

PUTTING SIN TO DEATH — FREE
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to Death



Owen · Scupoli · Isaac · Cassian

RESURRECTION PUBLISHING READER

PUTTING SIN TO DEATH

John Owen, Lorenzo Scupoli, Isaac of Nineveh, and John Cassian

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This free sample prints the question, two answers whole, and a taste of the comparison — it is not the full reader.

ABOUT THIS READER

Putting Sin to Death gathers four teachers from across the Church's traditions — John Owen, Lorenzo Scupoli, Isaac of Nineveh, and John Cassian — on one question: How does the believer put sin to death?

The editorial layer — the prefaces, the four analyses, the comparison parts, and the glossary — was generated with large language models working under our editorial method, then verified quotation by quotation against the source editions. No page reached print until a human editor accepted it.

PART I — THE QUESTION

The question this reader exists to ask is a single sentence: how does the believer put sin to death and live in repentance? Two things are being asked at once, and the four voices in this book keep both together. To put sin to death is to fight: to weaken, resist, and kill something that lives in the believer and does not intend to die. To live in repentance is to go on — praying, falling, rising, grieving, hoping — without the fight swallowing the life it serves. A reader who takes the first half alone becomes a technician of the self; a reader who takes the second alone becomes a spectator of his own corruption. The four writers printed here refuse both reductions, though they refuse them in four vocabularies, from four centuries, from four corners of the Church.

Those corners matter to the shape of the book. John Owen wrote as a Protestant divine of the seventeenth century. Lorenzo Scupoli wrote as a Catholic of the sixteenth. Isaac of Nineveh wrote in the seventh century in the Syriac East; he is this reader's Orthodox witness. John Cassian wrote in the fifth century for the monks of the Western coenobia — the Patristic West. And none of these men was answering any of the others. Cassian had been dead more than a millennium when Scupoli published; Scupoli's combat appeared in the sixteenth century, before Owen's treatise; Isaac wrote some ten centuries before Owen and about nine before Scupoli. Nothing in the comparison parts stages these four as a debate, because no debate ever happened. The comparison belongs to the reader, not to the writers. What Parts VI–VIII compare is four independent answers to the same question.

Four books, four kinds of answers

John Owen. *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* appeared in 1656. The book is a treatise in the old sense: it moves from general principles to numbered directions, and the numbered spine is the argument. It addresses believers — not the world, not the half-convinced — who find that indwelling sin is still alive in them. The duty Owen draws from the text is permanent, daily, and binding on the strongest Christians most of all, and he meets the easiest objection to it before the reader can raise it:

Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you. Your being dead with Christ virtually, your being quickened with him, will not excuse you from this work.
— Owen, chapter II

Five imperatives in succession; then the objection — dead with Christ, quickened with him — met before it is spoken. Union with Christ is real comfort, and Owen refuses to let it function as a discharge. This reader prints five of the treatise's fourteen chapters: the duty (chapter II), the Spirit as the work's only author (chapter III, which also carries Owen's own polemic against mortification attempted by method alone, his critique labeled as his), the definition of mortification (chapter VI), the rule about peace (chapter XIII), and the great direction to act faith on Christ (chapter XIV).

Lorenzo Scupoli. *The Spiritual Combat* is a different kind of book entirely: sixty-six short chapters addressed to a single combatant, each a rule or a tactic rather than a discourse. Scupoli sustains the military frame without embarrassment: the field of battle, wounds, desertion, the enemy's devices. And he assumes a reader who lives under obedience: superiors who order the day, a spiritual father who settles doubtful cases, the sacraments at hand. Method comes before feeling. His command to the combatant is procedural and daily:

But if you aspire to such a pitch of perfection, you must daily do violence to yourself, by courageously attacking and destroying all your evil desires and affections. In great matters as well as in small, it is necessary, then, that you prepare yourself and hold yourself in readiness for this conflict, for he only will be crowned who was brave in the battle. — Scupoli, chapter I

The verb is the book: violence, done daily, to oneself. And notice the scale, great matters and small, because Scupoli's combat is won and lost in the small ones. Fifteen of the sixty-six chapters are printed here, chosen so that every stage of his campaign is represented: the twin ground of distrust of self and trust in God, the ordered day, the protocol for falls, the fourth weapon of prayer, and the assault of despair at the end.

Isaac of Nineveh. Isaac the Syrian, of the seventh century, wrote the *Ascetical Homilies* (homiletic prose, not treatise): second-person address, aphoristic sentences, a question-and-answer catechism in one homily, an assumed ascetic setting of cell, silence, night vigils, and psalmody. This edition reprints A. J. Wensinck's 1923 English (the *Mystic Treatises* selection), lightly edited by Resurrection Publishing; Wensinck's idiom and his bracketed clarifications stand as printed. Four homilies are printed here. Isaac's answer to the reader's question turns on one verb: sin is not put to death by managing its acts but by hating its cause —

A man is not freed from the allurements of sin in his heart until he hates from [the depth of] his heart and sincerely the cause of sin. This causes the vehemence of the struggle which opposes man in the blood and in which his freedom is testified to through the purity of his love of virtues. — Isaac, Homily 30

The hatred is of a cause, not of the self, and the struggle it starts is “in the blood”: in the body's appetitive life, not mainly in the

intellect. The power that produces the hatred is mercy, met through weakness rather than won by resolve.

John Cassian. *The Institutes*, written in the fifth century, is a twelve-book constitution of coenobial life, and inside it a clinic. Cassian's answer to the reader's question changes the unit of analysis: the believer does not face "sin" as one problem but a succession of distinct combatants, and the war is waged by diagnosis (name the spirit, trace its causes, apply its remedies) and waged inside a community, under a grace that completes what effort begins. This reader holds three of the twelve books: dejection (Book IX), vainglory (Book XI), and pride (Book XII). The eightfold catalogue of principal faults opens the complete work at Book V, which is named but not included here. His axiom about the location of sin comes with its own proof case:

For no one is ever driven to sin by being provoked through another's fault, unless he has the fuel of evil stored up in his own heart. Nor should we imagine that a man has been deceived suddenly when he has looked on a woman and fallen into the abyss of shameful lust: but rather that, owing to the opportunity of looking on her, the symptoms of disease which were hidden and concealed in his inmost soul have been brought to the surface. — Cassian, Book IX

The second sentence is the clinic in miniature: the look did not create the lust; it surfaced a disease the soul already carried. Sin, on this showing, has symptoms, causes, and remedies, which is why Cassian's books read like case histories with cures attached.

The map of comparison

Eight topics organize the comparison in Parts VI–VIII. All four writers speak to each of them in their own printed text:

1. **Duty and seriousness of sin:** what the fight costs, and why it never lapses.
2. **The ground of the fight:** what actually powers it — the Spirit and the cross, a practiced distrust-and-trust, faith and humility that find mercy, grace completing what toil begins.
3. **Taxonomy of passions or particular lusts:** whether the war is mapped in advance as a catalogue or fought one named case at a time.
4. **Repentance and mercy:** what repentance is, and what it is for.
5. **Assurance and “speaking peace”:** how a believer knows where he stands after sin.
6. **Rule and community against individual conscience:** where the fight is checked and settled.
7. **Watchfulness and vigilance:** the discipline of seeing the enemy early.
8. **Daily practice:** what the day actually contains.

The map is not a scorecard. Where the four converge, Part VI says so plainly and no further. Where they differ, Part VII names the difference and stops: the point is to let each writer finish his own sentence in his own terms, not to crown one of them.

The order of reading

This reader has an order, and it is simple. Parts II–V each begin with an analysis chapter, then print that writer’s units whole: entire chapters, homilies, or books, never fragments. The analysis orients you; the chapters are the writer himself. Read all four writers through before you turn to the map: Part VI gathers the agreements, Part VII

names the differences, Part VIII assembles a daily shape from the four streams, and the glossary maps each camp's terms onto its neighbors. A reader who begins with the map will see the skeleton without the body; the comparison is written to be read second, and the whole chapters are what make it fair.

The four answers are more alike than their vocabularies suggest, and more different than their shared concern implies. Neither fact is an accident, and neither is a problem. The rest of the book is the demonstration.

THE PROTESTANT VOICE — JOHN OWEN

The reader's Part II opens with "How the Protestant voice deals with sin" — Owen's teaching, set out in his own terms — and prints five chapters of his treatise whole. This sample prints Chapter II of *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, complete.

CHAPTER II

The principal assertion concerning the necessity of mortification proposed to confirmation—Mortification the duty of the best believers, Col. 3:5; 1 Cor. 9:27—Indwelling sin always abides; no perfection in this life, Phil. 3:12; 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Pet. 3:18; Gal. 5:17, etc.—The activity of abiding sin in believers, Rom. 7:23; James 4:5; Heb. 12:1—Its fruitfulness and tendency—Every lust aims at the height in its kind—The Spirit and new nature given to contend against indwelling sin, Gal. 5:17; 2 Pet. 1:4, 5; Rom. 7:23—The fearful issue of the neglect of mortification, Rev. 3:2; Heb. 3:13—The first general principle of the whole discourse hence confirmed—Want of this duty lamented.

Having laid this foundation, a brief confirmation of the fore-mentioned principal deductions will lead me to what I chiefly intend,

—

I. That the choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.

So the apostle, Col. 3:5, “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth.” Whom speaks he to? Such as were “risen with Christ,” verse 1; such as were “dead” with him, verse 3; such as whose life Christ was, and who should “appear with him in glory,” verse 4. Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you. Your being dead with Christ virtually, your being quickened with him, will not excuse you from this work. And our Savior tells us how his Father deals with every branch in him that beareth fruit, every true and living branch. “He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit,” John 15:2. He prunes it, and that not for a day or two, but whilst it is a branch in this world. And the apostle

tells you what was his practice, 1 Cor. 9:27, “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection.” “I do it,” saith he, “daily; it is the work of my life: I omit it not; this is my business.” And if this were the work and business of Paul, who was so incomparably exalted in grace, revelations, enjoyments, privileges, consolations, above the ordinary measure of believers, where may we possibly bottom an exemption from this work and duty whilst we are in this world? Some brief account of the reasons hereof may be given:—

1. Indwelling sin always *abides* whilst we are in this world; therefore it is always to be mortified. The vain, foolish, and ignorant disputes of men about perfect keeping the commands of God, of perfection in this life, of being wholly and perfectly dead to sin, I meddle not now with. It is more than probable that the men of those abominations never knew what belonged to the keeping of any one of God’s commands, and are so much below perfection of degrees, that they never attained to a perfection of parts in obedience or universal obedience in sincerity. And, therefore, many in our days who have talked of perfection have been wiser, and have affirmed it to consist in knowing no difference between good and evil. Not that they are perfect in the things we call good, but that all is alike to them, and the height of wickedness is their perfection. Others who have found out a new way to it, by denying original, indwelling sin, and attempering the spirituality of the law of God unto men’s carnal hearts, as they have sufficiently discovered themselves to be ignorant of the life of Christ and the power of it in believers, so they have invented a new righteousness that the gospel knows not of, being vainly puffed up by their fleshly minds. For us, who dare not be wise above what is written, nor boast by other men’s lines of what God hath not done for us, we say that indwelling sin lives in us, in some measure and degree, whilst we are in this world. We dare not speak as “though we had already attained, or were already perfect,” Phil. 3:12. Our “inward man is to be renewed day by day” whilst here we live, 2 Cor. 4:16; and ac-

cording to the renovations of the new are the breaches and decays of the old. Whilst we are here we “know but in part,” 1 Cor. 13:12, having a remaining darkness to be gradually removed by our “growth in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ,” 2 Pet. 3:18; and “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, so that we cannot do the things that we would,” Gal. 5:17: and are therefore defective in our obedience as well as in our light, 1 John 1:8. We have a “body of death,” Rom. 7:24; from whence we are not delivered but by the death of our bodies, Phil. 3:21. Now, it being our duty to mortify, to be killing of sin whilst it is in us, we must be at work. He that is appointed to kill an enemy, if he leave striking before the other ceases living, doth but half his work, Gal. 6:9; Heb. 12:1; 2 Cor. 7:1.

2. Sin doth not only still abide in us, but is still acting, still laboring to bring forth the deeds of the flesh. When sin lets us alone we may let sin alone; but as sin is never less quiet than when it seems to be most quiet, and its waters are for the most part deep when they are still, so ought our contrivances against it to be vigorous at all times and in all conditions, even where there is least suspicion. Sin doth not only abide in us, but “the law of the members is still rebelling against the law of the mind,” Rom. 7:23; and “the spirit that dwells in us lusteth to envy,” James 4:5. It is always in continual work; “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit,” Gal. 5:17; lust is still tempting and conceiving sin, James 1:14; in every moral action it is always either inclining to evil, or hindering from that which is good, or disframing the spirit from communion with God. It inclines to evil. “The evil which I would not, that I do,” saith the apostle, Rom. 7:19. Whence is that? Why, “Because in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing.” And it hinders from good: “The good that I would do, that I do not,” verse 19;—“Upon the same account, either I do it not, or not as I should; all my holy things being defiled by this sin.” “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would,” Gal. 5:17. And it

unframes our spirit, and thence is called “The sin that so easily besets us,” Heb. 12:1; on which account are those grievous complaints that the apostle makes of it, Rom. 7. So that sin is always acting, always conceiving, always seducing and tempting. Who can say that he had ever any thing to do with God or for God, that indwelling sin had not a hand in the corrupting of what he did? And this trade will it drive more or less all our days. If, then, sin will be always acting, if we be not always mortifying, we are lost creatures. He that stands still and suffers his enemies to double blows upon him without resistance, will undoubtedly be conquered in the issue. If sin be subtle, watchful, strong, and always at work in the business of killing our souls, and we be slothful, negligent, foolish, in proceeding to the ruin thereof, can we expect a comfortable event? There is not a day but sin foils or is foiled, prevails or is prevailed on; and it will be so whilst we live in this world.

I shall discharge him from this duty who can bring sin to a composition, to a cessation of arms in this warfare; if it will spare him any one day, in any one duty (provided he be a person that is acquainted with the spirituality of obedience and the subtlety of sin), let him say to his soul, as to this duty, “Soul, take thy rest.” The saints, whose souls breathe after deliverance from its perplexing rebellion, know there is no safety against it but in a constant warfare.

3. Sin will not only be striving, acting, rebelling, troubling, disquieting, but if let alone, if not continually mortified, it will *bring forth great, cursed, scandalous, soul-destroying sins*. The apostle tells us what the works and fruits of it are, Gal. 5:19–21, “*The works of the flesh are manifest, which are, adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like.*” You know what it did in David and sundry others. Sin aims always at the utmost; every time

it rises up to tempt or entice, might it have its own course, it would go out to the utmost sin in that kind. Every unclean thought or glance would be adultery if it could; every covetous desire would be oppression, every thought of unbelief would be atheism, might it grow to its head. Men may come to that, that sin may not be heard speaking a scandalous word in their hearts,—that is, provoking to any great sin with scandal in its mouth; but yet every rise of lust, might it have its course, would come to the height of villainy: it is like the grave, that is never satisfied. And herein lies no small share of the deceitfulness of sin, by which it prevails to the hardening of men, and so to their ruin, Heb. 3:13,—it is modest, as it were, in its first motions and proposals, but having once got footing in the heart by them, it constantly makes good its ground, and presseth on to some farther degrees in the same kind. This new acting and pressing forward makes the soul take little notice of what an entrance to a falling off from God is already made; it thinks all is indifferent well if there be no farther progress; and so far as the soul is made insensible of any sin,—that is, as to such a sense as the gospel requireth,—so far it is hardened: but sin is still pressing forward, and that because it hath no bounds but utter relinquishment of God and opposition to him; that it proceeds towards its height by degrees, making good the ground it hath got by hardness, is not from its nature, but its deceitfulness. Now nothing can prevent this but mortification; that withers the root and strikes at the head of sin every hour, so that whatever it aims at it is crossed in. There is not the best saint in the world but, if he should give over this duty, would fall into as many cursed sins as ever any did of his kind.

4. This is one main reason why the Spirit and the new nature is given unto us,—that we may have a principle within whereby to oppose sin and lust. “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit.” Well! and what then? Why, “The Spirit also lusteth against the flesh,” Gal. 5:17. There is a propensity in the Spirit, or spiritual new nature, to be

acting against the flesh, as well as in the flesh to be acting against the Spirit: so 2 Pet. 1:4, 5. It is our participation of the divine nature that gives us an escape from the pollutions that are in the world through lust; and, Rom. 7:23, there is a law of the mind, as well as a law of the members. Now this is, first, the most unjust and unreasonable thing in the world, when two combatants are engaged, to bind one and keep him up from doing his utmost, and to leave the other at liberty to wound him at his pleasure; and, secondly, the foolishness in the world to bind him who fights for our eternal condition, [salvation?] and to let him alone who seeks and violently attempts our everlasting ruin. The contest is for our lives and souls. Not to be daily employing the Spirit and new nature for the mortifying of sin, is to neglect that excellent succor which God hath given us against our greatest enemy. If we neglect to make use of what we have received, God may justly hold his hand from giving us more. His graces, as well as his gifts, are bestowed on us to use, exercise, and trade with. Not to be daily mortifying sin, is to sin against the goodness, kindness, wisdom, grace, and love of God, who hath furnished us with a principle of doing it.

5. Negligence in this duty casts the soul into a perfect contrary condition to that which the apostle affirms was his, 2 Cor. 4:16, "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day." In these the inward man perisheth, and the outward man is renewed day by day. Sin is as the house of David, and grace as the house of Saul. *Exercise* and *success* are the two main cherishers of grace in the heart; when it is suffered to lie still, it withers and decays: the things of it are ready to die, Rev. 3:2; and sin gets ground towards the hardening of the heart, Heb. 3:13. This is that which I intend: by the omission of this duty grace withers, lust flourisheth, and the frame of the heart grows worse and worse; and the Lord knows what desperate and fearful issues it hath had with many. Where sin, through the neglect of mortification, gets a

considerable victory, it breaks the bones of the soul, Ps. 31:10, 51:8, and makes a man weak, sick, and ready to die, Ps. 38:3–5, so that he cannot look up, Ps. 40:12, Isa. 33:24; and when poor creatures will take blow after blow, wound after wound, foil after foil, and never rouse up themselves to a vigorous opposition, can they expect any thing but to be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and that their souls should bleed to death? 2 John 8. Indeed, it is a sad thing to consider the fearful issues of this neglect, which lie under our eyes every day. See we not those, whom we knew humble, melting, broken-hearted Christians, tender and fearful to offend, zealous for God and all his ways, his Sabbaths and ordinances, grown, through a neglect of watching unto this duty, earthly, carnal, cold, wrathful, complying with the men of the world and things of the world, to the scandal of religion and the fearful temptation of them that know them? The truth is, what between placing mortification in a rigid, stubborn frame of spirit, which is for the most part earthly, legal, censorious, partial, consistent with wrath, envy, malice, pride, on the one hand, and pretenses of liberty, grace, and I know not what, on the other, true evangelical mortification is almost lost amongst us: of which afterward.

6. It is our duty to be “perfecting holiness in the fear of God,” 2 Cor. 7:1; to be “growing in grace” every day, 1 Pet. 2:2, 2 Pet. 3:18; to be “renewing our inward man day by day,” 2 Cor. 4:16. Now, this cannot be done without the daily mortifying of sin. Sin sets its strength against every act of holiness, and against every degree we grow to. Let not that man think he makes any progress in holiness who walks not over the bellies of his lusts. He who doth not kill sin in his way takes no steps towards his journey’s end. He who finds not opposition from it, and who sets not himself in every particular to its mortification, is at peace with it, not dying to it.

This, then, is the first general principle of our ensuing discourse: Notwithstanding the meritorious mortification, if I may so speak, of all and every sin in the cross of Christ; notwithstanding the real

foundation of universal mortification laid in our first conversion, by conviction of sin, humiliation for sin, and the implantation of a new principle opposite to it and destructive of it;—yet sin doth so remain, so act and work in the best of believers, whilst they live in this world, that the constant daily mortification of it is all their days incumbent on them. Before I proceed to the consideration of the next principle, I cannot but by the way complain of many professors of these days, who, instead of bringing forth such great and evident fruits of mortification as are expected, scarce bear any leaves of it. There is, indeed, a broad light fallen upon the men of this generation, and together therewith many spiritual gifts communicated, which, with some other considerations, have wonderfully enlarged the bounds of professors and profession; both they and it are exceedingly multiplied and increased. Hence there is a noise of religion and religious duties in every corner, preaching in abundance,—and that not in an empty, light, trivial, and vain manner, as formerly, but to a good proportion of a spiritual gift,—so that if you will measure the number of believers by light, gifts, and profession, the church may have cause to say, “Who hath born me all these?” But now if you will take the measure of them by this great discriminating grace of Christians, perhaps you will find their number not so multiplied. Where almost is that professor who owes his conversion to these days of light, and so talks and professes at such a rate of spirituality as few in former days were, in any measure, acquainted with (I will not judge them, but perhaps boasting what the Lord hath done in them), that doth not give evidence of a miserably unmortified heart? If vain spending of time, idleness, unprofitableness in men’s places, envy, strife, variance, emulations, wrath, pride, worldliness, selfishness, 1 Cor. 1, be badges of Christians, we have them on us and amongst us in abundance. And if it be so with them who have much light, and which, we hope, is saving, what shall we say of some who would be accounted religious and yet despise gospel light, and for the duty we have in hand, know no more of it but what consists in men’s denying themselves

sometimes in outward enjoyments, which is one of the outmost branches of it, which yet they will seldom practice? The good Lord send out a spirit of mortification to cure our distempers, or we are in a sad condition!

There are two evils which certainly attend every unmortified professor;—the first, in himself; the other, in respect of others:—

1. *In himself.* Let him pretend what he will, he hath *slight thoughts of sin*; at least, of sins of daily infirmity. The root of an unmortified course is the digestion of sin without bitterness in the heart. When a man hath confirmed his imagination to such an apprehension of grace and mercy as to be able, without bitterness, to swallow and digest daily sins, that man is at the very brink of turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, and being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Neither is there a greater evidence of a false and rotten heart in the world than to drive such a trade. To use the blood of Christ, which is given to *cleanse us*, 1 John 1:7, Tit. 2:14; the exaltation of Christ, which is to give us *repentance*, Acts 5:31; the doctrine of grace, which teaches us to *deny all ungodliness*, Tit. 2:11, 12, to countenance sin, is a rebellion that in the issue will break the bones. At this door have gone out from us most of the professors that have apostatized in the days wherein we live. For a while they were most of them under convictions; these kept them unto duties, and brought them to profession; so they “escaped the pollutions that are in the world, through the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ,” 2 Pet. 2:20: but having got an acquaintance with the doctrine of the gospel, and being weary of duty, for which they had no principle, they began to countenance themselves in manifold neglects from the doctrine of grace. Now, when once this evil had laid hold of them, they speedily tumbled into perdition.
2. *To others.* It hath an evil influence on them on a twofold account:—
 - a. *It hardens them*, by begetting in them a persuasion that they are in as good condition as the best professors. Whatever they see in

them is so stained for want of this mortification that it is of no value with them. They have a zeal for religion; but it is accompanied with want of forbearance and universal righteousness. They *deny* prodigality, but with worldliness; they separate from the world, but live wholly to themselves, taking no care to exercise loving-kindness in the earth; or they talk spiritually, and live vainly; mention communion with God, and are every way conformed to the world; boasting of forgiveness of sin, and never forgiving others. And with such considerations do poor creatures harden their hearts in their unregeneracy.

- b. They *deceive* them, in making them believe that if they can come up to their condition it shall be well with them; and so it grows an easy thing to have the great temptation of repute in religion to wrestle withal, when they may go far beyond them as to what appears in them, and yet come short of eternal life. But of these things and all the evils of unmortified walking, afterward.

THE CATHOLIC VOICE — LORENZO SCUPOLI

The reader's Part III carries fifteen chapters of *The Spiritual Combat* — the 1875 Rivingtons English, the Combat proper — each printed whole. This sample prints Chapter I, complete.

CHAPTER I

In what Christian Perfection consists; and that the attainment of it involves a struggle, and of four things necessary for this conflict.

IF you wish, beloved in Christ, to reach the height of perfection, and by drawing near to your God to become one spirit with Him, (and no aim can be imagined or expressed which is greater, or nobler than this,) you must before all else gain a true idea of what constitutes genuine spiritual perfection.

There are many who have believed it to consist exclusively in outward mortification, in hair-shirts and disciplines, in long watchings and fastings, and in other bodily sufferings and chastisements.

Others again, and especially women, think that they have reached the climax of perfection, when they say many prayers, attend many services and offices, and are regularly at Church and at Communion.

Some indeed, (and among this class not a few Religious persons who have withdrawn themselves from the world,) persuade themselves that perfection entirely depends on the regular attendance at the Hours of prayer, on silence, solitude, and exact observance of Rule.

And thus, some in these, and others in those external actions suppose perfection to consist. But they are all deceived. For although these practices are sometimes means of gaining the spirit of perfection, and sometimes are its fruits, yet in no sense can it ever be said that true spiritual perfection consists in these.

Unquestionably they are means most efficacious for obtaining spirituality, when they are properly and discreetly employed; for by them we gain strength against our own sinfulness and frailty, we are fortified against the assaults and snares of our common enemies, and,

in short, are provided with those spiritual helps, which are necessary to all the servants of God, and especially to those who have but lately entered His service.

They are also fruits of the Spirit in truly spiritual persons, who “keep under” the body because it has offended its Maker, and in order to keep it low and submissive to His commands; in those who live in solitude and silence in order to avoid even the least occasions of sin, and to have their conversation in Heaven, and who give themselves entirely to the Service of God and to works of mercy; who pray, and meditate upon the Life and Passion of Jesus Christ, not for the sake of curiosity and devotional feeling, but that they may gain deeper knowledge of their own corruptness and of God’s Mercy and Goodness, and that they may be more and more inflamed with the love of God, and the hatred of themselves—following the Son of God by self-denial, and by taking the Cross upon their shoulders; who frequent the Holy Sacraments with the view of glorifying the Divine Majesty, that they may be more closely united with God, and gain fresh strength against their enemies.

To others, however, who found perfection entirely on external practices, such works may bring greater ruin than open sins; not that these works are bad in themselves, for in themselves they are very good, but in consequence of the mistaken use which is made of them they have this sad result; because those who practice them are so wrapped up in what they do, that they leave their hearts a prey to their own evil inclinations and to the devices of Satan. He sees them wandering from the right path, and not only does he leave them to the enjoyment of these exercises, but lets them vainly fancy that they are roaming amidst the delights of Paradise, and persuade themselves that they are borne upwards even to the angelic choirs, and that they feel the Presence of God within them. Such persons sometimes are so absorbed in curious, deep, delightful thoughts, that they become as it were oblivious of the world and of all creatures, and appear to themselves rapt even to the third heaven.

But in how great an error these persons have entangled themselves, and how far they are distant from that true perfection which we seek, may easily be gathered from their lives and conversation. For in everything, whether it be great or small, they seek their own advantage, and like to be preferred before others; they are self-willed and opinionated, blind to their own faults, sharp-sighted for the faults of others, and severely condemn the sayings and doings of other men.

But if you touch only with your finger a certain vain reputation in which they hold themselves, and are pleased to be held by others; if you bid them discontinue any of their regular and formal devotions, they are at once angry and exceedingly disturbed.

And if God Himself visits them with trials and infirmities, (which never come without His appointment or permission, and which are the tests of His servants' faithfulness,) or if He permits them to be sorely persecuted in order that they may gain a true knowledge of themselves, and be brought back to the way of true perfection, immediately the false foundation is discovered, and the miserable condition of the proud heart is seen. For in all events, whether adverse or prosperous, they are unwilling to be resigned and to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God, acquiescing in His just though hidden judgments; neither will they, in imitation of the most lowly and patient Son of God, abase themselves below all creatures, and love their persecutors and enemies as dear friends, because they are the instruments of Divine Goodness, and work together for their mortification, perfection and salvation.

It is therefore quite evident, that all such persons are in great danger. For since the inward eye is darkened, by which they see themselves and their outward actions which are good, they attribute to themselves a high degree of perfection, and so, becoming more and more puffed up, they readily pass judgment upon others; yet they themselves need a special miracle of grace to convert them, for nothing short of that would have effect. It is more easy to convert and

bring back an open sinner to the path of truth, than the man whose sin is hidden and mantled with the semblance of virtue.

You clearly and distinctly see, then, from what I have said, that the essence of the spiritual life does not lie in any of those things to which I have alluded. It consists in nothing else but the knowledge of the Divine Goodness and Greatness, of our own nothingness, and proneness to all evil; in the love of God and the hatred of self; in entire subjection not only to God Himself, but for the love of Him, to all creatures; in giving up our own will, and in completely resigning ourselves to the Divine Pleasure; moreover, in willing and doing all this with no other wish or aim than the glory and honor of God, the fulfilment of His Will because it is His Will, and because He deserves to be served and loved.

This is the law of love engraven on the hearts of His faithful servants by the hand of the Lord Himself.

This is the self-denial which is required of us.

This is His sweet yoke and light burden.

This is that obedience to which our Redeemer and Master calls us, both by word and example.

But if you aspire to such a pitch of perfection, you must daily do violence to yourself, by courageously attacking and destroying all your evil desires and affections. In great matters as well as in small, it is necessary, then, that you prepare yourself and hold yourself in readiness for this conflict, for he only will be crowned who was brave in the battle.

Doubtless this is the hardest of all struggles, because by fighting against ourselves, we are, at the same time, attacked by ourselves, and on that account the victory obtained in such a conflict will be of all others the most glorious and most dear to God.

Therefore, if you used every endeavor to mortify yourself, and to tread down your inordinate affections, inclinations, and rebellious passions, even in the smallest matters, you would be rendering to God a far greater and more acceptable service, than if while permitting

some of your inclinations to remain unmortified, you scourged yourself until you bled, fasted more rigorously, and practiced an austerity greater than that of the hermits and saints of the desert, or converted souls by thousands.

For, although in itself the conversion of souls is dearer to God than the mortification of an irregular desire, yet it is not your duty to will and perform that which is in itself more excellent, but that which God before all else strictly desires and requires of you. For He doubtless seeks and desires of you self-conquest, and the thorough mortification of your passions, rather than that you, wilfully leaving one of them alive in you, should perform in some other direction some greater and more notable service for His sake.

Now you see wherein the real perfection of a Christian lies, and that to obtain it you must enter upon a constant and sharp warfare against self; you must provide yourself with four very safe and highly necessary weapons, that you may win the palm, and be finally a conqueror in this spiritual conflict—these are,

Distrust of self	I.
Trust in God	II.
Spiritual Exercises	III.
Prayer	IV.

Concerning all these, with God's help, we intend plainly and briefly to treat.

FROM PART VII — WHERE THEY DIFFER

Agreement is the smaller half of honesty. Part VI gathered what the four writers hold in common; this part names what they do not: four axes on which the traditions genuinely part company, each framed in the terms of the writer who holds it. No camp is described by another camp's critique. Owen's attack on mortification attempted by method alone appears below only as Owen's own labeled polemic, never as a description of what any other tradition teaches. And nothing here is a debate: none of these writers was answering any of the others (Cassian wrote more than a millennium before Scupoli, and Scupoli's combat was in print before Owen's treatise), so the differences are set side by side, not staged against each other. Each axis ends by naming what turns on it, plainly, with no winner declared.

Difference 1 — The ground of the fight: where the power is located

All four agree the fight is not self-powered (Part VI, Agreement 2). The disagreement is about *where* the power is. For Owen, the ground is a person and an event: the Spirit, given for this work as its only author, and the death of Christ, on which faith acts for the killing of sin.

He only is sufficient for this work; all ways and means without him are as a thing of nought; and he is the great efficient of it,— he works in us as he pleases. — Owen, chapter III

The Spirit is the efficient cause; every means without him is a thing of nought. The cross is the event side of the same ground, and Owen's summary of Romans 6 holds the two together:

This is that the apostle intends: Christ by his death destroying the works of the devil, procuring the Spirit for us, hath so killed sin, as to its reign in believers, that it shall not obtain its end and dominion. — Owen, chapter XIV

The death that shows what sin deserves is the death that procures the Spirit who applies its killing power.

Owen sharpened this position in polemic. Writing against directions for mortification that, in his judgment, merely re-issued pre-Reformation methods, he condemned (as his own critique, in his own words):

Such directions to this purpose have of late been given by some, and are greedily caught at by others professing themselves Protestants, as might have become popish devotionists three or four hundred years ago. — Owen, chapter III

That sentence is Owen's protest, not a description of any other writer in this book. Scupoli, heard from his own chapters, also refuses self-powered combat; his ground is a practiced twofold disposition, and he is precise about its interior order, because presumption hides exactly where the reader would not think to look for it:

To escape, then, as far as possible, from presumption, and to work in the spirit of self-distrust and trust in God, the consideration of your own weakness must go before the consideration of God's power, and both should precede all your actions. — Scupoli, chapter III

Weakness first, power second, both before every action: the order is the safeguard, because presumption secretly lurks under an imagined self-distrust.

Isaac locates the ground in the posture that receives: faith and humility are the instruments by which mercy is found at all.

O thou wretched man, wishest thou to find life? Take faith and humility in order to find by them mercy and help and consolation from God, and protection secretly and openly. — Isaac, Homily 79

Nothing is demanded first except two things he can take; the chain then runs downhill by design — sincerity instead of since knowledge's subtleties lead, in his sequence, to presumptuous thoughts, and presumptuous thoughts to removal from God.

Cassian's grace chapters state the same denial from the far side: human effort is real and commanded, but it cannot finish what only the divine gift can complete. The elders' doctrine is laid down, he says, most earnestly:

But clearly and most earnestly do I lay down, not giving my own opinion, but that of the elders, that perfection cannot possibly be gained without these, but that by these only without the grace of God nobody can ever attain it. — Cassian, Book XII

Labor is not canceled; it is not the ground either. Grace takes the toil into its service rather than replacing it.

What turns on this. The four traditions locate the power differently, and the difference shapes everything downstream. Owen's ground is external and historical: an event that has already happened, applied by a person who gives it. Scupoli's is a trained interior stance (distrust and trust, twin dispositions practiced daily), completed by prayer as the fourth weapon. Isaac's is a posture of receiving, in which weakness itself is the assigned position. Cassian's is a gift that hires human toil rather than replacing it. A reader's practical theology will

follow this seam: whether strength is expected *from* the cross by faith, *through* a practiced twofold humility, *in* the merciful receiving of weakness, or *behind* every effort as its completion — four locations, none of them the self.

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