

The Christian Life (23): Sanctification (Part 8)

Having considered the mistakes and necessity of mortification, we come this week to its Biblical imageries and basic elements.

I. Mortification: Its Imageries and Elements

1. *Its imageries.* Scripture exhorts us to "mortify" or "put to death" the deeds of the body (Rom.8:13; Col.3:5). We are to kill sin. This is a brutal and difficult work described by crucifixion, amputation, and purification. (1) Crucifixion. "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Lk.9:23). Following Christ is a life of self-denial and death. We must deny ourselves of self-trust, ease, and glory. This is done through death or crucifixion. First century Christians would have understood the imagery of the cross as an instrument of death. Crucifixion was a lingering and painful death. A man's life was slowly drained from him. And so in mortification, the life of sin is slowly and painfully drained from us.

The death of the cross was a slow and lingering death; denying unto them that suffered it the favor of a quick dispatch; just so it is in the death of sin: though the Spirit of God be mortifying it day by day, yet this is a truth sealed by the sad experience of all believers in the world, that sin is long a dying. And if we ask a reason of this dispensation of God, among others this seems to be one; corruption in believers, like the Canaanites in the land of Israel, are left to prove and to exercise the people of God, to keep us watching and praying, mourning and believing; yea, wondering and admiring at the riches of pardoning and preserving mercy all our days.¹

(2) Amputation. "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire" (Matt.18:8-9; Matt.5:29-30). The imagery behind this passage seems to be the practice of amputating limbs sick with disease. "The metaphor is from surgeons, whose manner it is, when the whole is in danger by any part, to cut it off, lest all perish" (Jacobus).² In the first century many people, especially the poor, were afflicted with various diseases that spread through the body. It was possible that a specific disease may infect the hands or feet and need amputation. A person was confronted with two options, amputate a hand or foot or else die from the disease. Thus this imagery underscores the absolute necessity of mortification. Sin is a disease spreading through our bodies. It must be dealt with in a brutal and merciless way. If left unmortified, we shall die (eternally). "For if you live according to the flesh you will die (eternally); but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (eternally)" (Rom.8:13).

Our Savior describes mortification as the amputation of body parts as these are used by our remaining flesh. Our members can be used as instruments of righteousness or unrighteousness (Rom.6:19). Thus it's not literal amputation that our Savior refers to but the amputation of lusts and sins that would misuse our members. "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col.3:5). To "put to death our members" is one and the same with putting to death "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness." These members are said to be "on the earth" because the flesh sets its mind on earthly things. "He

¹ John Flavel, *Works*, 2:374

² Melancthon Jacobus, *Notes on the Gospel of Matthew*, 66

calls them earthly members because as influenced by the flesh they always tend to earthly things and hold the minds of men to earthly things" (Davenant).³ Thus, in telling us to mortify our members "which are on the earth," he means, we are to put to death the sins that use our members for earthly or carnal purposes.

(3) Purification. "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2Cor.7:1). Here the imagery is not crucifying or amputating but purifying. "Everyone who has this hope (seeing Christ and being like Him), purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1Jn.3:3). This imagery is borrowed from the OT practice of purification from ceremonial defilement. Several things would render a person ceremonially unclean. This uncleanness would necessitate the worshiper be removed from the nation until he was declared ceremonially clean. This would symbolically be realized through various ceremonial washings. Paul exhorts us to "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit." "By *the filthiness of the flesh* is meant external pollution, defilement by outward actions, actions committed in the body, whereby the man is defiled, such as all impure words, filthiness, and foolish talking, all rotten and corrupt communication, which defile a man's own body. By *filthiness of the spirit* is meant internal pollution, defilement by the internal acts of the mind, such as evil thoughts, lusts, pride, malice, envy, covetousness, and the like" (Gill).⁴

2. *Its elements.* John Davenant defined mortification as "the practice of repressing our corrupt nature, and restraining all unlawful actions and affections which are wont to spring from thence."⁵ He said three things are involved: "a serious determination of resisting sin; an avoiding of the occasions which are wont to induce us to sin; a careful use of all means which tend to the subduing of sin."⁶ He then concluded: "A good determination averts the heart itself from the ways of sin; a diligent avoiding of it causes us not to return to it; the use of means, that we should be constant in our determination and proceed happily."⁷ Thus, there are four basic elements of mortification: dependence, lamentation, starvation, and opposition.

(1) Dependence. If any sin is to be mortified we must remain totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit. "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom.8:13-14). "Whenever we set seriously upon this work at any time, let us apply ourselves to the Spirit of God, as one in office to this end, as being a Spirit of holiness not only in His nature but in His operations (Eph.1:13; Rom.1:4)" (Charnock).⁸ "The sanctifying Spirit is the only effectual principle of mortification; and, without Him, no resolutions, vows, abstinences, castigations of the body, or any other external endeavors, can ever avail to the mortification of one sin" (Flavel).⁹ "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal.5:16). We walk in (by) the Spirit by prayer and remaining sensible to His inward convictions. "The work of the Spirit is to convince, by shaking the soul out of its carnal dullness. The Spirit gives a strong alarm to put us upon a holy watchfulness against the projects of sin. Listen to these convictions which come in by the word, which is the ministration of the Spirit" (Charnock).

³ John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 2:36

⁴ John Gill, *Exposition of Old and New Testaments*, 8:800-801

⁵ John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 2:32

⁶ John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 2:32

⁷ John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 2:32

⁸ Stephen Charnock, *Works*, 5:223

⁹ John Flavel, *Works*, 2:377

¹⁰ Stephen Charnock, *Works*, 5:223

"We must feel our absolute dependence upon God. Our need of the influences of the Spirit to take hold and conquer our sins. Without this influence nothing will be done. We will only wax worse and worse. This will lead us to cry: *Cast me not away from Thy presence; take not Thy Holy Spirit from me*" (Nettleton).¹¹

The work of mortification is peculiar to the Spirit of God (Rom.8:13; Gal.5:17). *First*, the Spirit of God implants habits of a contrary nature, which are destructive to sin, and are purgative of corruption. Grace is to corruption what water is to fire. *Second*, the Spirit assists those gracious habits in all the times of need, which He does in many ways; sometimes notably awakening and rousing grace out of the dull and sleepy habit and drawing forth the activity and power of it into actual and successful resistances of temptation. As Joseph said, 'How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God' (Gen.39:9)? Holy fear awakens first and raises all the powers of grace in the soul to make a vigorous resistance of temptation: the Spirit also strengthens weak grace in the soul.¹²

(2) Lamentation. True mortification begins with a right view of sin. No sin will ever be mortified without a true sense of its heinous and destructive nature. Repentance (of which deep sorrow and remorse are essential elements) is essential to mortification. "There is no doubt whatever that an inadequate view of sin is the chief cause of a lack of holiness and sanctification, and indeed of most of the false teaching with respect to sanctification" (MLJ).¹³ "Let us often think deeply of the corruption of our natures, how loathsome it is to God, and this will make it loathsome to us. The more it is abominated, the more it is mortified; the supplies of it are cut off, its attempts discovered" (Charnock).¹⁴ "Would you mortify your sins? Cherish those thoughts which are the most opposed to all sin. View the evil nature of sin. It always renders you unhappy—it subjects you to the guardians of a guilty conscience and at times fills the soul with awful apprehensions of future punishment" (Nettleton).¹⁵ John Owen gave as his second "particular direction" for mortification: "Get a clear and abiding sense upon thy mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin wherewith thou art perplexed."¹⁶

In order to have a proper sight and sense of sin, we must bring it to Mount Sinai (law) and Mount Calvary (gospel). (a) Mount Sinai. We must bring our sins to the holiness of God as evidenced in the moral law of God. "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth, fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them" (Col.3:5-7). (b) Mount Calvary. We must bring our sins to the cross of Jesus Christ. "He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities" (Isa.53:5). "He was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom.4:25). "Nowhere is the nature of sin displayed in such terrible and awful colors as in the death of the blessed Son of God" (MLJ).¹⁷ "Make it your daily exercise, to bring the cross of Christ into your hearts, to nail and fasten your lusts unto it; and you shall quickly find them languish and expire" (Hopkins).¹⁸

¹¹ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 171

¹² John Flavel, *Works*, 2:378-379

¹³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 244

¹⁴ Stephen Charnock, *Works*, 5:224

¹⁵ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 173

¹⁶ John Owen, *Works*, 6:50

¹⁷ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 245

¹⁸ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 3:165

Above all, think what your sins cost the Savior. Go, my brethren, frequently to that interesting scene. There behold His agony and His sweat as it were great drops of blood. See the multitude with swords falling down to the ground; and slaves assembling to take Him. See Him betrayed by a kiss, forsaken by all His disciples – led forth to His trial, and condemned, scourged, spit upon. See Him taken by the cruel soldiers and dragged into the common hall. See Him stripped, and covered with a scarlet robe, and crowned with thorns, with a reed in his hand. See the insulting mob bow the knee before Him and pay Him mock homage. See Him led forth bearing His own cross and fainting under the weight. See Him stretched out, His hands and feet pierced through and nailed fast to the accursed tree. See it raised from the ground, and His body suspended between the heavens and the earth. And there Christian, hangs your Redeemer. There see what your sins have done.¹⁹

Would you mortify and keep under sin in your heart? Then meditate much upon Christ's death and your own. These are effectual means to kill and keep under sin. Meditate upon Christ's death. Think to yourself: 'Shall I live in those sins that the Lord Jesus Christ died to redeem me from? Shall I harbor those lusts in my heart that shed the blood of my dear Savior? Shall I not kill those sins that killed Christ, and see the blood of those lusts that spilled the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ?' Such considerations will make a man refrain from sin and subdue it. Meditating on the death of Christ is an effectual means to put us to crucifying and killing our lusts.²⁰

(3) Starvation. Basic to mortification is the starvation of the flesh. (a) Refuse to feed the flesh. "Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom.13:13-14). If our flesh is a fire, then we need to remove from it all that would feed the flame; all that would stoke the fire. This includes what we watch, where we go, listen to, read, and who we associate with. "Be careful about what you read in newspapers, in books, be careful what you watch on the television, listen to on the radio (I would add watch or read on the internet): 'Make not provision for the flesh!' You need not give it any encouragement, it does not need any, it is bad enough as it is. Starve it! Do not give it any food. There is a fire within you; never bring any oil anywhere near it, because if you do there will be a flame, and there will be trouble" (MLJ).²¹ "Remove your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house" (Prov.5:8). "Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn away from it and pass on" (Prov.4:14-15). "Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be seared" (Prov.6:27-28)?

(b) Feed the soul with gospel truth. The best way to starve the flesh is to strengthen the soul with the grace and promises of the gospel. This is why every NT text that exhorts us to mortification is in the context of gospel realities and provision. "Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts" (Rom.6:11-12). "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of

¹⁹ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 173-174

²⁰ Christopher Love, *The Mortified Christian*, 85

²¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 245, 249

God, these are sons of God" (Rom.8:13-14). "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2Cor.7:1). "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is out life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth" (Col.3:1-5).

(4) Opposition. Every motion or suggestion of the flesh must be resisted and every deed or work of the flesh must be mortified. Older writers (and Scripture) distinguished between original and actual sin. Original sin refers to the flesh and actual sin refers to the deeds or works of the flesh. Original sin is the mother and actual sins its offspring. Original sin (flesh) must be resisted and actual sins must be mortified. Thus, essential to true mortification is the regular use of means that keep the soul healthy and oppresses the risings of the flesh. We may refer to this as preventative or precautionary mortification.

(a) Be watchful. "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation" (Matt.26:41). "Be watchful in all things" (2Tim.4:5). "Be serious and watchful in your prayers" (1Pet.4:7). We must watch for the first stirrings of lust and sin. "If you give way to a sin, the more power it will have over you and the more difficult it will be to subdue it; therefore, crush the dragon in the egg. It is an easier matter to keep an enemy out than to thrust him out when he is already in. You should keep your souls, as it were, in a garrison. Do not give way to sin, but resist and oppose it in its first motion" (Love).²² "Resist strongly the first motions and first risings of your corruptions. Crush them while they are in their infancy, before they get to a head, and gather strength against you. It is folly to wait till your enemies are grown up: no; take the offspring and progeny of lust, while they are little, and deal with them as God threatens Babel, dash these 'little ones against the stones'" (Hopkins).²³

Rise mightily against the first actings of your distemper, its first conceptions; suffer it not to get the least ground. Do not say, 'Thus far it shall go, and no farther.' If it have allowance for one step, it will take another. It is impossible to fix bounds to sin. It is like water in a channel—if it once break out, it will have its course. Do you find your corruption to begin to entangle your thoughts? Rise up with all your strength against it, with no less indignation than if it had fully accomplished what it aims at. Consider what an unclean thought would have; it would have you roll yourself in folly and filth. Ask envy what it would have—murder and destruction is at the end of it. Set yourself against it with no less vigor than if it had utterly debased you to wickedness.²⁴

(b) Use Scripture. Scripture is the sword that the Spirit uses to kill sin, "And take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph.6:17). "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Ps.119:11). Specific Scriptures need to be applied to specific sins. Just as a doctor uses various medicines to remedy various sicknesses, so we need to view Scripture as a collection of medicines, which are able to cure every spiritual sickness. Thus, for the sin of worry or fear we should meditate on Matthew 6:2, "Which of you by worrying can add one single hour to his life," for the sin of impurity 1Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you," and for the sin of pride 1Corinthians 4:7, "For who makes you differ from another? And what do

²² Christopher Love, *The Mortified Christian*, 81

²³ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 3:155

²⁴ John Owen, *Works*, 6:62

you have that you did not receive?" And so, Scripture must not only be read and studied, but memorized and meditated on.

If you would keep under your corruptions, then keep in your memory some special sentences of Scripture which most express and vehemently forbid those sins to which you are most strongly inclined. This is an excellent way to fence your heart against any corruptions. If you had in your thoughts some express places of Scripture against those sins you are most inclined to, this would help you in subduing your sins. Therefore, look over the whole Bible and choose those places of Scripture that most dreadfully threaten that sin. For example, if you are given to uncleanness consider this: 'He that goes in to a harlot, he shall not take hold of the paths of life,' and 'whoremongers and adulterers God will judge' (Heb.13:4). So for any other sin you are addicted to, recollect and gather together the most direct Scriptures that speak against it and condemn it.²⁵

(c) Stay prayerful. "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one: (Matt.6:13).

An important means of mortification is bending your heart in importunate prayer to God against the corruption that troubles you the most. In Psalm 56:9 David says, 'When I cry unto Thee, then shall mine enemies turn back.' So when we call out to God, it is the way to make our lusts turn from us. There is never a mortified man who has not been a praying man. Subduing lust can never be obtained without prayer, for prayer is the sword of the Spirit whereby we can conquer and overcome our corruptions. When you grow most remiss and careless and formal in prayer, then you are most of all troubled with unmortified lusts and corruptions. Either your sins will make you leave praying or your praying will make you leave sinning.²⁶

Would you have your sins mortified? Carefully attend to all the duties of religion. Never be idle. Maintain daily communion with God. Let no day pass without entering your closet and calling self to an account and humbling your soul in the dust for your sins. If at any time you are conscious of having yielded to temptation; let not guilt drive you from your closet. For you know not when it will end. Dealy not—go immediately to the throne of grace, with all your sin and guilt fresh in your mind. Tarry not till you feel better, lest you obtain a false peace and cover your sins. However humiliating, no matter, delay not, go just as you are and tell the Lord the worst of your case. Feel no disposition to justify your sin in the least, but own and confess the very worst of your case.²⁷

²⁵ Christopher Love, *The Mortified Christian*, 82

²⁶ Christopher Love, *The Mortified Christian*, 81

²⁷ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 172