

JOHN OWEN: *KILLING SIN BEFORE IT KILLS YOU*¹

I. ESTIMATING OWEN'S INFLUENCE TODAY

John Owen died in 1683 and has been dead for 325 years, but he still stands today as a great pillar of the Christian world. This is amazing, not only because he has been dead so long but because his writing is and was so difficult to read. Owen's preface to the reader in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*: "Reader, if thou are, as many in this pretending age, a sign or a title gazer, and comest into books as Cato into the theatre, to go out again—thou has had thy entertainment; farewell!" However, J.I. Packer, Sinclair, Roger Nicole, and Sinclair Ferguson did not leave—they lingered and learned from Owen (no greater impact).

If you read Packer's *Quest for Godliness*, which is about the Puritan vision of the Christian life, Owen is its hero. For Packer, the Puritans are the redwoods in the forest of theology, but Owen is the "greatest among the Redwoods." J.I. Packer on Owen: "For solidity, profundity, massiveness, and majesty in exhibiting from Scripture God's ways with sinful mankind there is no one to touch him." In fact, Packer says he owes his life to Owen, because Owen saved him from crisis not long after his conversion.

Roger Nicole, professor at Gordon Conwell for over 40 years says that Owen is the greatest theologian of the English language EVER. And Sinclair Ferguson who wrote *John Owen on the Christian Life* considers Owen his greatest influence (note on heroes).

Unfortunately, though Owen has left us much of his work, he has left us little of his life. His diaries were destroyed and his correspondence is scant; we are left to his work to see into his soul. In all his 23 volumes, we do not get one word about his mother or siblings and only one sentence about his father.

Owen was born the same year Shakespeare died and in the middle of the "Puritan Century" (1560-1660). His death in 1683 basically marked the end of Puritanism in England. At age ten he went to grammar school in Oxford, entered Queens' College at 12, received his B.A. at 16, and his M.A. at 19. He had such a zeal for knowledge that he often only allowed himself four hours of sleep a night. After his graduation he became a tutor and a chaplain. Civil war in 1642 forces Owen out of his post and into London.

II. FOUR EVENTS THAT SHAPED HIS LIFE

Conversion

His conversion very similar to Spurgeon's conversion 200 years later. Owen was a convinced Calvinist with a great set of Christian knowledge already but with no sense of the reality of his faith. At 26 he went with his cousin to hear a famous preacher but he did not show and a country preacher took his place. His cousin wanted to leave but Owen convinced him to remain where the simple preacher took the text of Matthew 8:26: "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" At this word, his doubts and fears were erased.

Marriage and Children

In 1644, Owen marries Mary Rooke, about whom we know almost nothing. What we do know about their life blows the mind. We know that they had 11 children together, and all but one died in childhood, and the one that lived died as a young adult, so Owen outlived his wife and all 11 children!

Owen Becomes a Pastor

On July 16, 1643 Owen became a pastor in a small parish in Fordham, Essex. This set the course of his life toward pastoral ministry, and Owen always remained in heart and spirit a pastor.

¹ Much of this lecture follows Dr. John Piper's chapter on Owen in *Contending for our All, Vol. 4*, with mixed quotation from Owen's *Mortification of Sin*

Owen in Political Life

In 1646 Owen was invited to speak to Parliament, forcing him into political affairs for the next 14 years. In fact, he became advisor and chaplain to Oliver Cromwell during the Civil War, where he travelled to Scotland and Ireland in order to preach to the troops and analyze the religious situation there. Upon the war's end, Cromwell appointed Owen dean and vice-chancellor at Oxford in 1651, where he remained for 9 years. "At Oxford, Owen was responsible for the services of worship because Christ Church was a cathedral as well as a college and he was the preacher. He was responsible for the choice of students, the appointment of chaplains, the provision of tutorial facilities, the administration of discipline, the oversight of property, the collection of rents and tithes, the gift of livings, and the care of almsmen for the church hospital." His life was consumed with the administrative work of the university. And don't forget how regularly his children were dying; he lost two boys to the plague in 1655. But somehow he published 22 works during that 9 year period, some of them his most intense and personal: *Of the Mortification of Sin*, *Of Communion with God*, and *Of Temptation*. These are not books of modern fluff but books that stand to the end. In 1660, Owen was relieved of his duties because of the restoration that brought back the king. The Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662, putting 2000 puritan ministers out of their pulpit. This made Owen a fugitive pastor roaming London until his death in 1683. **Bunyan and Owen story.**

III. OWEN'S LIFE GOAL—HOLINESS

One of Owen's greatest books, *Of the Mortification of Sin*, is an exposition of Romans 8.13, "*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.*" "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."

"The reason this question of personal holiness is so urgent for us today is not only because there is a 'holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (Heb. 12.24), but also because there seems to be a shortage of political and ecclesiastical leaders today who make the quest for holiness as central as the quest for church growth or academic achievement or political success." This is amazing because Owen was a busy man, much busier than any of us. He was embroiled in nearly ever controversy of his day, from religious to political, he was a pastor, he was writing 23 volumes, he was entangled with military generals and political leaders, he passed through two major plagues (one killed 70,000 in London), he was the spokesman for thousands of ministers, he was involved in academic administration, and his children were dying. He was not a monk; he did not have long retreats and vacation houses, but still he was KNOWN for his holiness. How?

IV. OWEN'S PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

Owen humbled himself under the hand of God

Two days before he died, he wrote to his friend, "I am leaving the ship of the Church in a storm, but while the great Pilot is in it the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable."

Owen pursued personal communion with God

Andrew Thompson wrote of Owen: "It is interesting that amid the din of theological controversy, the engrossing and perplexing activities of a high public station, and the chilling damps of a university, he was yet living near God, and like Jacob amid the stones of the wilderness, maintaining secret intercourse with the eternal and invisible."

J.I. Packer says that the Puritans differed from evangelicals today because with them "Communion with God was a great thing, to evangelicals today it is a comparatively *small* thing. The Puritans were concerned about communion with God in a way that we are not. The measure of our unconcern is the little that we say about it. When Christians meet, they talk to each other about their Christian work and Christian interests and their Christian acquaintances, the state of the churches, and the problems of theology—but rarely of their daily experience of God."

Owen: "Friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits; and these, the more free and less occasioned by urgent business." Owen made many visits to his Friend, but not just to ask for things but to contemplate His glory.

Owen's last book was *The Glory of Christ* and in it he says, "The revelation...of Christ...deserves the severest of our thoughts, the best of our meditations and our utmost diligence in them...What better preparation can there be [for our future enjoyment of the glory of Christ] than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel." There is a combination here of 'severest thoughts' or 'assiduous meditations' with relentless prayer.

Owen sought Assiduous Meditation and Constant Prayer

Owen went deeper than anyone I know today—he wrote 320 pages on the 8 verses in Psalm 130 and a 7 volume commentary on Hebrews. In the preface, he says, "I must now say, that, after all my searching and reading, *prayer and assiduous meditation* have been my only resort, and by far the most useful means of light and assistance. By these have my thoughts been freed from many an entanglement."

"I do acknowledge unto you that I have a dry and barren spirit, and I do heartily beg your prayers that the Holy One would, notwithstanding all my sinful provocations, water me from above."

Owen only said in public what he experienced in private

It is easy to become deceived about our own souls. Piper: "Over the years...we find we can speak of mysteries without standing in awe; we can speak of purity without feeling pure; we can speak of zeal without spiritual passion; we can speak of God's holiness without trembling; we can speak of sin without sorrow; we can speak of heaven without eagerness and the result is an increasing hardening of the spiritual life." Owen knew this and fought against it: "Our happiness consisteth not in the knowing the things of the gospel, but in the doing of them." There is a severe difference between the "knowledge of the truth and the knowledge of the power of the truth."

"I hold myself bound in conscience and in honor, not even to imagine that I have attained a proper knowledge of any one article of truth, much less to publish it, unless through the Holy Spirit I have had such a taste of it..., that I may be able, from the heart, to say with the psalmist, 'I have believed and therefore I have spoken.'"

Owen was an unrelenting warrior against his sin

The Believer's Duty Against Sin

"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." "The life, vigor, and comfort of our spiritual life depend much on our mortification of sin."

"Let not that man think he makes any progress in holiness who walks not over the bellies of his lusts. He who does not kill sin in his way takes no steps toward 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."

"The mortification of indwelling sin remaining in our mortal bodies, that it may not have life and power to bring forth the works or deeds of the flesh, is the constant duty of believers."

The Deception of Sin

"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."

"The mortification of sin consists not in the improvement of a quiet, sedate, nature. Some men have an advantage by their natural constitution...Let not such persons try their mortification by such things as their natural temper gives no life or vigor to."

“Is it not enough to make any heart to tremble, to think of being brought into that estate wherein he should have slight thoughts of sin? Slight thoughts of grace, of mercy, of the blood of Christ, of the law, heaven, and hell, come all in at the same season. Take heed, this is that which you lust is working toward—the hardening of the heart, searing of the conscience, blinding of the mind, stupefying of the affections, and deceiving of the whole soul.”

“Mortification is not the diversion of sin...He that changes pride for worldliness, sensuality for Pharisaism, vanity in himself to the contempt of others, let him not think that he has mortified the sin that he seems to have left. He has changed his master, but is a servant still.”

The Power of Sin

“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.”

“There is not a day but sin foils or is foiled, prevails or is prevailed on; and it will be so while we live in this world.”

“Such outside endeavors, such bodily exercises, such self-performances, such merely legal duties, without the least mention of Christ or his Spirit, are varnished over with swelling words of vanity, for the only means and expedients for the mortification of sin, as discover a deep-rooted unacquaintedness with the power of God.”

“Prayer, fasting, watching, meditation, and the like—These have their use in the business at hand; but whereas they are all to be looked on as streams, they look on them as the fountain.”

“It [sin] untunes and unframes the heart itself by entangling its affections. It diverts the heart from the spiritual frame that is required for vigorous communion with God; it lays hold on the affections, rendering its object beloved and desirable, so expelling the love of the Father (I John 2.15. 3.17).”

The Root of Sin

“The root must be dealt with, the nature of the tree changed, or no good fruit will be brought forth.” “The root of an unmortified course is the digestion of sin without bitterness in the heart.”

“A man may beat down the bitter fruit from an evil tree until he is weary; while the root abides in strength and vigor, the beating down of the present fruit will not hinder it from bringing forth more. This is the folly of some men; they set themselves with all earnestness and diligence against the appearing eruption of lust, but leaving the principle and root untouched, perhaps unsearched out, they make but little or no progress in this work of mortification....This is every man’s ‘knowing the plague of his own heart’ (I Kings 8.38), without which no other work can be done. It is to be feared that very many have little knowledge of the main enemy that they carry about with them in their bosoms.”

“God will deliver none from destruction that continue in sin; so that while anyone lies under an abiding power of sin, the threats of destruction and everlasting separation from God are to be held out to him.”

Owen meditated on the glory of Christ

“Think greatly of the greatness of God...We speak much of God, can talk of him, his ways, his works, his counsels, all the day long; the truth is, we know very little of Him. Our thoughts, our meditations, our expressions of Him are low many of them unworthy of His glory, none of them reaching His perfections.”

“Only a sight of his glory and nothing else can truly satisfy God’s people...One of the greatest privileges the believer has, both in this world and for eternity, is to behold the glory of Christ.”