated spiritual warfare cannot sustain.
What Mortification Is Not	The outline’s specific negations that prevent the misunderstanding of mortification as a merely human discipline: (1) Not behavior modification, mortification is not the external management of sinful behavior through the force of willpower; behavior modification addresses the symptom while leaving the root untouched; (2) Not suppression or white-knuckled self-control, suppression drives the sin underground rather than killing it; the mortified sin weakens; the suppressed sin waits; (3) Not asceticism or self-punishment, mortification is not the production of physical pain as a means of spiritual discipline; self-punishment misunderstands the atonement by suggesting that the flesh’s suffering can contribute to the payment that the cross has already made; (4) Not a once-for-all crisis experience, mortification is the ongoing, daily, present-tense activity of Romans 8:13’s present active imperative, not the second-blessing resolution of Keswick or Higher Life theology. True mortification is Spirit-empowered, gospel-motivated, daily warfare against a specific enemy in a specific life.
Crucifying the Flesh (Galatians 5:24)	Paul’s description of the believer’s mortifying work in Galatians 5:24: “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” The aorist active “have crucified” describes a definitive action that the believer has already taken in her union with Christ, a past-tense reality grounding the present-tense practice of mortification. The crucifixion of the flesh is not the experience of sinless perfection or the complete absence of the flesh’s desires; it is the definitional, covenantal, Spirit-sealed reality of the person who belongs to Christ Jesus: her flesh has been crucified with Christ, its passions and desires have been nailed to the cross, and the living person who remains is the new creation who is now called to act in accordance with what the crucifixion has covenantally established. The present-tense practice of mortification (Romans 8:13’s putting to death) is the daily, practical implementation of the past-tense covenantal reality (Galatians 5:24’s have crucified).
Laying Aside Every Encumbrance (Hebrews 12:1)	The author of Hebrews’ description of the believer’s active role in the spiritual race in Hebrews 12:1: “let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” The mortification command here is in the imagery of the ancient athlete who strips off every weight and encumbrance before the race, not because the weights are necessarily sinful in themselves but because they impede the specific race to which the believer has been called. The “sin which so easily entangles”

Term	Definition
	(euperistatos) is the specific sin that most characteristically entangles the believer in the specific race of her specific life, the besetting sin, the characteristic pattern of remaining sin that most persistently trips her up and impedes her progress toward the goal. And the fixing of the eyes on Jesus (verse 2) is the specific christological orientation of the mortifying discipline: the runner does not look at the weights she is laying aside; she looks at the One who ran the race before her and who is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God as the Author and Perfecter of her faith.
The Eschatological Horizon of Mortification	The eschatological motivation for the present practice of mortification: the day is coming when mortification will be permanently and completely unnecessary because the glorification of State 4 will have removed every trace of the remaining sin that mortification is currently pursuing. This eschatological horizon is both the motivation for the present practice (the certain destination gives urgency and direction to the ongoing journey) and the specific hope that sustains the mortifying believer through the repeated defeats and slow progress of the lifelong battle. The mortification that Romans 8:13 commands in the present tense anticipates the glorification that Romans 8:30 guarantees in the past tense of the divine certainty: “these whom He justified, He also glorified.” The battle is real and ongoing; the outcome is certain; and the certainty of the outcome is the specific eschatological fuel that sustains the daily, present-tense engagement with the battle.

Practical Application

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

We must believe Owen's foundational principle with its full, uncomfortable urgency: there is no neutral ground in the battle with remaining sin. The believer who is not actively engaged in the mortification of specific sins in her specific life is not maintaining a stable holding position; she is losing ground to an enemy that is not neutral either. The flesh does not rest while the believer rests from mortification; it advances. Sin does not remain at a constant level of influence when the mortifying discipline is neglected; it grows. Romans 8:13's present-tense command, "putting to death", continuous, habitual, daily, is the specific warning against the comfortable assumption that the battle can take seasons of rest without cost. It cannot. The cost of the rest is the strength of the enemy.

We must also believe that the Spirit is not a passive observer of the mortifying discipline but its active, essential, irreplaceable engine. No mortification of sin occurs without the Spirit's power, and no amount of human willpower, behavioral strategy, or self-discipline can substitute for the specific, Spirit-dependent activity that Romans 8:13's "by the Spirit" requires. This conviction should produce the specific kind of prayer that genuine mortification requires: not "Lord, help me do better" but "Lord, by Your Spirit, put to death in me this specific sin, in this specific battle, today", the specific, urgent, Spirit-invoking prayer of one who knows that the power she needs is not her own.

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

The mortification of sin should produce in the believing heart the specific urgency and the specific hope that the discipline requires simultaneously. The urgency of Owen's "be killing sin or it will be killing you", not the morbid urgency of one who fears the enemy's ultimate victory but the disciplined urgency of one who knows that the specific battle she is currently failing to engage is the specific battle that is currently advancing against her. And the hope of the eschatological horizon, that the day is coming when the battle will be permanently over, the sin permanently defeated, and the mortifying discipline permanently unnecessary, giving the specific daily battle its specific forward momentum and its specific motivation to press on through the defeats as well as the victories.

Desire, above all, the specific transformation of 2 Corinthians 3:18: the ongoing, Spirit-worked, glory-driven, progressive conformity to the image of Christ that the mortification of specific sins and the cultivation of specific graces together produce. This transformation is not the dramatic instantaneous change of perfectionist expectation but the gradual, accumulative, battle-by-battle progress of a person who is being transformed from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord. Desire to see the specific sins of your specific life progressively weakened and the specific graces of your specific calling progressively strengthened through the sustained, Spirit-dependent, gospel-motivated engagement with the battle that Lessons 21 and 22 together describe.

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

- Read John Owen's *Mortification of Sin* in its entirety if you have not done so. If the full text is not immediately available, read at minimum chapters 1–4 (on the nature and urgency of mortification), chapter 7 (on the direction of the Spirit's work), and chapters 9–14 (on the specific means and methods). Owen's writing is dense by contemporary standards, but the investment is among the most practically productive available in the entire Reformed pastoral library. The specific diagnostic precision with which Owen identifies the counterfeits of mortification, the specific theological clarity with which he grounds the discipline in the Spirit's work and the gospel's truth, and the specific pastoral wisdom with which he addresses the believer who is struggling in the specific battle will repay repeated reading across an entire pastoral career.
- Apply the five means of mortification to one specific pattern of remaining sin in your own life. Choose the specific sin that you identify as most resistant to the Spirit's sanctifying work, most characteristic of your personal struggle, and most threatening to the race that Hebrews 12:1 describes as "set before" you. For each of the five means, write a specific one-paragraph plan: (1) Recognition, what are the specific forms, triggers, and self-justifying lies of this specific sin in your specific life? (2) Humiliation, what would genuine,

God-directed grief over this specific sin look like in your prayer life? (3) The gospel, what is the specific lie this sin tells you, and what is the specific truth of the cross that addresses that lie? (4) The Spirit, what specific prayer would you pray for the Spirit's power in this specific battle? (5) Accountability, who is the specific trusted brother or sister with whom you will confess this specific sin?

- Study the relationship between mortification (the killing of sin) and vivification (the cultivation of virtue) in Colossians 3:1–17. Note the structure: verses 5–9 address the mortification of specific vices (the “put to death” and “put aside” commands); verses 10–17 address the vivification of specific virtues (the “put on” commands: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearing, forgiving, love, peace, thankfulness, the Word of Christ). For each vice being mortified, identify the corresponding virtue being cultivated in its place. Then apply the structure to your own sanctification plan: for each specific sin being mortified, what specific virtue is being cultivated in its place? True sanctification is always the putting off and the putting on together.
- Examine your current spiritual disciplines in light of the five means of mortification. For each of the five means, honestly assess the current quality and intensity of your engagement: Are you practicing genuine recognition, honest, specific, Spirit-illuminated self-examination, or settling for generic acknowledgment of general sinfulness? Are you practicing genuine humiliation before God, God-directed, new-nature-generated grief, or merely the natural moral discomfort of violated conscience? Are you preaching the gospel to yourself daily with the specific application to specific sins that Owen describes? Are you specifically, urgently, persistently seeking the Spirit's power for the specific battles you are fighting? And are you in the specific, confessional, prayer-sharing accountability relationship with a trusted brother or sister that James 5:16 commands? The honest answers will reveal the specific gaps in the mortification strategy that require the most immediate attention.
- Meditate on Hebrews 12:1–2 as the comprehensive image of the mortification discipline. The cloud of witnesses (the assembled company of the faithful whose lives testify to the sustaining power of the same grace that is available to the believer in her battle), the laying aside of every encumbrance and the entangling sin (the specific mortification command), the running with endurance (the vivification command), and the fixing of the eyes on Jesus (the christological orientation that gives both their direction and their power), these four elements together constitute the comprehensive image of the mortifying, vivifying, endurance-marked, Christ-fixed life of the person who is pressing toward the goal. Then apply the image to your specific life: what is the specific encumbrance you need to lay aside? What is the specific entangling sin? What does running with endurance look like in your specific race? And how specifically are you fixing your eyes on Jesus in the daily context of your specific battle?

Key Texts: *Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5–17; Galatians 5:24; Hebrews 12:1–2; Romans 6:11–14; 2 Corinthians 7:1; James 5:16; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Matthew 15:18–19; 1 John 1:9; Philippians 3:12–14*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, what was your primary strategy for engaging with the specific patterns of remaining sin in your life? Was it primarily behavioral (managing the triggers and circumstances of the sin), primarily willpower-based (resolving more firmly not to commit the specific sin), primarily devotional (reading the Bible and praying more in general), or something else? How does the lesson's specific account of mortification, Spirit-empowered, gospel-motivated, daily, specific, confirm, challenge, or supplement your prior strategy?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Romans 8:12–14 carefully and identify the three specific features of the mortification command in verse 13 that the lesson examines: (a) the agency (“by the Spirit”, what case is the Spirit in, and what does this grammatical case indicate about the Spirit’s role?); (b) the verb tense (“putting to death”, is it present or aorist, and what does this tense indicate about the character of the discipline?); (c) the object (“the deeds of the body”, how specific is the target of mortification?). Then note the conditional structure of the verse: what are the two conditions and the two outcomes? And what does the negative condition (“if you are living according to the flesh, you must die”) establish about the stakes of the mortification battle?
3. Read Colossians 3:1–17 as a complete unit. Identify the theological foundation of the mortification-vivification commands in verses 1–4 (the believer’s resurrection with Christ; the hiding of her life with Christ in God). What is the relationship between this theological foundation and the imperatives that follow (how does “if then you have been raised up with Christ” in verse 1 ground the “therefore” of verse 5’s mortification command)? Identify the specific vices to be mortified in verses 5–9 and the specific virtues to be cultivated in verses 10–17. For each vice, identify the corresponding virtue in the passage or in the broader NT. And what does the “put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” in verse 14 establish as the ultimate goal toward which all the specific cultivations are moving?
4. Read Galatians 5:16–25 and identify the relationship between (a) the command to “walk by the Spirit” (verse 16), (b) the conflict between flesh and Spirit (verse 17), (c) the works of the flesh to be mortified (verses 19–21), (d) the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated (verses 22–23), and (e) the past-tense indicative of verse 24 (“have crucified the flesh”). How does verse 24’s indicative ground the imperatives of the preceding verses, what is the relationship between what the believer has already done (crucified the flesh) and what she is being commanded to do (walk by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the flesh)? And what does verse 25 (“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit”) add to the relationship between indicative and imperative?
5. Read Hebrews 12:1–2 and identify the specific elements of the athletic metaphor and their theological referents: (a) the cloud of witnesses, who are they (see Hebrews 11) and what do they witness to? (b) the encumbrance, is this necessarily sinful, or can legitimate things become encumbrances? (c) the sin which so easily entangles, is this a specific sin or sin in general? (d) the race, what is the race of verse 1? (e) fixing our eyes on Jesus, what specific aspects of Jesus’ example does verse 2 identify as the model for the runner? And what does the connection between the athlete’s stripping-off of encumbrances and the runner’s fixing of eyes on Jesus establish about the relationship between mortification (laying aside the sin) and the christological orientation that powers it?
6. Read 2 Corinthians 7:1 in the context of 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” What specific promises does verse 1’s “having these promises” refer to (see 6:16–18: the temple of the living God, “I will dwell in them”, “I will be their God”, “I will be a father to you”)? What is the specific ground of the mortification command in the promises, how does the knowledge that God dwells in the believer as a father motivate the cleansing from defilement? And what does “perfecting holiness in the fear of God” add to the

understanding of the goal of mortification, is perfecting holiness the achievement of sinless perfection, or the progressive, ongoing, never-completed-until-glorification process of increasingly holy living?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. Owen's foundational principle, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you", establishes that there is no neutral ground in the battle with remaining sin. Evaluate this claim. Is it theologically defensible to say that the sin that is not being actively mortified is actively growing? Are there patterns of remaining sin that can remain at a stable level of influence without the active engagement of mortification? And is the urgency of Owen's principle consistent with the assurance of salvation, if failure to mortify a specific sin will eventually "kill" the believer spiritually, does this imply that the believer's final salvation is contingent on the quality of her mortifying discipline?
8. The lesson argues that mortification is emphatically not mere behavior modification, and that behavior modification addresses the expression of sin without touching its root. Evaluate this claim. Is there a legitimate place for behavioral strategies in the broader discipline of mortification, removing occasions of temptation, establishing patterns of life that support rather than undermine the mortifying discipline? If so, how does the legitimate use of behavioral strategies avoid becoming the counterfeit of mere behavior modification? And what is the specific test that distinguishes the legitimate behavioral component from the counterfeit, is it the motivation (Spirit vs. flesh), the target (root vs. expression), or something else?
9. Owen's claim that the gospel, specifically the daily preaching of the cross to oneself, is the primary instrument of mortification rests on the analysis that every specific sin maintains its power through a specific lie about what it will provide, and that the cross provides the specific truth that addresses the specific lie. Evaluate this analysis. Is it theologically accurate to say that every specific sin maintains its power through a specific promise or lie? Are there sins whose power seems to reside in something other than the specific promise of satisfaction, in compulsion, in habit, in chemical dependency, in developmental trauma? And how does the gospel's truth address the full range of the power sources of specific sins, not only the deceived-desire dimension?
10. The lesson presents accountability, the confession of specific sins to trusted brothers and sisters, as the fifth means of mortification, grounding this in James 5:16's command. Evaluate the pastoral wisdom of this specific means. What are the specific benefits of confessing specific sins to a trusted fellow believer, as the lesson identifies? What are the specific risks of such confession, the risk of inappropriate disclosure, of damaged relationships, of misuse of the information shared, and how do these risks affect the practical implementation of the accountability principle? And how does the Protestant tradition's rejection of mandatory confession to a priest affect the character of the voluntary accountability relationship that James 5:16 commends?
11. The lesson presents the eschatological horizon, the certain arrival at State 4's non posse peccare, in which mortification will be permanently unnecessary, as a motivational factor in the present battle. Evaluate whether this eschatological horizon actually motivates the present battle or whether it produces the opposite of motivation (why engage in a difficult discipline today when the result is guaranteed regardless of the effort?). How does the Puritan tradition's use of eschatological motivation in the mortification of sin actually work psychologically and spiritually? And what is the difference between the eschatological guarantee of final sanctification and a divine assurance that removes the urgency of the present discipline?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. Owen's principle establishes the urgency of mortification by identifying the specific costs of neglect: the sin that is not being actively mortified is advancing. Apply this to your own spiritual life. Identify the one specific pattern of remaining sin that you have most consistently avoided engaging in genuine mortification, the sin you have been managing behaviorally, suppressing by willpower, or simply ignoring in the hope that it will not cause significant damage if you do not address it. What specific evidence do you have that this specific sin is not remaining at a stable level but is advancing in its influence on your affections, choices, and

character? And what specific plan would you make today for engaging the genuine, Spirit-dependent, gospel-motivated mortification of this specific sin?

13. The lesson identifies the gospel as the third and most powerful specific means of mortification, the daily, specific, cross-directed application of the truth of Christ's atoning work to the specific lies of specific sins. Apply this principle to the specific sin you identified in Question 1. What is the specific lie that this specific sin tells you, the specific promise it makes about what it will provide? And what is the specific truth of the gospel, the specific provision of Christ's atoning work, that directly addresses that specific lie? Write a paragraph-length "gospel sermon" that you would preach to yourself in the specific moment of temptation to this specific sin, confronting its specific lie with the specific truth that the cross provides.
14. The lesson identifies accountability as the fifth means of mortification, grounding the practice in James 5:16's command to confess sins to one another. Evaluate the current state of accountability in your own life. Do you currently have a specific, trusted, appropriately chosen brother or sister in Christ who knows the specific sins of your specific struggle and who is praying for your specific mortification of those specific sins? If not, what specific steps would you take to establish that accountability relationship? And if yes, assess the current quality of the accountability: Is it genuinely specific (do they know the specific sin, not merely a general category)? Is it genuinely prayerful (are they specifically praying for the specific mortification)? Is it genuinely ongoing (is the accountability maintained through the defeats as well as through the victories)?
15. Hebrews 12:1's image of the athlete stripping off every encumbrance to run the specific race distinguishes between the encumbrances (which may not be sinful in themselves but impede the race) and the entangling sin (which is specifically sinful and specifically entangling). Identify, for your specific life and your specific calling: (a) the specific "entangling sin" that Hebrews 12:1 calls the believer to lay aside, the besetting sin that most characteristically trips you up and impedes your progress in the race; and (b) any specific "encumbrances" that are not sinful in themselves but that are currently impeding your ability to run the specific race with the endurance Hebrews 12:1 describes. Then articulate how the fixing of your eyes on Jesus (verse 2), specifically on the specific aspects of Jesus' own race that Hebrews 12:2 identifies, would change the way you engage the laying-aside of both.
16. The lesson closes with the doxological observation that every act of genuine mortification is a specific display of the Spirit's power and the gospel's truth working together in the life of a specific redeemed person, and that the credit belongs entirely to the Triune God who provided the power, the motivation, and the guarantee. How fully does this doxological frame characterize your experience of the mortification discipline? When you experience a specific victory in a specific battle with a specific pattern of remaining sin, is your first response the pride of achievement ("I resisted that successfully") or the gratitude of the instrument ("The Spirit enabled that through me, and the glory belongs to Him")? And how would the consistent, deliberate, habitual reframing of specific mortification victories as specific Spirit-accomplishments change the way you engage both the victories and the defeats of the ongoing battle?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's time of prayer with Romans 8:13 read as a personal commission and as a personal confession: "If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Read the verse and then ask the specific questions it raises for your specific life: Am I putting to death the specific deeds of the body in my specific life? By the Spirit, am I specifically, urgently, persistently seeking the Spirit's power for the specific battles I am fighting, or am I attempting the mortification by the force of my own willpower and self-discipline? The present tense, is the putting-to-death a continuous, habitual, daily activity in my life, or is it an occasional crisis-response to an especially intense battle? These questions are the specific diagnostic tools that the verse provides for the honest self-examination that genuine mortification requires, and the honest answers will indicate the specific areas where the mortification strategy needs to be strengthened, renewed, or established.

Pray in the structure of the five means of mortification, moving through each means as both a confession of the current quality of your engagement and a specific petition for the Spirit's enabling. Begin with recognition: pray for the Spirit's specific illumination of the specific patterns of remaining sin that most need to be engaged in the current season of your sanctification, not the generic acknowledgment of general sinfulness but the honest, specific, Spirit-illuminated identification of the particular expressions of the flesh that are most powerfully competing with the Spirit's work in your specific life right now. Then move to humiliation: pray for genuine, God-directed, new-nature-generated grief over the specific sins that the recognition has identified, the *kata theon* luke of 2 Corinthians 7:10 that drives the person to the cross rather than merely to self-reproach. Then pray for the gospel application: ask the Spirit to give you the specific eyes to see the specific lies of the specific sins you are mortifying and the specific mind to receive the specific gospel truth that disarms each specific lie. Then pray for the Spirit's power: not "Lord, help me do better" but "Lord, by Your Spirit, put to death in me this specific sin, in this specific battle, today, because I cannot do this without You, and the power that raised Christ from the dead is the power that Your Word promises for this specific battle." And finally, pray for the accountability relationship that the battle requires: if you do not have the specific, trusted, praying brother or sister that James 5:16 commands, ask the Spirit to provide and prepare the specific person; if you do, pray for that specific person and for the specific mortification she is simultaneously engaged in.

Pray together in two specific directions that correspond to the two dangers the pastoral application of this lesson identifies. First, for the members of your congregation who are most engaged in the genuine battle of mortification but who are most discouraged by the defeats: the genuine believers who are fighting the specific battles, confessing the specific sins, and pressing on after the specific defeats, but who are experiencing the slow, accumulative, battle-by-battle progress of genuine mortification as evidence that the battle is not working rather than as evidence that the battle is real and the Spirit's power is genuine. Pray for the eschatological perspective of 2 Corinthians 3:18's "from glory to glory" for these specific people: that the specific battles they are fighting and the specific progress they are making, however slow and however punctuated by defeat, are the Spirit's specific work of transformation in their specific lives, and that the day is coming when the transformation will be complete. Second, for the members of your congregation who are most in danger of the opposite error, the comfortable nominal professor who is not fighting any specific battles, not engaging any specific sins in genuine mortification, and whose apparent peace with remaining sin is not the hard-won peace of the press-on believer but the dangerous comfort of a person who has stopped fighting. Pray for the specific, convicting work of the Spirit that Owen identifies as the essential precondition for the recognition that is the first means of mortification: that the Spirit would break through the comfortable self-deception and bring the specific pattern of the specific sin into the honest, Spirit-illuminated awareness that genuine mortification requires.

Close with Hebrews 12:1–2 read as the doxological frame for the entire discipline of mortification: the great cloud of witnesses who have run the same race before you and who testify to the sustaining power of the same grace; the laying aside of every encumbrance and the entangling sin, in the specific obedience of one who is setting herself free for the race; the running with endurance, in the steady, daily, never-giving-up forward motion of one who has not yet reached the finish line but who knows with certainty that the finish line is coming; and the fixing of the eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising

the shame, and who is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God as the guarantee that the race you are running is the race He completed before you, and that the destination you are pressing toward is the destination He has already secured for you. This is the race. This is the endurance. This is the gaze that powers the running. To the Jesus who ran before you, who sits at the right hand and intercedes for you, and who will bring you to the finish line where the mortification battle is over and the glory is complete, to Him be the glory forever. Soli Deo Gloria.

“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. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”

Romans 8:13–14, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 8:12–14; Colossians 3:1–17; Galatians 5:24; Hebrews 12:1–2; Romans 6:11–14; 2 Corinthians 7:1; James 5:16; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Matthew 15:18–19; 1 John 1:9; Philippians 3:12–14; Romans 8:30

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com