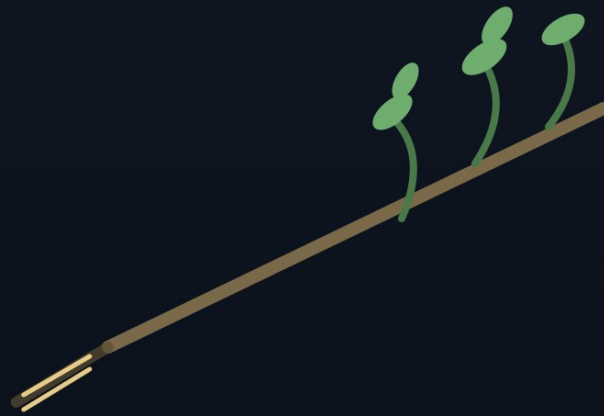


A MODERN GUIDE FOR NEW BELIEVERS

Of the Mortification of Sin

Putting sin to death so life can grow



BASED ON THE CLASSIC WORK BY

John Owen

Adapted and modernized for today's reader

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Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers

A modern-English rewrite of John Owen's 1656 treatise, based on his original text

Complete: Preface & Chapters 1–14

Preface

A quick note before we start: Owen uses the word “mortification” throughout this book, and we’ve kept it rather than swapping it out. It’s an old word for “killing” or “putting to death”: here, killing sin’s power in your life. We kept it because it’s the book’s central idea, and Owen means something stronger and more deliberate than “resisting” or “managing” sin. He means actively putting it to death. You’ll get used to it fast.

To you, the reader,

Let me tell you honestly why I decided to publish this.

The main reason is what I see happening in the church today. Christians are living in a time of relative peace, and they’re also divided against each other. Neither of those things is helping them. When I look at the hearts and lives of people who claim to follow Christ, I see people who aren’t ready to fight temptation. If this book does nothing more than push people to actually examine their lives, and gives them clearer direction on how to do that, I’ll count this work worth it.

There’s a second reason, too. I’ve watched other teachers give dangerous advice on this exact subject. They don’t understand the gospel or what Christ’s death actually accomplished, so they end up putting a heavy, exhausting burden back on people: telling them to defeat sin through their own effort and willpower. That’s a weight neither they nor anyone before them could ever carry. It isn’t the gospel’s way of dealing with sin at all: not in what it’s rooted in, not in how it works, not in what it produces. And what it produces is predictable: people who are self-righteous, superstitious, and constantly anxious in their conscience.

What I’ve written here is offered humbly. I hope it lines up with both the Spirit and the plain teaching of the gospel, and with the real experience of people who actually know what it means to walk with God under his covenant of grace. Even

if this particular book isn't the one that does it, believers desperately need *something* like it: something that will move this work of gospel-mortification forward in their hearts, and set them on a path where they can actually find rest for their souls.

I should also mention a few personal reasons. I had preached on this subject already, and God used it. People were genuinely helped. Several of them urged me to publish what I'd preached, with whatever changes I thought necessary. That encouraged me. It also reminded me of a debt I owed some dear friends: I'd promised them a book on communion with God, and years had passed without delivering it.¹ I couldn't pay that larger debt yet, but I thought I could at least offer them this shorter work in the meantime, like paying interest while the real debt waits. On top of that, I'd spent a good deal of time caught up in public theological controversies, and it seemed right to also produce something of a different kind: something written not because I had to, but because I wanted to.

For all these reasons, this short book now stands before you. I can honestly say that the deepest desire of my heart, and the main purpose of my life in the calling God has placed me in, is this: that mortification and wholehearted holiness would grow, both in me and in everyone else, for the glory of God, so that the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ would be made beautiful in every way. If this little book helps even the least significant believer move toward that goal, I'll consider it an answer to the weak prayers of its very unworthy author.

John Owen

¹ That promised book has since been published too. It's called *Communion with God*.

Chapter 1: Romans 8:13 Explained

Everything I'm going to say in this book stands on one verse: Romans 8:13.

“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (Romans 8:13, ESV)

I want to build this whole discussion on that verse, so let's slow down and actually look at what it's saying before we go any further.

The setting

Right before this verse, Paul has just finished explaining that we're justified by faith: that everyone who trusts in Christ is fully forgiven and stands before God with nothing held against them (Romans 8:1–3). Now he turns a corner. Having explained *what God has done for us*, he starts explaining *what that should produce in us*: holiness.

And here's the warning he gives on the way there: “if you live according to the flesh you will die” (Romans 8:13, ESV). I'm not going to unpack every angle of what “living according to the flesh” or “dying” means here. I only need enough of it to make sense of the second half of the verse, which is where we're headed.

Five things packed into this one verse

If you look closely, Romans 8:13 is actually making five separate points at once:

1. **A command:** “put to death the deeds of the body.”
2. **Who it's for:** “you.” (Not everyone. Specifically believers.)
3. **A promise attached to it:** “you will live.”
4. **Who actually does the work:** “through the Spirit.”
5. **A condition wrapped around all of it:** “if...”

Let's take these one at a time.

1. The “if” is about certainty, not doubt

When Paul says “if,” he's not saying “maybe you'll do this, maybe you won't, we'll see.” He's already told these same readers, one verse earlier, that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1, ESV). Their standing with God isn't in question.

Instead, this is the same kind of “if” you'd use with a sick person: “*If you take this medicine, you'll get better.*” You're not doubting whether they're allowed to get

better. You're pointing out a sure connection between the medicine and the healing. That's exactly what Paul is doing here. He's not describing a cause producing an effect (eternal life isn't something we earn; it's a free gift, Romans 6:23). He's describing a means that leads to an end God has already promised. Put simply: *put sin to death, and you will live*. That connection is certain, and it's the main reason this command carries real weight.

2. Who this is for

The word “you” here is aimed at believers specifically: people who already have no condemnation (v. 1), who are no longer ruled by the flesh but by the Spirit (v. 9), who have already been made alive by that same Spirit (vv. 10–11). This isn't a command for outsiders trying to earn their way to God. Piling this duty on people who don't yet know Christ just produces self-righteousness and empty religion. That's what happens whenever people who don't understand the gospel try to enforce it anyway.

So here's the main thesis of this entire book, stated plainly:

Even the best believers, people who are completely and permanently free from sin's power to condemn them, still have to spend their whole lives putting sin's ongoing power to death.

Being forgiven doesn't mean sin stops fighting you. It means you now have every reason and every resource to fight back.

3. Who actually does this work

Paul says “through the Spirit”: not through willpower, not through self-discipline alone, not through gritting your teeth harder. This is the Holy Spirit's work: the same Spirit who lives in believers, gives them life, and prays for them.

Every other way of trying to kill sin, through sheer effort, through rules you invent yourself, trying to make yourself right with God by your own strength, is a dead end. That approach, dressed up in different forms, is the essence of every false religion there's ever been. It cannot work, because it was never designed to.

4. What “put to death the deeds of the body” actually means

This phrase has three parts worth unpacking: what “the body” means, what “the deeds of the body” means, and what “putting to death” means.

“The body.” This isn’t just talking about your physical body. Paul uses “the body” here the same way he’s already been using “the flesh” throughout this chapter: as another name for the sin that still lives inside every believer. Elsewhere he calls this same thing “the old self” (Romans 6:6). It’s the corruption still present in us, the part of us still bent toward sin, even after we belong to Christ.

“The deeds of the body.” This means the actions and fruit that sin produces: both what shows up on the outside (the sins other people can see) and what’s happening underneath, in the desires and impulses that give rise to them. Paul’s point is to go after sin at the root, not just trim the branches. You don’t just deal with the visible sin; you deal with what’s producing it.

“Put to death.” This is a deliberate word picture: killing something. To kill a living thing is to strip it of all its strength and power, so it can no longer act. That’s exactly the picture here. Indwelling sin is described like a living enemy (Paul elsewhere calls it “the old self”) with its own kind of cunning, strength, and staying power. That enemy has to be killed: stripped of its power to produce what it wants to produce.

In one sense, this is already done. When Christ died, sin’s ultimate claim on us died with him: that’s the meaning of being “crucified with Christ.” And the moment you were made new in Christ, something was planted in you that’s fundamentally opposed to that old sinful nature. But (and this is the whole point of this book) that doesn’t mean the fight is over. What’s true positionally has to be worked out practically, a little more each day, for the rest of your life.

So here’s what Paul is actually calling believers to: **make sure indwelling sin never regains enough strength to produce the sinful actions it wants to produce. That’s a daily, lifelong duty.**

5. The promise: real life

The promise attached to all this is simple: “you will live.” This is the opposite of the death Paul warned about a moment earlier: “if you live according to the flesh, you will die.”

This promise isn’t only about eternal life, though it includes that. It’s also about the quality of life you get to experience right now, not the bare fact that you’re spiritually alive (every believer already has that), but the joy, comfort, and strength that comes with it. Paul uses similar language elsewhere: “for now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 3:8, ESV), meaning, “now my life actually feels like something good; now there’s joy in it.” That’s the

promise here too: live this way, and you'll experience a good, strong, comforting spiritual life now, and eternal life to come.

Which leads to the whole point of this chapter, stated as simply as I can put it:

How strong, joyful, and alive your walk with God feels depends directly on whether you're putting the deeds of the flesh to death.

That's the foundation everything else in this book is going to build on.

Chapter 2: The Duty of the Best Believers

Here's the thesis I laid out at the end of Chapter 1, and now I want to back it up:

Even the best believers, people completely and permanently free from sin's power to condemn them, still have to spend their whole lives putting sin's ongoing power to death.

Even mature believers have to keep fighting

Paul writes, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you" (Colossians 3:5, ESV). Who's he talking to? Not new converts. Not people who are struggling to get started. He's talking to people he's just described as raised with Christ, dead with him, and destined to appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1–4). In other words: mature, secure, deeply established believers. And his instruction to them is still: mortify. Make it your daily work. Never take a day off from it. Be killing sin, or it will be killing you. Being united with Christ doesn't excuse you from this fight. It's what qualifies you to win it.

Jesus makes a similar point with a different picture: even the branches that are already bearing fruit get pruned, "that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2, ESV). Growth doesn't mean you stop needing to be cut back. It means you get cut back more carefully, and more often, for as long as you're alive in this world.

And Paul says this was his own daily practice, even at the height of his ministry: "I discipline my body and keep it under control" (1 Corinthians 9:27, ESV). If this was the business of Paul's life, a man who'd seen more of God's grace and glory than almost anyone, none of us gets to claim an exemption.

So why does this never stop being necessary? A few reasons.

1. Sin never fully leaves you in this life

There's no point in your life on earth where sin's presence in you gets down to zero. I'm not interested in getting into arguments about theoretical sinless perfection. In my experience, the people most confident they've reached it usually just mean they've stopped being able to tell good from evil anymore, not that they've actually stopped sinning. For the rest of us, who take Scripture at its word, indwelling sin sticks around in some measure for as long as we're here. Paul himself refused to claim he'd "already attained" (Philippians 3:12). Our "inner self is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16, ESV), which only makes sense if there's still an old self being worn down, day by day, alongside it.

As long as sin is present, it has to be actively resisted. Someone assigned to defeat an enemy doesn't get to stop fighting just because the enemy is still breathing.

2. Sin isn't just present. It's active

This is the part people miss. Sin doesn't sit quietly waiting to be provoked. It's constantly working, whether you notice it or not, and it's usually working hardest exactly when it looks the quietest. Paul describes an internal war: sin's law fighting against his mind (Romans 7:23). James says the same: our internal desires are actively "at war within" us (James 4:1, ESV, cf. James 4:5). Every day, in every choice, sin is doing one of three things: pulling you toward evil, holding you back from good, or quietly pulling your heart away from closeness with God. If sin is always active, and you're not always resisting it, you will lose ground. There is no truce available in this fight, not even for a day.

3. Left unchecked, small compromises grow into ruinous sins

Paul lists what happens when sin is simply allowed to run its course: sexual sin, hostility, idolatry, addiction, and more (Galatians 5:19–21). Here's the pattern worth understanding: every sinful impulse, left to itself, aims for the extreme version of itself. A wandering thought would become full-blown sin if it could. A moment of envy would become open hatred if nothing stopped it. Sin rarely announces this ambition up front. It starts small, modestly, almost reasonably, and that's exactly what makes it dangerous. It gets a foothold quietly, then pushes further, a little at a time, without ever feeling like a big jump. That's what Scripture means by being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13, ESV): you don't usually fall off a cliff; you get walked off the edge one small, unnoticed step at a time. The only thing that reliably interrupts this pattern is mortification: going after sin at the root, every single day, before it has the chance to build momentum.

4. God gave you the Spirit specifically to fight this battle

This is actually one of the main reasons the Holy Spirit and your new nature were given to you in the first place: so that you'd have something inside you capable of resisting sin. Paul says it goes both directions: not only do "the desires of the flesh" work against the Spirit, but "the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh" too (Galatians 5:17, ESV). You weren't left defenseless. Refusing to use that gift, coasting instead of actively engaging the fight, isn't neutral. It's neglecting the exact weapon God armed you with against your greatest enemy. Grace, like any

gift, is meant to be used. Leaving it unused while sin runs free is an insult to the God who supplied it.

5. Neglect doesn't just stall your growth. It reverses it

Here's what's really at stake. Paul says that even while his body was wearing out, his "inner self" was "being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16, ESV). Neglect this duty, and you get the exact opposite: your inner life withers while sin gets stronger. Grace, like anything living, needs to be exercised or it decays. Believers who stop actively fighting sin don't just plateau. They can watch formerly tender, humble, zealous faith slowly curdle into something cold, worldly, and compromised, to their own grief and everyone else's confusion. There's no truly neutral gear here. You're either gaining ground or losing it.

6. This is simply what it means to grow as a believer

Scripture calls you to keep "perfecting holiness" (2 Corinthians 7:1), to keep growing in grace, and to let your inner self be "renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16, ESV). None of that happens automatically. It happens through the daily mortifying of sin. Don't fool yourself into thinking you're making spiritual progress while leaving your besetting sins untouched. Whoever isn't actively working against sin isn't making progress toward anything. They've simply made peace with the thing they were supposed to be fighting.

The bottom line

Yes, sin's ultimate power over you was already broken at the cross. Yes, something new and opposed to sin was planted in you the moment you were saved. But that doesn't mean the war is over. It means you now have everything you need to keep fighting it, every day, for the rest of your life. That's simply what it looks like to be a believer this side of heaven.

A warning: what happens when believers stop taking this seriously

I want to pause here and say something that troubles me. I see a lot of Christians today who have plenty of Bible knowledge, plenty of spiritual gifts, plenty of impressive-sounding talk about grace, and almost no real fruit of mortification to show for it. That gap is dangerous, and it does damage in two directions.

First, it damages you. Whatever you might claim, if you're not actually fighting sin, it's because deep down you've stopped taking sin seriously, at least the "ordinary," everyday kind. And that's the real danger zone: a heart that has

learned to swallow its own sin without so much as a wince. Once someone gets comfortable using grace and forgiveness as an excuse to stop resisting sin, rather than a reason to fight it harder, they're standing right on the edge of turning God's grace into a license, and that road rarely ends well. Honestly, this describes the path of most of the people I've watched walk away from the faith entirely. They started well, but once genuine conviction faded and daily obedience felt like a burden without a clear reason behind it, they leaned on "grace" to excuse what they no longer wanted to fight. And that excuse-making, once it takes hold, moves fast.

Second, it damages the people around you. An unmortified life quietly hurts others in two ways. It hardens them, because when they look at professing Christians who look "fine" on the outside despite obvious compromise, it teaches them that this level of compromise must be acceptable, so they lower their own guard to match. And it deceives them, because it teaches them that clearing a fairly low bar is enough to call it faithfulness, when in reality they might be matching your outward reputation while still falling far short of real life in Christ.

More on both of these later, but I wanted this concern on the table early, because it's exactly why this book exists.

Chapter 3: The Spirit Alone Can Do This Work

Here's the second major principle of this book:

The Holy Spirit alone is sufficient to kill sin in you. Every method that leaves him out accomplishes nothing, no matter how impressive it looks.

 **TRANSLATOR'S NOTE (not part of Owen's text):** In this section, Owen is specifically pushing back against certain medieval and 17th-century Catholic monastic practices, such as strict fasting, self-imposed suffering, and elaborate vows and rituals, that were being promoted as ways to defeat sin through sheer human effort and religious performance. He's not writing about Catholics in general. Below, we've kept his actual argument rather than his specific historical target, because the underlying mistake he's describing shows up constantly today, in every tradition: trying to kill sin through willpower, rule-keeping, and religious effort while leaving the Holy Spirit out of the picture entirely.

Why self-effort religion always fails

No matter how intense or sincere the effort, self-powered religious performance cannot kill sin. People have tried it for centuries: punishing rules, harsh self-denial, strict routines, all aimed at defeating sin through sheer discipline. And it never actually works, for two reasons.

First, some of these methods were never things God actually commanded. They're human inventions, dressed up as spiritual disciplines. Whatever effort you pour into a method God never designed for this purpose is effort spent chasing something that was never going to deliver.

Second, even the methods God does command, things like prayer, fasting, and Scripture meditation, get misused when people treat them as the source of the power itself, rather than as tools the Spirit works through. These practices are meant to be streams, not the fountain. Used rightly, in dependence on the Spirit, they're genuinely valuable. Used as a self-powered system: "if I pray enough, fast enough, follow the routine closely enough, sin will die," they can keep someone perpetually busy with religious activity while sin remains completely untouched underneath. It's possible to be always working at this and

never actually get anywhere, the same way it's possible to be "always learning" and yet "never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7).

This isn't just an old-fashioned mistake, either. It's exactly what happens every time someone gets caught in a sin, feels a wave of shame, and responds by gritting their teeth and white-knuckling their way through a few weeks of extra discipline, more prayer, more rule-following, more self-monitoring, until the guilt fades and the resolve quietly wears off. And then the same sin comes right back, often stronger than before. Spiritual disciplines are excellent food for a soul that's already healthy. They are not medicine for a soul that's sick. You cannot out-discipline a heart problem.

Here's why this approach can never actually work: killing sin isn't a task human effort was ever built to accomplish on its own. It requires power that only God supplies.

This is why it has to be the Spirit's work

The Spirit is specifically promised for this job. God said he would give his Spirit and take away the "heart of stone," replacing it with a heart that actually responds to him (Ezekiel 36:26, ESV; see also Ezekiel 11:19). This isn't a side effect of the Spirit's work. It's one of the things he was sent to do.

Every good thing we have comes to us through Christ, by the Spirit. Jesus said it plainly: "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, ESV). Whatever grace we have, including the ability to actually put sin to death, flows from him, and it reaches us through the Spirit he sent.

So how does the Spirit actually do this?

Three ways, generally speaking.

1. He grows things in you that crowd sin out. Paul contrasts the "works of the flesh" with the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:19–23) and says plainly that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24, ESV). These two things, the flesh and the Spirit, can't both be flourishing in the same heart at the same time. So one of the Spirit's main strategies isn't just subtraction; it's addition. As he causes love, patience, self-control, and the rest of his fruit to grow and thrive in you, sin simply has less and less room to live.

2. He directly weakens sin at the root. This isn't only indirect. The Spirit also acts on sin's actual power directly: weakening it, wearing it down, cutting off its strength at the source, the way fire burns away whatever it touches.

3. He brings the reality of the cross into your heart by faith. He gives you genuine, felt communion with Christ in his death, not just historical facts about the cross, but something you actually experience and draw strength from. (More on exactly how that works later in this book.)

But wait, if this is the Spirit's work, why do I keep telling you to *do* something?

Fair question. If mortification is really the Spirit's job, why does Scripture command *you* to do it?

Because that's how all of the Spirit's work in us operates. "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13, ESV). And yet believers are still commanded, throughout Scripture, to obey, to pray, to have faith. The Spirit's work and our responsibility aren't in competition. They're two ways of describing the same reality.

The Spirit doesn't bypass you: he works through you. He engages your mind, your will, your conscience, your actual desires, not around them, and not against them. That means his help isn't a reason to sit back and wait; it's exactly what makes real effort possible and meaningful in the first place. Depending on the Spirit and actively fighting sin aren't opposites. They go together.

I want to pause here, because this distinction matters more than it might seem. I've watched plenty of sincere people spend years trapped in a specific, sad kind of misery: they know their sin is wrong, they're determined to stop, and they throw everything they have at the problem, except they're doing it disconnected from the Spirit, trying to win a spiritual battle with purely human weapons. They fight, but they never win. They're at war, but they never find peace. Sometimes they think they've finally beaten a sin, when really they've just gone numb to it for a while: they've calmed their fear and guilt down enough that the sin looks defeated, when it hasn't actually been touched at all. Then the feeling wears off, the old temptation returns exactly as strong as before, and they're right back where they started. That's a genuinely exhausting way to live: pouring everything you have into a fight you were never equipped to win alone.

And if that's the sad situation of people who are at least *trying*, imagine how much worse it is for someone who isn't fighting sin at all, who has simply made

peace with it, and whose only real complaint is that life doesn't give them enough opportunity to indulge it.

That's exactly why this book keeps coming back to one point: this fight cannot be won by sheer willpower. It has to be fought in the Spirit's power, or it can't be won at all.

Chapter 4: Why This Matters for Your Everyday Life

Here's the last of the three principles I want to lay out before we get into the actual "how" of mortification:

The strength and comfort of your everyday walk with God depend heavily on your mortification of sin.

Think about it honestly: if you had to name what actually troubles you in your walk with God, it would come down to one of two things. Either you feel like you lack strength: your obedience feels weak, lifeless, going through the motions. Or you lack peace: you don't feel God's comfort and closeness the way you want to. Pretty much every spiritual complaint a believer has boils down to one of those two things.

And both of them are deeply connected to whether you're actively killing sin.

Two things worth clarifying first

Before I go further, I want to be careful not to overstate this, in two specific ways.

First, mortification doesn't guarantee you'll feel spiritually strong and at peace. It's not a mechanical transaction: fight sin hard enough, and joy is automatically dispensed. Consider Heman, who wrote Psalm 88. His life was one of deep, ongoing faithfulness and mortification, and yet he experienced real spiritual darkness and anguish for years. God let that happen, not because Heman had failed, but seemingly to give the rest of us an example: if a season like that happens to you too, you're not the first faithful believer to walk through it. Comfort is something God gives; it's his call when and how, not something we can force out of him through our own performance.

Second, mortification isn't the direct cause of your assurance either. The thing that gives you the immediate, felt sense that you belong to God is the Spirit's own direct testimony to your heart: the Spirit himself assuring you that you are God's child. That's his work, not a byproduct you earn through fighting sin hard enough.

So how does mortification actually matter, then?

Here's the honest answer: in the normal, ordinary Christian life, not as some ironclad rule, but as how God usually works, your daily mortification has a real and significant effect on how strong and at peace you feel in walking with him. Here's how.

1. Unmortified sin drains your strength

Left alone, sin will always do two things to you: it will weaken you, and it will cloud your sense of God.

Think of David. When he let an unconfessed sin sit unaddressed in his heart, the effect wasn't neutral. He described it in devastating terms: "there is no soundness in my flesh... there is no health in my bones because of my sin" (Psalm 38:3, ESV), and "I am feeble and crushed" (Psalm 38:8, ESV). Unmortified sin doesn't just sit there quietly. It actively drains you. It does this in a few specific ways:

- **It hijacks your affections.** Sin doesn't stay contained. It reaches into your heart and attaches itself to something, making that thing feel desirable and necessary. And that always comes at a cost: "if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15, ESV). You can't say to God "you are my treasure" with your whole heart while something else is quietly competing for that same spot.
- **It occupies your thoughts.** Once sin has a foothold, your mind starts working overtime to plan for it, justify it, and figure out how to get back to it: mental energy that could have gone toward literally anything else.
- **It actually gets in the way of what you're supposed to be doing.** Whatever you're preoccupied with chasing or protecting will pull your attention away from actually engaging with God, right when you need to be present with him most.

2. Unmortified sin clouds your sense of God's love

Even if it doesn't change the underlying reality (you're still God's child, still forgiven, still secure), unmortified sin acts like a thick cloud that blocks the felt experience of that truth. It won't necessarily take away your salvation, but it will absolutely take away your sense of it.

This is why so many believers cry out to God for comfort and don't seem to find it, not because God is refusing them, but because they're looking for relief without actually dealing with the root cause. God said as much to his people through Hosea: he would withdraw and wait "until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face" (Hosea 5:15, ESV). You can see your own struggle clearly, cry out about it repeatedly, and still not find relief until you actually deal honestly with what's causing it.

3. Mortification clears space for everything else in your spiritual life to actually grow

Here's a picture worth holding onto: imagine a healthy plant growing in a garden that's never weeded. It might survive. But it'll be stunted, hard to spot, barely recognizable, basically useless, choked out by everything growing up around it. Now plant that same seed in a garden that's carefully weeded and tended. Same seed, completely different result: it thrives, it's obvious at a glance, and it's actually useful.

That's exactly what happens to your faith, love, and zeal when sin goes unchecked. They don't necessarily disappear, but they get buried, weakened, hard to find, barely functional. Scripture describes this as things that "remain" but are "about to die" (Revelation 3:2). Daily mortification is what keeps the weeds pulled, so that the actual life God has planted in you has room to grow into something real and usable, not just technically present, but visibly, obviously alive.

4. Mortification is one of the clearest evidences that your faith is real

There's nothing that gives you a stronger sense that your faith is genuine, not performed, not just talk, than this: actively, daily opposing your own sin. That kind of ongoing, costly resistance to yourself isn't something people fake for long. If you're doing the hard work of killing sin day after day, that's real evidence, both to you and to God, that something authentic is going on in your heart. And that, more than almost anything else, is a foundation for lasting peace.

That's the third and final principle. Now that we've established *why* mortification matters this much, it's time to get into the actual work: what mortification is, and how to actually do it.

Chapter 5: What Mortification Is NOT

Up to this point, I've been laying groundwork: why mortification matters, and why it has to be the Spirit's work. Now I want to get practical. Here's the situation I'm actually writing to:

Imagine you're a genuine believer, but there's a specific sin still living in you with real power. It drags you around, fills your heart with turmoil, tangles up your thoughts, drains your strength for anything spiritual, wrecks your peace, and maybe even leaves your conscience feeling dirty. What do you actually do about it? What steps do you take to weaken this thing, not necessarily destroy it completely, but genuinely fight it, so that you can keep real strength and peace in your walk with God even while the fight continues?

To answer that well, I need to do three things:

1. Define clearly what it actually means to mortify a sin, both what it *isn't* and what it *is*, so we're not building on a shaky foundation.
2. Give some general conditions that have to be in place before real mortification is even possible.
3. Get into the specific, practical steps for actually doing it.

This chapter covers the first half of point one: what mortification is *not*. Getting this wrong is dangerous. A lot of people think they've mortified a sin when they've actually just done something else entirely. So let's clear the ground carefully before we build anything on it.

1. It's not making the sin disappear completely

Let's be honest about the goal: when you genuinely go after a sin, what you actually want is for it to be completely gone, no root, no fruit, dead forever, never to whisper to you again. That's the real target. But here's the hard truth: that target isn't fully reachable in this life.

You can, by the Spirit's grace, win real and repeated victories over a sin, sometimes almost constant victory. But total, permanent eradication, so that the sin simply no longer exists in you at all? That's not available this side of eternity. Even Paul, someone with more faith, love, and spiritual fruit than perhaps anyone who's ever lived, said it about himself: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own" (Philippians 3:12, ESV). If Paul hadn't arrived, none of us should expect to. We still carry a body that has to be transformed by Christ's power before this fight is fully over.

And here's the encouraging flip side: God designed it this way on purpose. He doesn't want you complete in yourself. He wants you complete in Christ. You've "been filled in him" (Colossians 2:10, ESV), not in your own track record of defeated sins. So don't measure mortification by "is this sin 100% gone forever," because that's not the test Scripture gives you.

2. It's not just hiding the sin

This one's simpler, but worth saying plainly: mortification isn't the same as concealment. Someone can stop practicing a sin outwardly, for reasons that have nothing to do with actually hating it, and look, from the outside, like a changed person. But if nothing's actually happened in the heart, all that's really occurred is that the old sin picked up a new companion: hypocrisy. That's not progress. That's the same problem with better camouflage.

3. It's not just having a naturally calm personality

Some people are simply wired with an even temperament. They're less prone to outbursts of anger, less easily provoked, less visibly "messy" than other people. If someone like that manages their natural calm well, they can look, to themselves and everyone around them, like an extraordinarily mortified, disciplined believer. Meanwhile, their heart might be quietly full of things nobody sees.

Meanwhile, someone with a genuinely fiery, reactive temperament might struggle visibly with anger their whole life, and still be doing far more real spiritual work against that sin than the naturally calm person is doing against anything.

The lesson: don't measure your own mortification by sins your personality was never going to struggle with anyway. Test yourself instead against the sins that actually cost you something to fight: self-denial, envy, doubt, pride, the ones your natural temperament gives you no head start on. That's a much more honest mirror.

4. It's not just rerouting the sin somewhere else

This is a subtle one, and it's easy to miss in yourself. A sin isn't mortified just because it's been diverted into a different channel.

Think of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8. He gave up sorcery, but the greed and ambition that had driven the sorcery in the first place didn't go anywhere. It just found a new outlet. That's exactly why Peter tells him: "I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23, ESV). Same corruption,

same root. The sorcery was just one visible symptom of it, and now it had simply moved.

This happens constantly, in ways that have nothing to do with actual spiritual victory. A change in life circumstances, relationships, or priorities can make an old temptation quietly fade, not because it was defeated, but because the conditions that fed it changed. People naturally lose their taste for certain youthful sins as they age, without ever having genuinely mortified them; the appetite just moved on. And sometimes people literally trade one sin for another and mistake the trade for progress: pride for materialism, indulgence for judgmental self-righteousness, vanity for contempt of other people. Swapping which sin runs your life isn't freedom. You've just changed which master you're serving.

5. It's not a temporary, situational win

This is probably the trickiest one to catch in yourself, because it can genuinely feel like real victory in the moment. There are two common situations where a sin looks mortified but isn't.

The first: right after getting badly burned by it. A sin breaks out in some obvious, painful way. It disturbs your peace, wrecks your conscience, maybe risks your reputation, and makes God's displeasure suddenly, uncomfortably real. That jolt wakes everything up in you. You're horrified at yourself, you cry out to God, you resolve fiercely against the sin, and for a while, it genuinely goes quiet. It's not gone. It's just lying low, the way an enemy camp goes on high alert and hides after an attack, fully intending to strike again the moment things calm down. The quiet isn't victory; it's the sin waiting out the alarm.

The second: during a hard season of God's discipline. When real trouble hits (loss, hardship, consequences you can't escape), people often become intensely serious about their sin, because it feels like the reason God's hand feels heavy. So they resolve, sometimes with real tears and real sincerity, to leave the sin behind for good. And for a while, it does go quiet, not because it's been wounded, but simply because your attention is completely consumed by fear and crisis, leaving no room for the sin to operate. The moment the crisis passes and your attention returns to normal life, the sin comes right back, exactly as strong as before.

This exact cycle shows up in Israel's history: over and over, hardship would drive them to earnestly seek God and turn from sin, and then, the moment relief came, "their heart was not right with him, neither were they steadfast in his covenant"

(see Psalm 78:32–37). They meant it in the moment. It still didn't last, because the sin had never actually been dealt with, only outrun for a while by fear.

This is one of the most common ways sincere believers deceive themselves. They live through real, tearful, urgent-feeling repentance, and mistake the temporary quiet that follows for a sin that's actually been killed, when it's only ever been startled into hiding.

So that's the negative side of the definition: five things mortification is *not*, all of which can look convincing from the inside. Next, I want to actually define what mortification *positively* is, so you have something solid to aim at instead of just a list of counterfeits to avoid.

Chapter 6: What Mortification Actually Is

Now that we've cleared away the counterfeits, let's build something solid. What does it actually mean to mortify a sin? It comes down to three things.

1. Weakening the sin's habitual grip

Every sin you struggle with isn't just a stray bad choice here and there. It's a settled inclination, a habit baked into your heart, constantly leaning you toward evil. Someone with no genuinely mortified sin at all fits the description from before the flood: "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5, ESV). That's a heart under the constant pull of sin. The only reason people aren't visibly chasing every sin at once, all the time, is that they've got so many competing sinful desires all shouting for attention that their energy gets split between them, but underneath, the whole direction is still bent toward serving self.

This bent isn't like a normal, healthy inclination that nudges you gently. It has real force. Scripture describes sinful desires as things that "wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11, ESV) and actively fight to take you captive (Romans 7:23). This is a genuine internal battle, not a mild preference.

One important caution here: not every sin has equal strength in every person, or at every moment. A sin can pick up real power depending on your natural temperament, your circumstances, or simply because it's found fertile ground to grow in, and it gets an especially sharp boost whenever a fitting temptation shows up and gives it new energy it didn't have a moment before. That's worth knowing about yourself: your fiercest battles won't always be in the same place as someone else's, and they won't always feel equally intense from week to week.

It's also worth noticing that some sins are simply more *felt* than others. Paul singles out sexual sin as uniquely intense in this way: "flee from sexual immorality... the sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (1 Corinthians 6:18), meaning its effects are more viscerally obvious than something like greed or worldliness might be. Because of this, some people can look impressively "mortified" simply because their particular besetting sin happens to be a quiet one, while someone visibly wrestling with a loud, obvious sin might actually be doing far more real spiritual work than they are. Don't judge your progress, or anyone else's, just by how loud or quiet a sin looks from the outside.

So what does weakening this habit actually look like? Picture a man being crucified. At first he fights hard: he strains, he cries out, he resists with everything

he has. But as his strength drains away, his struggles get weaker and less frequent, until eventually they're barely noticeable at all. That's the picture Scripture uses: "our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:6, ESV). Mortification works the same way. A sin you're actively crucifying doesn't disappear instantly, but its strength, energy, and grip drain out of it, a little at a time, day by day, until it can barely rise up in you at all. It might still throw the occasional dying convulsion that looks alarming in the moment, but that's very different from a sin that's still healthy and strong.

Here's the key, though: this weakening has to happen at the root, not just the surface. You can spend all your energy knocking down the visible fruit of a sin, but if the root underneath is left completely untouched, it will just keep producing more. That's the mistake a lot of sincere people make: fighting hard against the *appearance* of a sin every time it shows up, while never actually digging into what's feeding it underneath. That's exhausting work, and it doesn't actually get anywhere.

2. Constant, ongoing fighting against sin

Simply being able to keep pressing against a sin, refusing to let it go unchallenged, is itself a real measure of how mortified it is. When a sin is genuinely strong, the soul can barely put up a fight at all; David describes this exact feeling: "my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see... my heart fails me" (Psalm 40:12, ESV). That's what it looks like when sin has the upper hand, not active warfare, just being overwhelmed.

Real, ongoing fighting against sin has three parts:

First, know that you actually have this enemy, and take it seriously.

Recognize it clearly as something dangerous, something that has to be dealt with, not shrugged off. This is what it means to genuinely "know the plague of his own heart" (1 Kings 8:38). Without that honest self-knowledge, none of the rest of this work is even possible. Plenty of people carry around a dangerous, entrenched sin and barely notice it, which makes them quick to defend themselves and irritated by any correction, simply because they don't realize how much danger they're actually in.

Second, study how it operates. Learn its patterns: how it typically approaches you, what excuses it reaches for, what circumstances tend to give it an opening, and how it's beaten you before. This is exactly what any wise person does with a real enemy: study their tactics so you're not caught off guard again. David

modeled this kind of honest self-awareness: “my sin is ever before me” (Psalm 51:3, ESV). One of the most valuable spiritual skills you can develop is genuinely understanding your own specific weaknesses: what your particular sin’s favorite excuses sound like, what situations give it the best opening, and how to recognize its approach early, before it’s gained any ground.

Third, hit it daily with everything that actually wounds and weakens it, the specific practices we’ll get into later in this book. Someone who’s doing this never assumes a sin is dead just because it’s currently quiet; they keep giving it fresh wounds, every single day. Paul’s instruction fits here exactly: “put to death therefore what is earthly in you” (Colossians 3:5, ESV), not once, but as an ongoing campaign. As long as you’re doing this consistently, you’re the one with the upper hand. Sin is on the defensive, not you.

3. Real, actual victories

The third mark of genuine mortification is actual success, and I want to be precise about what that means. It’s not simply that a sin didn’t get the chance to act out this time because circumstances happened to prevent it. Real success looks like this: your heart actually catches the sin at work, scheming, forming temptations, angling for an opening, and instead of letting it run, you immediately bring it before God’s law and Christ’s love, judge it for what it is, and follow through until it’s actually defeated.

When you’re regularly experiencing that kind of victory (the sin weakened at the root, its outbursts fewer and feebler than before, no longer able to derail your obedience or wreck your peace, and you’re able to calmly recognize and fight it with real, repeated success), then that sin is genuinely mortified to a significant degree. And even while the fight continues, you can have real, lasting peace with God through all of it.

Bringing it all together

So here’s the full picture of what mortification actually is, made up of two things working together:

The foundation is growing something in you that directly opposes the sin: a specific, contrary grace, cultivated and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, that pushes back against it by its very nature. Pride is weakened by growing humility. A quick temper is weakened by growing patience. Impurity is weakened by growing purity of heart and conscience. Love of this world is weakened by

growing a heavenly-minded focus. These graces are the Spirit's own fruit in you, simply showing up differently depending on which sin they're working against.

The second piece is the vigorous, willing, ongoing fight itself: actually using every means God has provided, consistently, cheerfully, not grudgingly or occasionally.

Put these two together, and real, measurable degrees of victory follow. Depending on how deeply rooted the particular sin is, this can grow all the way to the point where you barely feel its opposition at all anymore, and, more certainly still, it will always produce a genuine, settled peace of conscience, exactly as God's covenant of grace promises to those who fight this fight in his strength.

That's what mortification actually is. Next, I want to lay out the conditions that need to be in place before this kind of fighting can even begin in earnest.

Chapter 7: This Only Works If You're Actually a Believer

Now I want to lay out the necessary conditions that have to be true before real mortification can even get started. Here's the first, and it's the most foundational one in this entire book:

You have to actually be a believer, someone genuinely united to Christ, for any of this to work. Not “believe you are.” Actually be.

Why this has to be true

Every command to mortify sin in Scripture is aimed specifically at believers. Paul writes “if you, through the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13) to people he’s already described as under “no condemnation” (Romans 8:1). He writes “put to death therefore what is earthly in you” to people he’s already described as raised with Christ, whose life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1–5). These commands were never addressed to outsiders.

That doesn’t mean people outside of Christ can’t produce something that *looks* like mortification. History is full of impressive examples: ancient philosophers like Seneca, Cicero, and Epictetus wrote eloquently about self-control, about despising the world, about mastering your own passions. But look at how most of them actually lived, and you’ll find the difference between their teaching and real mortification is like the difference between a sun painted on a sign and the actual sun in the sky. One might look similar from a distance. Only one gives off any real light or heat. There is no true killing of sin apart from a real, living connection to the death of Christ.

 **TRANSLATOR’S NOTE (not part of Owen’s text):** In this chapter, Owen spends significant energy critiquing specific religious practices of his day: Catholic vows and penances, and (importantly, since this often gets missed) certain Protestant teachers of his own tradition who gave people the exact same bad advice, essentially, “just vow to stop sinning for a while.” We’ve kept his actual argument, because the underlying error isn’t limited to any one tradition. It shows up anytime someone is told to fix their behavior through sheer resolve, without ever being pointed toward actually trusting Christ. That’s just as common today as it was in the 1650s, in every corner of the church.

The order matters: turning to Christ comes first

Here's an illustration worth using: imagine you tell a servant to pay a bill at one place, but first he has to go collect money from somewhere else. Paying the bill really is his duty. You'd rightly be upset if he never did it. But it isn't his *immediate* duty. First things first.

That's exactly the situation here. Mortifying sin genuinely is every person's duty. But it isn't the first thing to do, because, as we already established, only the Holy Spirit can actually kill sin, and the Spirit only comes to those who are united to Christ: "anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Romans 8:9, ESV). Trying to mortify sin before you belong to Christ is like trying to pay a debt with money you don't have yet.

Think of it this way: fire refines gold and silver, burns off the impurities, leaves something valuable behind. But the same fire does nothing useful to plain iron or brass; you can leave it in the furnace as long as you like, and it will never come out as silver, because it was never silver to begin with. The raw material has to actually be transformable. That's what regeneration does. It's not an extra polish on top of an unchanged heart; it's what makes a heart capable of being transformed at all.

This is why John the Baptist, calling people to repentance, said "the axe is laid to the root of the trees" (Matthew 3:10), not "trim your branches," but deal with the root. And it's why Jesus put it so plainly: "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33, ESV). You cannot prune a bad tree into producing good fruit. You have to actually change what kind of tree it is.

This is exactly what Peter modeled at Pentecost. When the crowd was "cut to the heart" and cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter didn't hand them a list of specific sins to work on. He said: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37–38, ESV). Whole-life conversion first. Everything else follows from that.

Three dangers of fighting sin before you've actually turned to Christ

If someone tries to mortify a specific sin while still unconverted, it usually goes one of three bad directions.

First, it distracts from the real problem. God's conviction is meant to bring a person to himself, not just to better behavior. But it's possible to take that conviction and redirect all your energy into managing one troubling sin, while never actually turning to God himself. That's not obedience; it's self-protection wearing obedience's clothes. Scripture describes this exact pattern in ancient Israel: even when they felt the weight of their sin and tried to find relief, "they return, but not to the Most High" (Hosea 7:16, cf. 7:12), real effort, aimed in the wrong direction entirely.

Second, it produces false comfort. Actively working against a sin, with real resolve, real effort, genuinely can quiet a troubled conscience. That's exactly the danger: it's possible to settle for that relief and never go to Christ at all, mistaking the temporary calm for the real cure. Worse, because the effort is sincere, it can breed a quiet, dangerous self-righteousness: "I must be in decent shape spiritually, look how seriously I'm taking my sin."

Third, it eventually breeds despair and surrender. Fight a sin long enough on human strength alone, and eventually it becomes obvious you're not winning. Some people, faced with that, simply give up, not just on that one sin, but on ever really dealing with sin at all. This is one of the saddest and most common ways people end up hardened for good: they tried, on their own strength, concluded it was hopeless, and never discovered that the actual solution was a Person, not more effort.

So should someone who isn't a believer just ignore their sin?

Fair question, and I don't want to be misunderstood. Here's my answer, in four parts:

First, it's a genuine mercy that God restrains human sin in general, through all kinds of means (conscience, law, consequences, upbringing), even in people who aren't yet converted. That restraint isn't nothing. It's part of what keeps the world livable.

Second, preaching genuinely convicts people and restrains real sin even before someone is converted, and that's a legitimate, valuable thing for it to do, even though it isn't the ultimate point.

Third, none of that reaches the actual root problem on its own. Real restraint isn't the same as real transformation.

Fourth, and most important: mortifying sin remains everyone's eventual duty, but the order matters enormously. Turn to Christ first; everything else follows

from that foundation. Telling someone to patch a crack in the wall while the whole house is on fire isn't help. Deal with the real emergency first.

A note for anyone helping someone else grow

If you're ever in a position to help someone else with their walk with God, as a parent, a mentor, a friend, whatever the relationship, here's something worth remembering: when you address someone's sin, aim past the specific behavior toward the deeper question of where they actually stand with God. Otherwise, you might just succeed in helping someone become a better-behaved person who still doesn't know Christ, which isn't actually help at all.

Be especially cautious about a specific, well-meaning but harmful piece of advice that comes up constantly: "just vow to quit for a while." It sounds reasonable. In practice, it usually backfires three ways: the forbidden-fruit effect often makes the temptation *more* intense, not less; breaking the vow (which is common) piles on fresh guilt and despair; and even *keeping* the vow doesn't touch the heart. It just produces someone who's proud of their willpower instead of someone who actually knows Christ.

I've watched sincere people spend years stuck in exactly this trap, working hard at a joyless, performance-based version of faith, never actually introduced to Christ or given any real understanding of the Spirit's power. If God ever opens their eyes to who Jesus really is, they'll finally see how empty all that effort was, and how much simpler, and how much better, the real thing is.

Chapter 8: You Can't Fight One Sin While Ignoring Everything Else

Here's the second general condition that has to be true before you can genuinely mortify a specific sin:

Without sincere, all-around effort across every area of your life with God, you will never successfully mortify even one troubling sin.

The first condition was about who you are: a genuine believer. This one is about the shape of your effort itself.

The pattern to watch for

Here's a situation that comes up constantly. Someone is genuinely wrecked by a specific sin. It's powerful, it disturbs them, it steals their peace, and they can't stand it anymore. So they go after it hard: praying against it, groaning under it, pleading with God for deliverance. All good so far. But at the same time, in every other area of their walk with God (regular prayer, reading Scripture, ongoing communion with him), they're careless and inconsistent. If that's the pattern, that particular sin is never going to be genuinely mortified. It doesn't matter how much energy goes into fighting it specifically.

This exact thing happened to Israel. They came to God with real, visible earnestness: fasting, seeking him "daily," delighting to know his ways (see Isaiah 58:2). And God rejected it. Why? Because their diligence was selective, intense in one narrow area while other basic obligations, like justice and generosity toward others, were being ignored (Isaiah 58:5–7). They were thorough in one spot and careless everywhere else, and that combination doesn't work.

Think of it like a person with a chronic, oozing wound caused by years of poor health habits. They can apply all the skill and attention they want directly to that wound, but if the underlying lifestyle causing it never changes, the wound isn't going to heal. The same is true spiritually: you can't successfully treat one symptom while ignoring your overall spiritual health.

Why this doesn't work: two reasons

1. Selective effort usually comes from the wrong motive

Ask yourself honestly: why are you fighting this particular sin so hard? If the honest answer is "because it disturbs me, it's stealing my peace, it fills me with

fear and shame,” notice what that motive actually is. It’s about *your* comfort. Meanwhile, you may be neglecting prayer, being careless with your words, drifting in other areas, sins that are no less serious, that Christ died for just as much, and you’re not remotely as bothered by them. Why not? Because they don’t disturb *you* personally.

That’s worth sitting with. If you genuinely hated sin because it’s sin, because it grieves God, you’d be just as watchful against everything that grieves him as you are against the one thing that happens to grieve you. The uncomfortable truth is, if your conscience were quiet about this sin, you’d probably leave it alone entirely. You’re not really fighting it because it’s wrong. You’re fighting it because it hurts.

God isn’t going to partner with that kind of selective, self-interested effort. His call has always been comprehensive: “let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1, ESV), not “let us clean up whichever specific thing is currently bothering us.” If you’re serious about this, you have to be serious about all of it.

2. God may be using this very sin to correct your broader negligence

Here’s a sobering possibility worth considering: what if God has specifically allowed this troubling sin to gain power over you precisely *because* of your general carelessness elsewhere, as a wake-up call, meant to get your attention on the bigger picture?

This can happen in two ways.

First, as a natural consequence. Every believer carries around some measure of indwelling sin their whole life, subtle, cunning, always looking for an opening. As long as you’re keeping careful watch over your heart in general, that sin stays weak and contained. But the moment your guard drops anywhere, sin tends to break through wherever the opening is, and once it’s found a route out, that’s the direction all its pressure goes. People sometimes spend years wrestling painfully with one specific, entrenched sin that could have been prevented entirely by simple, ordinary watchfulness across the board.

Second, as intentional discipline. Sometimes God deliberately allows a particular struggle to persist specifically to correct something else in you. Paul experienced this directly: he was given “a thorn... in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass” him, specifically “to keep me from becoming conceited” over the extraordinary revelations he’d received (2 Corinthians 12:7, ESV). Peter’s

humiliating denial of Christ served a similar purpose: a hard correction for his overconfidence. If God is doing something like that in you, it makes no sense to expect the specific symptom to disappear while the underlying issue driving it stays completely unaddressed.

The bottom line

You cannot remove the effect while leaving the cause fully intact. If you actually want to see a troubling sin mortified, really, genuinely dealt with, in a way God honors, it has to happen inside a broader life of sincere, comprehensive obedience: consistent prayer, real attention to Scripture, ongoing honesty with God about all of it, not just the one thing currently making you miserable. A heart that's willing to stay lazy in some areas while working hard in others isn't operating in real faith. It's still, underneath, more concerned about its own discomfort than about actually grieving God. And that kind of effort, however sincere it might feel in the moment, isn't the kind of mortification this book is actually about.

Chapter 9: When a Struggling Sin Needs More Than the Usual Approach

Assuming the last two conditions are in place (you're actually a believer, and you're pursuing sincere, comprehensive obedience, not just targeting one convenient sin), here's the first practical step: take an honest look at the specific sin troubling you, and check whether it's showing any warning signs that mean ordinary effort won't be enough. Some struggles need more than the usual approach.

Here are six warning signs worth checking for.

1. It's old

How long has this sin had real power over you? If it's been sitting there, active and unaddressed, for a long stretch of time, without any serious, vigorous attempt to actually deal with it, that's dangerous. David described exactly this experience: "my wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness" (Psalm 38:5, ESV). A wound left untreated doesn't stay the same size. It spreads. The longer a sin sits unaddressed, the deeper it works itself into your mind, your emotions, your habits, until eventually you stop even noticing it as wrong. It becomes familiar. Normal. That's a genuinely dangerous place to be.

2. You've found ways to feel okay about it anyway

Watch for two specific tricks the heart plays here.

The first: instead of dealing with a troubling sin directly when your conscience is bothered, you go looking for reassurance, evidence that you're basically doing fine spiritually, as a way to quiet the discomfort without actually facing the sin itself. To be clear, honestly reviewing what God has done in your life is a genuinely good practice; it's something the psalmists modeled and Paul explicitly calls believers to (2 Corinthians 13:5). But using that same good practice as an escape hatch, pulling out your "evidence of being fine" specifically to avoid facing present conviction, is something else entirely. That's not faith. That's a heart looking for a loophole.

The second: using grace as a kind of permission slip. This looks like: "I'll follow God in basically everything, except this one thing. Lord, forgive me for that part." If you notice that pattern in your own heart, take it seriously. Scripture has sharp words for exactly this move: twisting grace into "a license for sin" (Jude 4, ESV) is precisely what makes grace dangerous when it's misunderstood. To be fair, even

sincere believers can get tangled in this kind of thinking without fully realizing it. That's exactly why Paul felt the need to warn against it directly: "are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!" (Romans 6:1–2). But recognizing the danger doesn't make it any less serious when it shows up in you.

3. The sin keeps winning your heart's consent, even when you don't act on it

Here's something easy to miss: mortification isn't only about whether a sin gets acted out. If your will keeps quietly giving in, wanting the sin, consenting to it inwardly, even when outward circumstances happen to prevent you from actually doing it, that's still real ground the sin has gained in your heart. Outward restraint isn't the same as inward victory.

And don't let yourself off the hook with "I didn't really choose that, it just happened." If you know a certain kind of carelessness tends to open the door to this sin, and you keep being careless anyway, that carelessness itself is something you're choosing, even if the specific moment of giving in feels involuntary.

4. You only resist it out of fear, not out of love for God

Ask yourself honestly: when you're fighting this particular temptation, what's actually stopping you? If the only thing holding you back is fear of getting caught, fear of consequences, fear of punishment, and if you'd do it in a heartbeat with none of that fear attached, that's a serious sign the sin has taken deep root in you.

Compare that to Joseph, refusing Potiphar's wife: "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9, ESV). That's not the language of someone calculating risk. That's someone who actually hates the idea of grieving God, independent of any consequence. If your only weapon against temptation is fear of what happens if you get caught, you're fighting with the wrong equipment, and it won't hold up long-term. Believers aren't ultimately meant to be governed that way: "sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14, ESV). Fear-based resistance is a step backward from what real gospel-motivated obedience is supposed to look like.

5. It might be God's specific discipline for something else

Here's a sobering possibility worth genuinely considering: is it possible God has allowed this particular struggle to gain power over you specifically to get your attention about something else, some other pattern of carelessness or neglect you've been ignoring?

Ask yourself honestly: Before this sin took hold, had you been drifting, inconsistent in prayer, careless with your time, living mostly for yourself? Is there some other sin you've never actually dealt with? Have you received real blessings from God without much gratitude, or gone through hardship without actually letting it change anything in you? If any of that sounds familiar, it's worth taking seriously: a new struggle can sometimes be God's way of bringing an old, unresolved issue back to your attention.

6. It has already survived direct correction from God, more than once

Sometimes God confronts a specific sin directly and unmistakably: through a hard circumstance, a verse that lands like a blow, a conversation, a sermon that seems aimed right at you. If a sin has already survived several of these direct confrontations, if it keeps coming back, just as strong, after each one, that's a serious warning sign. Scripture describes exactly this pattern: "because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart" (Isaiah 57:17, ESV). Every time God interrupts you specifically and you shake it off and go back to business as usual, that's not a neutral event. It's a serious mercy being brushed aside.

An important caution: these are warning signs, not a test for whether you're saved

One thing needs to be said clearly before we go further: none of the six things above tell you whether or not you're a genuine believer. These are struggles that believers can fall into, not the things that define what makes someone a believer in the first place.

Don't make the mistake of concluding "I recognize some of these patterns in myself, so I must not really be a Christian." That's faulty logic, the same kind of mistake as saying "a wise person can get sick or act foolishly sometimes, therefore anyone who's sick or acts foolishly must be wise." One doesn't prove the other. Struggle and sin are things believers genuinely experience; they're not, by themselves, evidence one way or the other about whether someone belongs to Christ.

If you want real assurance that you belong to God, look for it in the right place: in the things that actually define what a believer is: real faith in Christ, love for him, the Spirit's fruit taking shape in you over time, not in the presence or absence of struggle itself. Struggle is not the opposite of genuine faith. But left unexamined

and unaddressed, it's exactly the kind of thing this chapter has been describing, and it deserves to be taken seriously, whichever of these six signs you recognize in yourself.

Chapter 10: See Sin for What It Actually Is

Here's the second practical direction: get a clear, lasting sense in your mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of the specific sin you're struggling with.

1. See its true guilt

One of sin's favorite tricks is talking itself down. "It's not that big a deal." "Other believers have done far worse than this." "God, just let this one thing slide." Naaman asked for exactly this kind of pass before he'd even stopped worshipping a false god: "In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant" (2 Kings 5:18). Sin is endlessly creative at finding ways to make itself look smaller than it is, and it works: it clouds your judgment until you genuinely can't see the situation clearly anymore. Scripture describes this exact effect: certain sins "take away the understanding" (Hosea 4:11) so completely that a person simply loses the ability to judge their own condition rightly.

You can see this pattern all through Scripture. The young man in Proverbs 7, pulled in by a seductress, is described as having no sense of what it was actually costing him: he "did not know that it would cost him his life" (Proverbs 7:23), not because it was hidden from him, but because he'd stopped being able to see it. God says something similar about Ephraim: "Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense" (Hosea 7:11, ESV), no real grasp of how much danger he was actually in. Even David, after his affair with Bathsheba, seems to have gone a shockingly long time without facing the real weight of what he'd done. It took a story Nathan told him (2 Samuel 12), designed specifically to close off every excuse, before David could finally see his own guilt clearly enough to actually grieve over it.

So here's the first work of anyone serious about mortifying a sin: get a right, honest verdict on its actual guilt. Two things will help.

First, having God's grace doesn't shrink the seriousness of ongoing sin. If anything, it does the opposite. Paul asks, almost with disbelief: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2). Think about what it actually means for a forgiven, Spirit-indwelt believer to keep giving ground to a sin they've received so much grace, help, and rescue to fight. There's more seriousness in a believer's unaddressed sin, not less, precisely because of everything they've been given to fight it with.

Second, consider how closely God pays attention to what's actually happening in your heart, not just what shows up on the outside. He treasures the smallest sincere longing of a believer's heart more than the most impressive outward performance stripped of real love. That means the reverse is also true: he takes the quiet presence of sin in a believer's heart more seriously than the same sin in someone who's never known him at all, precisely because it's a betrayal of real closeness. Think of how Jesus speaks to the lukewarm church in Revelation 3: he looks straight past their comfortable self-assessment to the real condition underneath, and it isn't flattering (Revelation 3:15–17). Let that same kind of honest self-examination shape how you see your own sin. Don't leave any room for the small, quiet excuses that let sin keep its foothold unnoticed.

2. See its danger

Beyond its guilt, take an honest look at where this sin, left unaddressed, actually leads.

(1) It hardens you. Scripture is direct about this: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:12–13, ESV). This is a slow, creeping process. Someone who used to feel genuinely moved by a sermon, or troubled by their own sin, or tender toward God, can gradually go numb. Prayer becomes routine. Scripture stops landing. Sin that once caused real distress starts to feel unremarkable. That's not a small thing to drift toward. A heart that's stopped being bothered by its own sin is in serious danger, whatever else looks fine on the surface.

(2) It can bring real, painful discipline into your life. I want to be careful here, because it's easy to misuse this point. Not every hardship is a specific punishment for a specific sin; that's not what I'm saying. But Scripture is clear that God does sometimes discipline his own children through real, painful consequences for unaddressed sin, the way a loving father disciplines a child he refuses to give up on. David's later years give a sobering picture of what that can look like. If you feel no weight at all about the possibility of God's fatherly discipline over sin you're allowing to continue, that numbness is itself worth paying attention to.

(3) It can cost you real peace and strength for a long time. Peace with God and strength to walk with him are two of the deepest promises of the gospel; life without them, even while technically “getting by,” is a thin, joyless kind of living. An unmortified sin puts both at risk. This is exactly David's experience in his

darker psalms: broken bones, a disquieted soul, wounds that wouldn't heal, all tied to sin he hadn't yet dealt with honestly. Or consider how God describes his own response to persistent, unaddressed sin: "I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face" (Hosea 5:15, ESV). If you've ever known real peace with God, or felt real strength to walk with him, take seriously what it would cost to lose that, even for a season.

(4) There's a real connection between an unaddressed pattern of sin and eternal danger. This point needs careful handling, so let me be precise. Scripture draws a real, serious connection between continuing in sin and final destruction (see Hebrews 3:12; 10:38; Galatians 6:8). But here's the crucial distinction: there's a real difference between judging your standing as a person in Christ, and judging where an unrepentant pattern of sin actually leads. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1) is gloriously true, and it belongs to everyone who is trusting him and walking by the Spirit. That truth about your identity in Christ isn't something this warning is meant to take away from you. What this warning is meant to do is something different: to make an ongoing, unrepented sin feel as serious as it actually is, so that you're moved to actually deal with it, not to make you doubt whether God could ever love you. Treat the sin, not your standing with God, as the thing under threat here. Take the warning seriously enough to act on it; don't let it become a reason to spiral into doubting whether you belong to Christ at all.

3. See its present cost, not just its future danger

Danger is about what's coming. But an unaddressed sin also has a real cost right now, today, whether or not you ever feel it directly.

(1) It grieves the Holy Spirit. Paul's appeal to believers is exactly this: "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30, ESV). The Spirit isn't a force; he's a person who lives in you, and he genuinely cares about what you let stay alongside him in your heart. Think of how a close friend feels hurt by the coldness or unfaithfulness of someone they love deeply. That's something like what's happening here, except it's the Spirit of God himself, living in you, grieved by what you're choosing to shelter.

(2) It grieves the work Christ has done in you. Every sin you knowingly protect is something Christ specifically died to destroy. Giving it continued room in your heart works directly against everything his death accomplished in you.

(3) It quietly costs you your usefulness. People who let a specific sin sit unaddressed for a long time often find, without quite knowing why, that their spiritual life feels thin and unproductive: prayer without power, effort without visible fruit, seasons of real spiritual barrenness. It's not usually one dramatic collapse. It's more often a slow leak, an unaddressed sin quietly working against everything else you're trying to build.

The bottom line

This is my second direction: keep these three things (the guilt, the danger, and the present cost of your besetting sin) genuinely alive in your mind. Don't just acknowledge them once and move on. Sit with them. Let them actually register, until they have real weight on your heart, not so you're crushed by fear, but so you're finally moved to deal with what needs to be dealt with.

Chapter 11: Five More Practical Directions

Let's keep going with the practical directions for actually mortifying a sin.

Direction 3: Don't just acknowledge the guilt. Let it actually register.

There's a real difference between intellectually admitting "yes, that's a sin" and actually letting your conscience feel the weight of it. The first does almost nothing. The second is where real change starts. Here's how to get there.

First, bring it before God's law. Hold your sin up against the law's full holiness and strictness, and let yourself feel how far short it falls. Don't let your conscience dodge this with the excuse "well, I'm not under the law's condemnation anymore, so it doesn't really matter." That's true in one sense (you're not under its condemning power) but it's a dangerous excuse to hide behind if you're using it to avoid facing what the law still says about the seriousness of what you've done. Let the law do its proper work here: showing you sin clearly, for what it actually is, until you can honestly say with David, "my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3).

Second, bring it before the gospel, not to find relief, but to feel the weight of it even more. This is uncomfortable, but it's worth sitting with. Ask your own heart directly: *What have I done? What love, what mercy, what grace have I trampled on to make room for this? Is this how I repay the Father for his love, the Son for his blood, the Spirit for his patience with me? Have I really counted closeness with Christ so cheap that I'd trade it for this? Have I let something else crowd out the very Spirit who chose to live in me?* Let your conscience sit with those questions honestly. If they don't move you at all, that's worth paying attention to.

Third, make it personal, not abstract. Think of specific moments: times God was patient with you when you had no right to expect it, times he pulled you back from the edge of real hardness, specific mercies, specific rescues, specific kindnesses in your actual life. Let all of that make the guilt feel real and personal, not just a theological concept you nod along with. Don't let up on this until your conscience is genuinely affected, not just informed.

Direction 4: Actually long for deliverance. Don't settle.

Don't let your heart get comfortable with where it currently is. A quiet resignation to your own struggle, "well, this is just how I am," is exactly the wrong posture. What you want instead is a real, active longing for change.

This kind of longing isn't just useful for motivating other action; Scripture treats it as valuable in itself. When Paul describes the Corinthians' genuine repentance, one of the things he highlights is their "longing," their earnest, urgent desire to make things right (2 Corinthians 7:11, ESV). And when Paul describes his own struggle with indwelling sin, listen to how far from resigned he sounds: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24, ESV). That's not calm acceptance. That's someone who genuinely wants out.

Real, honest longing for deliverance does something practical too: it keeps you alert for every opportunity to actually fight back, and it fuels real, persistent prayer. Get your heart into that kind of posture: not just resolving intellectually to change, but actually wanting it, the way you'd want relief from something genuinely painful.

Direction 5: Consider whether this sin is rooted in your natural temperament

Some struggles run deeper than habit; they seem to be wired into someone's natural personality or temperament. If that's true of your struggle, a few things are worth knowing.

This doesn't make you less responsible for it. If anything, it's more serious, not less. David didn't treat his sinful nature as an excuse; he treated it as an aggravation: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5, ESV). That a particular sin comes naturally to you isn't a get-out-of-guilt card. It's a sign of just how deep sin's roots go in you, which should humble you, not excuse you.

It also means you're at greater risk, and you need to know that. A sin that fits naturally with your temperament has an advantage most sins don't. Without real, extra watchfulness in that specific area, it's more likely to get the better of you than a sin that goes against your natural grain.

One practical remedy here is real, physical self-discipline. Paul modeled this: "I discipline my body and keep it under control" (1 Corinthians 9:27, ESV). Practices like fasting, deliberately limiting an appetite, or building in structured discipline around your body can genuinely help weaken a temperament-rooted struggle at its root. This is a real, God-honored tool. But it comes with two important cautions.

First, physical discipline isn't valuable in itself. Making yourself uncomfortable, tired, or physically weakened isn't the same thing as mortifying sin, and it's not automatically good just because it's hard. It's only useful as a means toward the actual goal: weakening a specific sin at its root. Someone can grow physically depleted while their heart stays exactly the same.

Second, these practices don't produce real change by their own power. If fasting or bodily discipline could mortify sin all by itself, then anyone could mortify sin without the Spirit's help at all, which we've already established isn't possible. These practices only work as tools the Spirit sometimes uses to accomplish his own work, not as a mechanism that works automatically on its own. Treat them as useful means, never as the actual source of the power.

Direction 6: Know your danger zones, and actually avoid them

Pay close attention to what situations, circumstances, or company tend to give this particular sin its opening, and deliberately steer clear of them. Jesus calls this "watching": "And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake" (Mark 13:37, ESV). David describes practicing exactly this kind of vigilance over his own heart, watching his own patterns closely enough to catch and resist them before they took hold.

People do this instinctively for physical health: if a certain food or environment consistently makes them sick, they avoid it, no explanation needed. Treat your spiritual vulnerabilities with the same seriousness. Notice honestly what situations, what company, what free time, what circumstances tend to open the door for your particular struggle, and set yourself deliberately against putting yourself there.

Here's why this matters more than it might seem: anyone willing to flirt with the situations that lead to a sin will eventually be willing to commit the sin itself. Think of Hazeal in 2 Kings 8. When the prophet Elisha told him the cruelty he'd one day be capable of, he was genuinely horrified, "Is your servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" But he didn't avoid the path that led there, and he became exactly what he'd been warned about. Tell someone directly they'll commit a specific sin, and they'll likely be offended. But show them they're willing to keep walking toward the situations that lead there, and the outcome isn't really in doubt.

Direction 7: Fight it at the very first stirring, not after it's already gained ground

Rise up hard against the very first hint of this sin's activity, its earliest thought or pull, and don't give it an inch. Don't tell yourself "I'll allow it this far, and no further." Sin doesn't respect limits you try to set for it after the fact. Once it's allowed even a small opening, it will push for more. It behaves like water breaking through a barrier: once it's out, it's far easier to have kept it contained from the start than to try to control it once it's already moving.

This is exactly the pattern James describes: desire, left unchecked, "conceives," gives birth to sin, and sin, left to mature, "brings forth death" (James 1:15, ESV). The place to stop that progression is at the very beginning, not partway through.

So when you notice a sinful thought or pull starting to take hold, meet it immediately, and meet it with the same seriousness you'd use if it had already run its full course. Don't underestimate what a small, quiet temptation is actually asking for. Left alone, it wants everything. Resist it early, and resist it hard. That's the only strategy that actually works.

Chapter 12: Let God's Greatness Put Your Pride in Its Place

Here's the eighth direction: regularly fill your mind with thoughts of God's greatness and your own smallness by comparison.

 **TRANSLATOR'S NOTE (not part of Owen's text):** Owen uses strong language in this chapter, "self-abasement," "vileness," even "abhor myself." It's worth being clear up front about what this is and isn't. This isn't about self-hatred, and it isn't about deciding you're worthless. It's the opposite of pride: an honest, healthy sense of how small you are next to a God this great, the same feeling you might get standing at the edge of the ocean or looking up at a night sky full of stars, just multiplied infinitely and pointed at the living God. That feeling isn't meant to crush you. It's meant to shrink your pride down to its actual size, because pride is one of the main things that keeps sin alive. A person who's genuinely in awe of God has less room left for the puffed-up self-importance that sin feeds on.

1. Think often about how great God actually is

Spend real time considering the sheer scale of God's greatness, and your own distance from it by comparison. This kind of thinking, done honestly, has a way of quietly deflating pride, and pride is exactly the kind of soil sin loves to grow in.

Look at what happened to Job. After a long stretch of arguing his own case, Job finally gets an actual, direct encounter with God's greatness, and it changes everything: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5, ESV). Coming face to face with the real size of God left him with a completely different sense of himself, not because God was cruel to him, but because an honest view of real greatness has a way of putting everything else back in proportion. Habakkuk describes something similar: real trembling, real awe, when he grasped the majesty of God (Habakkuk 3:16). Scripture uses striking comparisons to make this same point: next to God, the nations are like "a drop from a bucket" and "grasshoppers" (Isaiah 40:15, 22).

Spend real time in thoughts like this. There's nothing that makes a heart less vulnerable to sin's lies than genuine, regular awe at how great God actually is. Think greatly about the greatness of God.

2. Consider how little you actually know of him

Even with everything you've learned about God through Scripture and the Spirit, and that knowledge is real, it's genuinely worth having, it's still only a small fraction of who he actually is. Even Solomon, at the height of his wisdom, described himself as “more stupid than a man” and lacking real understanding when he tried to grasp the full scope of God (Proverbs 30:2).

This isn't false modesty. Even the greatest saints in Scripture, people who walked closer with God than most of us ever will, only saw part of the picture. Moses, arguably the person in the Old Testament who knew God most directly, was still told he could only see God's “back,” not his face, because no one could survive seeing God's full glory directly (Exodus 33:20–23). And Paul, writing under the full light of the gospel, still says: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, ESV).

To be clear: this doesn't mean your knowledge of God is fake or worthless. Through Christ, believers genuinely do know God, really and truly, more clearly than anyone did before Christ came: “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18, ESV). That's real, transforming knowledge, not a consolation prize. But “clearer than before” still isn't “complete.” Even now, we know God truly, but only partially. Full, unfiltered sight of him is something Scripture saves for eternity: “we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2, ESV).

Here's a picture worth holding onto: the Queen of Sheba had heard extraordinary reports about Solomon's wisdom and wealth. But when she actually arrived and saw it for herself, she admitted the reports hadn't even come close to the reality (1 Kings 10:6–7). Whatever confidence you have in your current understanding of God, however much theology you've learned, however clear your picture feels, it's still only a partial report. The reality, when you finally see it face to face, will be greater than anything you were able to grasp from here.

Why this actually matters for fighting sin

You might wonder what any of this has to do with mortifying sin. Here's the connection: pride needs a certain kind of self-importance to survive, a sense that you're the main character, that your judgment is reliable, that you basically have things figured out. Real, regular awe at how great God is, and how small your

own understanding actually is by comparison, quietly starves that self-importance. A heart that's genuinely in awe of God has far less room left for the kind of puffed-up confidence that makes sin's excuses sound reasonable.

And here's the important part: this isn't meant to leave you feeling worthless or crushed. It's meant to leave you amazed, the same way you'd feel real wonder standing somewhere vast and beautiful, not shame at being small, but genuine awe that a God this great chooses to know you, love you, and stay close to you anyway. Let your smallness before him be something that humbles your pride, not something that makes you doubt your worth. Those are two very different things, and only one of them is what this chapter is actually about. Hold both together: he is a "consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), worthy of real reverence, and he is also the God who wants you close to him. Genuine awe and genuine closeness were never meant to cancel each other out.

Chapter 13: Don't Give Yourself Peace God Hasn't Given You

Here's the ninth direction: when your conscience is genuinely troubled over a specific sin, whether it's the sin's deep roots in you or a specific incident where it broke out, don't rush to talk yourself into feeling better. Wait and listen for what God actually says to your soul, instead of manufacturing your own relief. This is a serious matter. Skip this step, and you leave yourself wide open to being quietly deceived by the very sin you're trying to deal with.

Two things worth understanding first

First, giving comfort is God's choice, on his timing, not a formula we control. God is free to give grace to whomever he pleases, and even among believers he's already saved and justified, he still reserves the right to decide when and how much felt peace to give. He's called the "God of all comfort" precisely because comfort is something he distributes from his own store, on his own schedule, not something we can manufacture on demand.

Second, it's specifically Christ's role to actually speak peace to your conscience, not yours. Speaking to the church in Laodicea, a church that had wrongly convinced itself it was doing just fine, Jesus identifies himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness" (Revelation 3:14, ESV). He knows the true state of your heart with total accuracy. You and I can talk ourselves into believing things that aren't true. He can't be wrong about you.

With those two things in mind, here are five ways to tell the difference between real peace that comes from God and peace you've simply talked yourself into.

1. Real peace comes with genuine sorrow over the sin, not just relief

If you go to God in Christ for healing, and you feel your conscience quiet down, but you don't feel any real grief or hatred toward the specific sin that caused the trouble, that's a warning sign. Real healing, the kind that actually comes from God, includes both: relief, and a genuine turning against the sin itself.

Scripture describes true repentance this way: "when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him" (Zechariah 12:10, ESV). Looking to Christ for healing isn't just remembering a fact about the cross; it's actually grieving over what your sin cost him. Ezekiel describes something

similar: once God renews his covenant kindness to his people, “then you will remember your ways and be ashamed” (see Ezekiel 16:60–63). Paul describes the Corinthians’ godly grief producing real “earnestness,” even a kind of holy indignation at themselves (2 Corinthians 7:11).

Israel’s history gives a sobering counterexample. In hard times, they’d cry out to God, calling him their Rock and Redeemer, real language of faith, and no doubt they felt some relief. But it never lasted. Why? Because, as the psalm says plainly, “their heart was not right with him, neither were they steadfast in his covenant” (Psalm 78:37). They wanted the comfort without any real change of heart toward the sin that caused the trouble. That kind of peace doesn’t hold. It’s a bandage over a wound that’s still infected underneath, and it will break open again.

2. Real peace isn’t just “I found a Bible verse that fits, so I’m applying it to myself”

This one takes more explaining. Imagine someone who’s fallen into the same sin again, feels genuinely distressed about it, and goes looking through Scripture for a promise that matches their situation. They find one (say, “the Lord will have mercy... he will abundantly pardon,” Isaiah 55:7, or “I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely,” Hosea 14:4), apply it to themselves, and decide they’re at peace. Nothing wrong with the verses themselves; the problem is treating the whole process like a formula: find the matching promise, apply it mentally, done, without ever actually waiting on God or genuinely engaging with him in the process.

You might ask: how do I know when I’m just doing this to myself versus when God is actually the one speaking peace to me? A few honest tests:

It won’t last. If it was self-manufactured, it tends to evaporate at the first real temptation. Give it a little time and watch what happens.

It skips waiting. Real, God-given peace usually comes after a season of patiently waiting on him, not from rushing to grab the first comforting verse you can find. Isaiah modeled this posture: “I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob” (Isaiah 8:17). God often wants his children to sit with him honestly for a while, not sprint straight to relief.

It quiets the mind but doesn’t actually warm the heart. When Naaman came to Elisha for healing, Elisha’s reply was simply “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:19), technically peaceful words, but there’s a real difference between words that settle

an argument and words that actually comfort a soul. Self-made peace can satisfy your reasoning without ever really touching your heart.

It doesn't actually change anything. This is the most telling sign of all. When God genuinely speaks peace, it comes with power to keep you from returning to the same sin: "he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly" (Psalm 85:8, ESV). Self-made peace, on the other hand, often does the opposite: once you've patched yourself up, you may find yourself right back at the same temptation within days, because nothing at the root actually changed. If you notice that "resolving" a sin this way tends to just refuel you for round two, that's a clear sign the Spirit wasn't really the one doing the healing.

3. Real peace isn't rushed or superficial

Scripture criticizes leaders who "healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14, ESV). A wound that's bandaged without being properly cleaned looks fine on the outside and breaks open again later. The same thing happens spiritually when someone gives their own conscience a quick, shallow glance at a promise, without ever really letting it sink in. Scripture describes the difference as a promise being "mixed with faith" (Hebrews 4:2) rather than just technically true. A promise you've truly received changes something in you. A promise you've merely skimmed past doesn't.

4. Real peace can't coexist with another sin you're deliberately ignoring

If you find peace about one specific sin while simultaneously ignoring some other serious, ongoing issue, some other pattern of pride, worldliness, or neglect that you and God both know is there but you've made no real effort to deal with, don't trust that peace. God doesn't grant peace about part of your life while another part sits in open, ignored rebellion. As Scripture says, "he is of purer eyes than to behold evil" (Habakkuk 1:13). He'll forgive real sin. He won't quietly wave off sin you haven't actually brought to him.

5. Real peace is deeply humbling, not just comfortable

Self-manufactured peace tends to feel merely comfortable. God's real peace tends to feel humbling. Think of David after Nathan confronted him: the moment he actually received God's forgiveness was also the moment of his deepest humility, not a casual sense of relief, but genuine brokenness paired with genuine

assurance. If your “peace” leaves you feeling comfortable but not remotely humbled, look closer at where it actually came from.

So when can I trust that I’m genuinely at peace with God?

Whenever God actually speaks it, sooner or later. Sometimes that happens almost instantly. More often, it comes after a season of honestly waiting on him.

How do you recognize his voice as opposed to your own wishful thinking? There’s a kind of spiritual recognition that grows the more you actually walk with him, the way sheep learn to recognize a shepherd’s voice: “my sheep hear my voice” (John 10:27, cf. John 10:4). It’s also recognizable by its effect: when Jesus walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they later said, “did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road” (Luke 24:32)? Real peace from God tends to carry that same unmistakable warmth. It’s not something you talk yourself into; it’s something that happens to you.

A second, simpler test: does this word actually do something real in you? Does it humble you? Does it make you love him more? Does it genuinely move you further from the sin, not just further from the discomfort of feeling guilty about it? If a promise leaves you comfortable but unchanged, be honest about what you’re actually dealing with. But if it leaves you humbled, grateful, and genuinely turned away from the sin, you can trust that God himself was the one speaking.

This might seem like a small distinction to dwell on, but skip it, and you leave a wide door open for sin to quietly talk you into premature comfort, over and over, without ever being genuinely dealt with.

Chapter 14: Set Your Faith on Christ Himself

Everything so far in this book has been preparation. Understanding why mortification matters, clearing away the counterfeits, examining your own heart honestly, learning your specific danger zones. All of that is real and necessary work. But none of it, by itself, actually kills sin. Now we come to the one direction that does the actual work: **set your faith actively on Christ himself for the killing of your sin.**

His blood is the one sovereign remedy for a sin-sick soul. Live in that truth, and you will die a conqueror. You will, by God's good providence, live to see this sin dead at your feet.

How does faith actually do this? A few specific ways.

1. Fill your mind with what's actually stored up for you in Christ

By faith, deliberately fill your soul with the truth that everything you need for this exact fight is laid up for you in Jesus. You may feel completely unable to win this battle on your own, worn out, ready to give up entirely, but there is more than enough in Christ to give you real relief (Philippians 4:13). Remember the prodigal son: even from a distance, far from home, it was the thought that there was still bread enough in his father's house that kept him from despair (Luke 15:17). Let that same thought steady you now. In your worst moments, remember there is a fullness of grace, strength, and help stored up in Christ specifically for you (John 1:16, Colossians 1:19). He was exalted specifically "to give repentance" (Acts 5:31), and mortification is simply repentance worked out day by day. If he gives one, he gives the other. Jesus himself said that this kind of purifying grace comes from abiding in him (John 15:3), and actively setting your faith on his fullness for exactly this purpose is itself a real way of abiding.

Let your own soul actually talk this through, honestly, the way you might process it out loud:

"I'm weak. I keep failing at this. This sin is too strong for me, and I genuinely don't know what to do. I've made promises to change and broken them more than once. I've thought I'd finally won, only to find out I was wrong. On my own, I know exactly where this ends. But here's what's also true: Christ has all the fullness of grace in his heart and all the fullness of power in his hand. He is able to defeat this. There is enough in him for my relief, even now."

Isaiah wrote something worth holding onto in exactly this moment: “He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength... they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:29, 31, ESV). This is the same God who told Paul, in the middle of his own unresolved struggle, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV). Paul wasn’t instantly freed from his thorn. But the sufficiency of God’s grace, simply known and trusted, was enough to steady him through it.

This kind of meditation on Christ’s sufficiency doesn’t always produce instant victory. But it will keep you in the fight. It will keep you from total despair, and from turning to false, useless remedies out of sheer desperation. Its real value shows up in the practice of it, not just in reading about it.

2. Raise up real expectation, not just belief, that Christ will actually help you

There’s a difference between believing Christ *could* help you and actually expecting that he *will*. Cultivate the second one. Habakkuk described this kind of settled waiting: “it is for an appointed time... though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry” (Habakkuk 2:3). Keep your eyes toward him the way a servant watches his master’s hand, ready and expectant (Psalm 123:2). This isn’t wishful thinking. It’s confidence grounded in who he actually is.

Ground this expectation in two things.

First, his mercy. Christ isn’t distant or unmoved by your struggle. He’s described as a high priest who genuinely sympathizes: “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15–16, ESV). God even compares his own comfort to a mother’s tenderness toward her child (Isaiah 66:13). This is not a God who is impatient with your weakness.

Second, his faithfulness. He has promised to help in exactly this kind of situation, and he keeps his word without fail. His covenant with his people is compared to the fixed, reliable rhythm of the sun, moon, and stars (Jeremiah 31:36). David describes waiting for God’s help the way someone watches for the

sunrise, certain it's coming, even if not yet visible (Psalm 130:6). Your relief will come in its appointed time, not necessarily yours.

Keeping this posture of real expectation does two valuable things.

It's part of how real relationship with him works. Genuine trust that someone who loves you will help you tends to draw out real care in return, and Christ has given every reason for that kind of trust. He hasn't given you grounds for doubt.

It keeps you actively engaged rather than passive. Anyone who genuinely expects help from someone stays close to them and pays attention to how they typically provide it. In the same way, real expectation of help from Christ keeps you engaged with the actual means he uses: prayer, Scripture, honest reflection. It's not an idle, do-nothing kind of hope. It's the kind that keeps you present and attentive, actively working out what you're trusting him to work in.

3. Fix your faith specifically on Christ's death

Mortification is tied, specifically and directly, to the death of Christ. This isn't incidental. He "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession" (Titus 2:14). He gave himself for the church "that he might sanctify her... so that the church might be presented to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle" (Ephesians 5:25–27). His blood is what "purifies our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14). This was always the aim of the cross, and it will be accomplished, in real and various degrees, in every believer he died for.

Paul makes the connection explicit in Romans 6. Believers, he says, are "dead to sin" (Romans 6:2), and he explains exactly why: "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death... we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life... We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:3–6, ESV). Your union with Christ's death isn't just a fact to file away. It's the actual source of your power to mortify sin: because he died, the Spirit was secured for you; because he died, real power flows out from his cross into your daily fight against sin.

So practically: bring the actual scene of the cross into your heart, deliberately, regularly. Don't just recall the fact of it. Picture him, weighed down by your sin, praying, bleeding, dying, and apply that blood specifically to the sin you're

fighting right now. Do this daily, not as a one-time exercise but as an ongoing practice.

What the Holy Spirit does through all of this

Everything described in this book, start to finish, is the Spirit's work, carried out through you, not around you. To close, here's a summary of exactly what he does:

He convicts you of the true evil, guilt, and danger of the sin. Nothing else in this process works until this happens. A heart that hasn't been genuinely convicted will always find a way to excuse, minimize, or tolerate its sin. Only the Spirit produces conviction that actually holds.

He reveals Christ's fullness to you, which is exactly what keeps you from despair on one side and false, self-made remedies on the other.

He establishes real, settled expectation of relief from Christ in your heart, the very thing this chapter has been urging you toward.

He brings the actual power of the cross into your heart, applying what Christ accomplished there directly to your present struggle.

He supplies ongoing grace for growth, strengthening the good in you as the sin weakens, so you're not just losing ground in one place but genuinely gaining it in another.

He empowers real prayer. Whatever life and power your prayers have, whatever ability they have to actually reach God, comes from him. He's described as the one who helps us "pray with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26) and as the Spirit poured out on those who look to the one they've pierced (Zechariah 12:10). Paul's own request for relief from his thorn was carried by exactly this kind of Spirit-given prayer (2 Corinthians 12:8).

That's the whole of it. Not a technique, not a formula, but a real, ongoing dependence on a real Person, carried out in the strength of another real Person living in you. That's what it actually looks like to put sin to death: not gritting your teeth and trying harder, but bringing your weakness honestly to Christ, again and again, and trusting him to do in you what he has already promised to do.

That's the whole of what I set out to say. If this book has done nothing more than help you understand the fight you're actually in, and point you toward the only

one who can win it with you, then it's done what it was written to do.

Appendix: About This Translation

Purpose

This is a modern-English rewrite of John Owen's 1656 treatise *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, adapted for a young reader who is new to the faith. The goal throughout was to preserve Owen's actual theological arguments and pastoral voice, not simply to summarize or water them down, while making the language, structure, and cultural references accessible to a modern young reader encountering this material for the first time.

Source Text

This translation works from Owen's original 1656 text, sourced from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL), rather than from any modern copyrighted modernization. Owen's original is public domain, which made it possible to restructure and rewrite it freely.

Editorial Principles

Restructuring, not paraphrase. Rather than lightly smoothing Owen's sentences, each chapter was actively rebuilt: long sentences were broken apart, implicit subjects and objects were made explicit, clauses were reordered for readability, and headers or numbered lists were added to chapters with dense, stacked argumentation. The aim was always to preserve Owen's actual meaning and reasoning, not to simplify it away.

The word "mortification" was kept, rather than replaced with a softer modern equivalent, because it's the book's central term and Owen means something more deliberate and forceful than "resisting" or "managing" sin. A brief definition was added at the start of the Preface so the term doesn't land cold.

Scripture quotations use the ESV, quoted exactly with full citations, for any verse Owen directly quotes or leans on heavily. Where Owen paraphrases or alludes to a passage without quoting it directly, that material was rendered as his own modernized prose instead. For longer passages, only the specific relevant portion is quoted, with the full reference given so a reader can look up the rest themselves.

Translator's notes were added in a small number of places, clearly boxed off and labeled so they're never mistaken for Owen's own words. These appear

where a chapter needs either historical context (Owen's 17th-century polemical targets) or pastoral framing (language that could be misread or land harshly on a young reader without it).

Chapter-by-Chapter Notes

Preface. Added an upfront note defining "mortification" for readers meeting the term for the first time.

Chapter 1: Romans 8:13 Explained. Dropped Owen's untransliterated Greek word studies entirely; they add intimidation without adding value for this reader. Kept "the old self" (from Romans 6:6) as the one recurring image for indwelling sin. Used headers to separate Owen's five-point breakdown of the verse, which runs together in the original.

Chapter 2: The Duty of the Best Believers. Kept all six of Owen's reasons why even mature believers must keep fighting sin, each given its own header. Summarized rather than fully quoting his string of supporting references (e.g., the Galatians 5:19–21 vice list). Preserved his closing warning about "unmortified professors" as a deliberate bridge into Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: The Spirit Alone Can Do This Work. Owen spends significant energy here attacking specific 17th-century Catholic monastic practices. Added a translator's note explaining that historical target, then generalized his actual argument (religious performance without the Spirit can't kill sin) since it applies across every tradition today, not just his original target. Fixed a voice-consistency bug on a later pass: a line had drifted into third person ("why does Owen keep telling us") instead of staying in his first-person voice.

Chapter 4: Why This Matters for Your Everyday Life. Kept Owen's honest caveat, using Heman (Psalm 88), that mortification doesn't guarantee felt peace, so the chapter doesn't read as a formula. Kept the Hosea 5 illustration for why crying out for comfort doesn't work if the underlying sin goes unaddressed.

Chapter 5: What Mortification Is NOT. Kept all five of Owen's "counterfeits" of mortification intact, including the Simon Magus (Acts 8) and Psalm 78 illustrations, since both do real work showing what false victory looks like from the inside.

Chapter 6: What Mortification Actually Is. Preserved Owen's three-part positive definition (weakening the habit at the root, constant active fighting, real

measurable success) and kept his crucifixion image as the chapter's central picture.

Chapter 7: This Only Works If You're Actually a Believer. Extended the translator's-note treatment from Chapter 3, noting that Owen critiques not only Catholic practice here but his own Protestant tradition's moralizers, who gave the same "just vow to stop" advice. Generalized his closing address to "preachers" into a note for anyone discipling someone else, since a teenage reader is more likely to be helping a friend than preaching a sermon. Fixed the same third-person voice slip found in Chapter 3 ("Here's an illustration Owen uses" corrected to first person).

Chapter 8: You Can't Fight One Sin While Ignoring Everything Else. Kept the Isaiah 58 illustration and the "chronic wound" metaphor, and preserved Owen's pointed self-examination questions ("why are you actually fighting this sin?") at full directness.

Chapter 9: When a Struggling Sin Needs More Than the Usual Approach. Kept all six of Owen's warning signs as genuinely distinct diagnostic categories. Gave real weight to his closing caveat that these are warning signs, not a salvation test, since without it this chapter could push an anxious reader into unhealthy self-doubt about whether they're "really saved."

Chapter 10: See Sin for What It Actually Is. The heaviest chapter so far in the original, with vivid wrath-and-hell imagery. Kept Owen's seriousness but toned back the most graphic language, which reads as frightening rather than clarifying for this age group. Carefully preserved his own built-in safeguard: the explicit distinction between judging your ways (a real warning against an unrepentant pattern) and judging your person (your secure standing in Christ). Also kept his caution that not every hardship is punishment for a specific sin.

Chapter 11: Five More Practical Directions. Covers Owen's directions 3 through 7. Simplified his more repetitive cautions about bodily discipline into a brief inline note rather than a third full translator's note, since the "religious performance without the Spirit" theme was already covered thoroughly in Chapters 3 and 7. Kept the Hazael illustration (2 Kings 8) for how flirting with temptation's occasions leads somewhere you didn't intend.

Chapter 12: Let God's Greatness Put Your Pride in Its Place. Flagged early in the project for its self-abasement language ("despise myself," "abhor myself"). Added a translator's note at the very start of the chapter, before any of that language appears, explicitly framing it as awe deflating pride, not self-hatred or

worthlessness. Cut almost all of Owen's dense scholastic digression on exactly how much more clearly New Covenant believers know God compared to Moses, keeping only his conclusion. Kept the Job, Queen of Sheba, and Moses illustrations, and closed on a deliberately warm note pairing reverence with closeness to God rather than ending on smallness alone.

Chapter 13: Don't Give Yourself Peace God Hasn't Given You. Dropped Owen's technical philosophical framework (a distinction between "vegetative," "sensitive," and "rational" life) used to explain false, self-manufactured comfort, keeping only the practical point it supports. Kept all five of his diagnostic tests for real versus false peace. Quietly dropped a single passing aside criticizing "popish devotionists" rather than expanding it into a full note, since it was one phrase, not a sustained argument.

Chapter 14: Set Your Faith on Christ Himself. The climactic chapter. Preserved Owen's extended "soul talk" passage, an internal monologue modeling how to preach truth to your own discouraged heart, largely intact, since it's some of the most moving writing in the book. Kept his unpacking of Romans 6 (union with Christ's death) fairly full, since it's the direct textual basis for why mortification is tied specifically to the cross. Added one closing line beyond Owen's own text, since his original ends somewhat abruptly by trailing into a promise to discuss prayer elsewhere.