

Discussion Guide for Reading Groups

Of the
MORTIFICATION
of Sin in Believers

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Resurrection Publishing



DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR READING GROUPS

OF THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN IN BELIEVERS

JOHN OWEN

One Protestant voice on putting sin to death

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Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers — Discussion Guide
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This voice among four

How does the believer put sin to death? Christians have answered that hard question with shared seriousness and with real differences in emphasis. This guide begins with John Owen because it is made to help a group read *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* carefully, together, and all the way through.

John Owen · one Protestant voice on that question.

Owen is one of four voices gathered around this question. Cassian's *Institutes*, Isaac's *Mystic Treatises*, Scupoli's *The Spiritual Combat*, and Owen's treatise belong in conversation: they share a concern for repentance, watchfulness, and life in Christ, yet they do not flatten their traditions into one answer. Let their kinship be a help, and their honest difference an occasion for patient attention.

This guide is for Owen's treatise. For a reading group, the Owen hardcover is available in a facilitator pack of 8, so each reader may have the work in hand.

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Facilitator norms

This is a conversation that may touch sensitive ground, but it need not become a place where anyone is pressed to disclose what they have not chosen to share. Invite candor; do not require it. A participant may speak from the text, from prayer, or from a question still taking shape. Silence is not failure, and no one is asked to prove seriousness by telling more than is wise.

Read the author with care before judging him quickly. Let people finish a thought. Ask what a passage says before asking how it applies. Where the group disagrees, name the disagreement plainly and return to the words on the page. The aim is neither to win an argument nor to make a display of self-knowledge, but to hear a Christian teacher faithfully and to seek the Lord together.

Keep Christ at the center. The counsel in these pages is not a set of religious techniques by which we repair ourselves. Faith looks to Christ, depends upon his Spirit, and receives the ordinary means of grace with humility. Pray at the beginning and end; make room for repentance and hope; leave one another with encouragement that is truthful, particular, and free of pressure.

Owen — argument map

Owen begins with a command and ends with a Person. Read the middle directions in that order.

1. The foundation: Romans 8:13. Believers are commanded to put the deeds of the body to death, and the promised life is joined to that duty. The work belongs to believers; the Spirit is its effective cause.

2. Why the work remains necessary. Indwelling sin has not ceased to act. Left alone, it weakens obedience, darkens comfort, and seeks room to grow. Mortification is therefore a lifelong work, not a crisis measure or proof that one has earned life.

3. What the work is—and is not. It is not outward restraint, a quieter temperament, a change of circumstances, or a brief victory after fear has been stirred. It is the Spirit's steady weakening of sin's power, active resistance to it, and real, though incomplete, success against it.

4. The ground beneath the directions. The work is for those joined to Christ, and it calls for an undivided, humble obedience. Owen does not offer a technique for self-repair; he requires faith, honesty, and attention to the whole life before God.

5. Particular watchfulness. Where a sin has become familiar or has repeatedly prevailed, Owen asks for sober attention: its guilt, its danger, the occasions that feed it, and the first movements by which it seeks consent. The point is not panic or self-exposure, but truth before God.

6. The end toward which every direction points. Faith looks to Christ crucified. His death, the fullness of his grace, and the Spirit he gives are the believer's relief. The directions clear the ground; Christ is not an addition to the remedy but its source.

Session 1

Reading: Prefaces and Chapter I

Where we are: Owen sets the whole book under Romans 8:13, where believers are called to put sin to death through the Spirit.

Understand: What does Owen mean when he says that mortification is the work of those who already belong to Christ, rather than a way to make oneself acceptable to him?

Discern: How does the promise “you shall live” keep this duty from becoming an attempt to earn life, even as it keeps the duty serious?

Trust: Where does this opening chapter direct a person who knows that willpower alone has not changed the heart?

Tip: Give time to the verse itself. Let the group hear the command, the promise, and the Spirit’s place before moving to application.

Session 2

Reading: Chapters II–III

Where we are: Owen explains why this work does not end in this life and why the Spirit, not self-made religion, must carry it forward.

Understand: Why does Owen think a believer must continue this work even after real growth, forgiveness, and assurance?

Discern: What kinds of effort can look earnest while leaving the root of sin untouched? What makes them different from the Spirit's work?

Trust: Owen says the Spirit works in us without turning our obedience into passivity. How does that give both humility and courage for the next step?

Tip: Keep the contrast clear: Owen does not despise prayer, fasting, or watchfulness; he refuses to treat them as power sources apart from Christ and his Spirit.

Session 3

Reading: Chapter IV

Where we are: Owen connects mortification with the strength, clarity, and comfort of ordinary life with God.

Understand: In what sense does Owen say that spiritual vigor and comfort depend on mortification, and in what sense does he carefully refuse to say that they are earned by it?

Discern: What does Owen mean by sin weakening and darkening the soul? Which part of his account corrects a shallow explanation of every spiritual dryness?

Trust: How can a group seek freedom from sin without treating present comfort as the measure of God's favor?

Tip: Make room for Owen's example of Heman. The absence of felt comfort is not simple evidence of neglect, nor is mortification a lever by which to demand consolation.

Session 4

Reading: Chapters V–VI

Where we are: Owen clears away false measures of mortification, then describes its real shape: sin's power weakened, opposed, and increasingly denied success.

Understand: Which distinction in these chapters most changes how you would recognize true mortification: the difference from suppression, a change in temperament, diversion into another form, or a temporary victory? Why?

Discern: Owen says a person can be relieved by the quietness of sin without sin being mortified. What questions would help a group tell the difference without examining one another harshly?

Trust: Why is it hopeful, rather than discouraging, that Owen does not promise sin's complete removal in this life? How does his account give a believer a truthful way to notice progress?

Tip: Give this session room. Do not rush toward examples or solutions. The group needs Owen's definition before it can use his later directions without mistaking them for self-management.

Session 5

Reading: Chapters VII–VIII

Where we are: Before giving particular directions, Owen locates the work in union with Christ and calls for sincerity across the whole life.

Understand: Why does Owen begin by insisting that mortification belongs to those joined to Christ? What problem is he trying to prevent?

Discern: How can concern about one troubling sin become merely concern for one's own relief? What does Owen mean by a wholehearted obedience without making it a claim to flawlessness?

Trust: How do these chapters turn a person from isolated self-improvement toward Christ, repentance, and a more faithful ordinary walk?

Tip: Do not let the discussion turn into a ranking of failures. Owen's point is that grace does not make peace with the parts of life we would prefer not to bring before God.

Session 6

Reading: Chapters IX–X

Where we are: Owen turns to a sin that has become entrenched or repeatedly disquieting and teaches the believer to face its guilt, danger, and present evil without excuse.

Understand: Which signs lead Owen to call a condition dangerous, and why does he warn against using assurance or mercy to make peace with what should be confronted?

Discern: What is the difference between taking sin seriously and falling into despair, fear, or relentless self-accusation?

Trust: Owen calls the conscience to reckon with sin in the light of both God's law and Christ's love. Why are both needed, and what would be lost by leaving either out?

Tip: Lead gently but plainly. The aim is not to make anyone report hidden matters; it is to refuse the evasions by which a heart protects what God calls evil.

Session 7

Reading: Chapters XI–XIII

Where we are: Owen calls for watchfulness: honest conscience, a real desire for deliverance, attention to occasions, humility before God, and patience for peace that God himself gives.

Understand: How do Owen’s directions about occasions and first movements of sin change the meaning of watchfulness from vague vigilance to wise attention?

Discern: Why does Owen warn against declaring peace to oneself too quickly? How can his warning be heard without making a troubled conscience distrust every promise of God?

Trust: What does it look like to wait for God’s peace while continuing in prayer, repentance, and ordinary obedience?

Tip: Keep the final question tethered to Christ’s promises. Waiting for God’s peace is not withholding oneself from him; it is refusing a peace made by denial or haste.

Session 8

Reading: Chapter XIV

Where we are: Having prepared the ground, Owen gives his central direction: act faith on Christ crucified and expect help from him by the Spirit.

Understand: Why does Owen call the earlier directions preparatory? What does he now identify as the work that actually brings sin's power down?

Discern: How does faith fixed on Christ's death differ from using the cross only to quiet guilt or from trying to make oneself worthy of help before coming to him?

Trust: Where does Owen direct a believer who is weary of failed resolutions? What does it mean, in his account, to expect relief from Christ while attending to the means he has given?

Tip: Give this session the most time. Return to the chapter's order: Christ's fullness, the confidence his mercy and faithfulness invite, then the cross brought near by the Spirit.

Also on this question

If another voice would serve the group's next conversation, these editions take up the same question from different places in the tradition.

The Institutes — John Cassian

Patristic (West)

Cassian follows the desert tradition into the passions and their remedies: a slower, formative account of repentance than Owen's concentrated argument about mortifying indwelling sin. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

Mystic Treatises — Isaac of Nineveh

Orthodox

Isaac approaches the struggle through ascetical counsel shaped by mercy, prayer, and the healing of the heart, rather than Owen's analytic treatment of sin's power. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

The Spiritual Combat — Lorenzo Scupoli

Catholic

Scupoli offers a practical manual of watchfulness and spiritual warfare, with daily counsels for resisting self-reliance and temptation alongside Owen's doctrinal case. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

Letters from Resurrection Publishing

If this question is yours, Resurrection Publishing sends personal notes from Harvey, our founder — on reading these voices for real groups.

Sign up for the letters: <https://resurrectionpublishing.com/l/g>

Close

Thank you for giving this demanding little book the time it asks of you. Keep Owen near enough to return to: not as a substitute for Scripture, prayer, or the Church's ordinary life, but as a serious companion in the work of learning to hate sin and hope in Christ.

If this question remains with your group, the other voices on it are in the Resurrection Publishing catalog as hardcovers and ebooks, each with its own free discussion guide. They are invitations for another season of reading, not requirements for completing this one.

This edition is for readers who want the work itself, not a summary.