

How to Kill Sin: John Owen's The Mortification of Sin

Paul Rutherford provides an overview of the Puritan John Owen's classic book The Mortification of Sin.

In my early twenties I confessed to a friend an ongoing battle with sin. He suggested I read John Owen's book, *The Mortification of Sin*[\[1\]](#). I wish I had read it back then. It would have saved me so much pain in my battle against sin.

So I want to help you in that same way by sharing some of Owen's key insights in the battle against sin.



Let's begin with the title. Mortification, what does that word mean? Broadly speaking, it means to kill or put to death. The Latin root from which this English word is derived, "mort-" or "mors" means death. *Mortificare*—to kill.[\[2\]](#) Other examples of this root include mortuary, mortician, and mortgage.

Simply put, mortification means death, but note the dictionary also lists "shame" and "humiliation" as definitions as well. So mortification involves death. More to the point, Owen wants you to kill *sin*. More importantly, he makes a case that Scripture commands you to kill sin.

This message today is not for everyone. It's only appropriate if you believe in Jesus. Early in the work Owen gravely warns those who would mortify sin, but do so without first believing in Jesus.

I would warn you as well. Please don't sit here and read another minute if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ for your righteousness, for your salvation. If you're reading this right now and have never made a confession of faith, and

you're ready, please do so now. Just talk to God and tell him you believe that Jesus is Lord, that He died for your sins, was buried, and raised from the dead, and you are putting your trust in Him. Then tell someone you know who already believes. It will be the most important thing you do, ever.

If you're still reading, then let's press on. Owen discusses at length what it means to kill sin, how to do it effectively, and why you should do it.

But before we jump in, remember John Owen was a 17th century English pastor and theologian. This is not his first book, and at the time he composed it, he was Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford. Owen has academic credentials. But this book is more devotional than academic. Owen draws from personal experience. It is not merely intellectual. He meant for it to be practiced.

What is Mortification?

John Owen wrote *The Mortification of Sin* in England in 1656. Mortification means death, or in this case to kill. . . sin. That's what we covered in the previous section. This matters because your life is at stake here. In chapter two, Owen warns us with this now famous quote, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." That is probably the most famous quote from that book.

Did you catch the significance of that quote? Sin will kill you. That's why this is a big deal. That's why this matters. That's also why sin's presence requires such a drastic response. It must be killed. James tells us that "[S]in when it is fully grown brings forth death." [\[3\]](#)

Your best option—the most effective option—your only real option is to *kill* sin. Just like John Owen said. Kill it. Or it will kill you. Because trust me. It will kill you—in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally,

intellectually—every way.

Owen quickly reminds us this is impossible in a complete, ultimate, or perfect sense, until Jesus comes back, not before.[{4}](#) So until then we mortify sin.[{5}](#)

Now let's talk about mortification. Let's talk about killing sin. What exactly does that mean? Sin is an abstract thing, not a biological organism. How do you kill an abstract thing? Owen's instruction is clear: "utterly destroy it" or, make it cease to be.

Owen defines the process of mortification three ways: sin gets weaker, you fight against it constantly, and you have full success over it.[{6}](#)

So then mortification means to weaken sin, or drain it of its power. It means the desire to sin decreases in degree, frequency, and quality. That comes as you "crucify the flesh with its passions and desires," as we read in Galatians 5:24.

Mortification also means to fight sin constantly. You have an enemy. Employ any means necessary to destroy his work. The contest will be vigorous and hazardous.

Finally, mortification is success against sin in any given moment. This isn't merely resisting temptation. Owen has more in view here; it is recognizing temptation, bringing it before Christ, pursuing sin to its root, and conquering it in Jesus' strength.

Before we discuss how to do this, for clarity let's talk about how not to mortify sin.

How NOT to Mortify Sin

Mortification means to kill, and the point of John Owen's book *The Mortification of Sin* is to kill sin. Nothing short of your life is at stake here since sin always leads to death.[{7}](#)

Sin is not to be trifled with. It cost Jesus His life.

Owen himself covers what mortification is NOT in the book, before he defines what it is. So now we will follow his lead.

Mortification is commonly mistaken. It is tricky to identify properly. Four things frequently masquerade as mortification, when they are in fact not. These four are: faking it, having a calm disposition, cross-addiction, and behavior modification.

Faking it, the first instance of false mortification, is making yourself look good on the outside, instances where outward signs of sin are obvious—compulsive spending, for example. You may choose not to buy something the next time you're tempted, but that outward choice is not the root of sin. The root is inside. It goes deeper.

The root is the belief that material will fill that void inside. Owen further points out hypocrisy as a real danger here. Not only did you not mortify the sin, you are now making it look as if you have.

Mortification is also not simply a calm disposition. Some sins are obvious, visible, even violent in nature. In these cases if you become more calm, more quiet, more gentle, it could appear on the outside as if the sin is gone. In fact it is not. Owen reminds us that mortification is more than a simple change in disposition.

Mortification is also not replacing one vice for another. For example, if the presenting sin is addiction to pornography, keeping yourself from erotic material may appear as victory unless you pick up the bottle. Now you simply exchanged pornography for alcohol. You exhibit a cross-addiction. This, too, is not mortification.

Mortification is also not mere change in behavior. Surely you have made a big change before—created a new habit, lost weight, something, even a New Year's resolution. You can force

the behavior for a while—maybe even through February! You can make yourself do what you've resolved. But eventually, that old habit creeps back; unless some real changes are made, it's merely a shift in behavior. This also is not mortification.

What is mortification, then? How do you do it?

How to Mortify Sin

After all this preliminary discussion, you probably want to know how you can kill sin, conquer it, and be victorious, because if you don't it will kill you, as Owen himself says in the book.

Here's the bad news, though. *You* can't mortify your sin. You will have no victory over sin by employing any method I recommend to you. Now, don't despair! This doesn't mean you can't experience victory! God forbid. Rather, it is God's will for you to find victory over the curse of sin. What I mean here is that mortification is not something *you* do. It is instead something God does, namely the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can mortify sin, kill sin in the flesh. Only He is strong enough to put to death the old man.

So what do you do, then? Here are Owen's words. "Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet." [\[8\]](#)

The way to mortify sin is to set *faith* at work. Put your faith to work. Believe in the work Jesus did on the cross. His sacrifice is your remedy. That's how you kill sin—you don't. You believe in the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, and let Christ kill it for you.

It's freeing really. Would you want the responsibility of killing the broken flesh within you? I don't. Owen goes on to

add two more points of substance. First “fill your soul” with the provision of Christ. I might call that meditation. Meditate on Christ. Fill your mind with His provision.

The second point is to *expect* relief in Christ. Owen reasons that if Christ’s blood is enough to make you righteous—and if the Spirit is strong enough to mortify your flesh, then expect it’s going to happen. It may not be instantaneous. Anyone who’s been walking with Christ for some time will affirm this. It’s a slow and difficult, often *painful* process, but definitely a good one.

So that is how you mortify sin. You don’t. You let the Spirit do it. Your job is to believe by faith.

Conclusion

What have we learned so far? If you are following in the footsteps of Jesus, you need to mortify, or put to death, sin in your life. If you don’t it will kill you.

This is not a popular message. I admit. Sin is not a fun topic. But Scripture is clear. Sin must be put to death. Owen’s book, while dating over three hundred years back, could be neither more timely nor more appropriate for you today.

Owen admonishes the sincere believer to kill indwelling sin without delay. He warns the unbeliever this is impossible without Jesus Christ. Jesus is absolutely essential to the success and continued process of mortification. To do otherwise is the “soul and substance of all false religion in the world.”[\[9\]](#)

If you believe in Jesus and you are stuck in your sin, maybe you’re trapped in addiction, this book is for you. Mortify sin.

“Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin.”[\[10\]](#)
You believe in His Son for salvation. Believe Him now for the

deliverance of your soul from the power of indwelling sin.

It is not easy. You will struggle every day against sin. The bad news here is that you carry the problem with you. Your flesh is broken. It remains unregenerate until the day of Christ. Your soul is secure eternally by the blood of Christ, and one day you will receive a gloriously new body. But for now, we struggle.

But consider Jesus' promise in that struggle: "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."[\[11\]](#)

Mortification is not for the faint of heart. But it is good. Your sin does not define you. God does. And he says you are fearfully and wonderfully made.[\[12\]](#) He paid the price of your sin. It was an awful lot. But he loves you that much.

Trust him today. Trust in his Word. And trust in the community of saints He provided for you. Confess your sin to them today. Do you want to fully live? Then kill sin.

Notes

1. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*. (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House), 1996.
2. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000.
3. James 1:15.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:50-54.
5. Colossians 3:5.
6. Owen, p.64.
7. James 1:15; Proverbs 14:12; Genesis 2:17.
8. Owen, p.161.
9. Ibid., p.23.
10. Ibid., p.161.
11. John 16:33.
12. Psalm 139:14.

Glorious Morning Glories

This is what love looks like.

My husband planted morning glories for me on our back fence because they are my favorite.

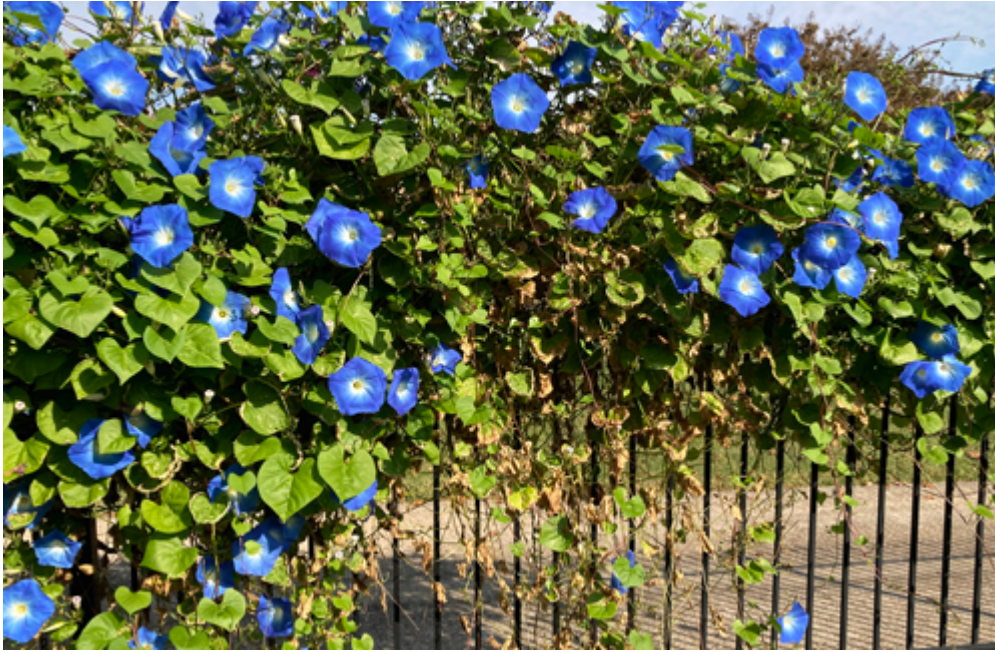


I love that a whole new batch of brand new blooms pops out each morning, day after day of fresh beauty that reminds me of Lamentations 3:23, that God's mercies are "new every morning—great is Your faithfulness!"

This year, we had to wait long into the fall for the flowers. The green foliage was crazy lush and full for months, but there were no gorgeous "blue happies," as I think of them, until late October.

Finally they started exploding daily with beauty and color. Not long afterwards, an unseasonable cold snap hit us, and the green foliage started to wither and dry up.

But the “blue happies” kept popping out!



I had to smile at what was happening on our fence, because it was a powerful illustration of what it's like for me to grow older. The green leaves were getting old and spent and dry and yucky, at the same time that every morning, there were still fresh and new morning glory blooms sprouting out. What a picture of what has become my new life verse, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

Therefore we do not lose heart, but ***though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.*** For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

My body is growing older and weaker, especially ravaged by the lingering effects of polio. Not long ago, I spent almost two years [unable to walk](#) at all because of severe arthritis in both hips. (The Lord has restored so very much to me on the other side of two [hip replacements](#)!) I'm able to walk and stand without pain these days, for which I give thanks every

single day, but the march of time continues and, like everyone else, I'm going downhill physically.

But—the glorious but!—on the inside I get to be fresh and new every day! Just like the “blue happies”! As I walk in faithfulness with the Lord, seeking to abide in Him and allow the beauty and character of Christlikeness to flow into and through me, He keeps bringing renewed energy and joy to my soul. Every day! I love it!

The hope for us as believers, especially older believers, is that we get to be renewed daily with the radiance and vibrancy and joy of Jesus within that keeps getting better and better the older we get!

In fact, the Bible even speaks about our transformation as a special kind of glory: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 says,

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

I LOVE being transformed, a little bit every day, into the image of Jesus, with ever-increasing glory! I get to be a spiritual morning glory!

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2020.

3 Truths to Feed Our Hope in a Pandemic

*When the world is upside down due to unforeseen circumstances, we need hope, but not just any hope. Sue explains that **biblical hope** is something different. Something better. Because it's about God.*

When pretty much the whole world is in stay-at-home mode . . .
when pretty much the whole world is impacted by sudden unemployment because the whole world is in stay-at-home mode . . .
. . . when pretty much the whole world's economy might be affected by the crazy fall in oil prices . . .

We desperately need hope.

Hope that things will get better. Hope that we will be able to experience "normal" again. Hope that everyone's stress level will go down, especially health care heroes and first responders.

I've been thinking a lot about hope lately.

Your everyday kind of hope is a wish or expectation for the future. It's oxygen for the soul. An important part of mental health is being able to look forward to something good.

But *biblical hope* is something different. Something better. Because it's about God.

Where everyday hope is about wishing, biblical hope is a confident expectation that God will be good, and He will do good, toward us. It is faith in the future tense.

Everyday hope is horizontal, looking at circumstances, the world, and other people—which are all broken by the Fall, and they are guaranteed to disappoint. But biblical hope is vertical. It looks UP instead of out. Biblical hope is focused

on a perfect, loving God who is all-knowing and all-powerful. He doesn't just *know* the future, He *holds* the future.

We can encourage one another daily, as Hebrews 3:13 urges us, by reminding ourselves and each other of what is true. Let me suggest three truths that will feed our hope.

God is good.

Probably the #1 lie of the enemy is that God ISN'T good. It's what was behind his temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden: that God was holding out on her because He's not good.

And when life is hard and we live in pain, it's easy to look through the filter of "God is not good, that's why He's letting me hurt."

But the truth is that our circumstances are not an accurate indicator of whether God is good or not. Our logic and thinking are not accurate judges of whether God is good or not.

Even if we don't say it out loud, we can sit in the self-pity puddle of the belief, "If God was good, He wouldn't let me hurt."

But our pain is achieving something eternally significant, an eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). When life is hard, God is doing something really big in us. And eventually, for those who have trusted Christ, God's goodness will mean He carries us to the place where there is no more pain, no more tears, no more sickness or weakness or even disappointment. That is our hope, that the future will hold nothing but GOOD for us.

We're not there yet. But it's coming!

God is faithful.

He is faithful in His character, He is faithful to His word, He is faithful to His promises.

Faithfulness means being a promise-keeper, even when it's hard. The Hebrew word for faithfulness means steadfastness, firmness.

On a trip to Colorado, my brother-in-law Phil learned that a cashier at Rocky Mountain National Park was also from Chicago. He said, "It must be cool to be here with these mountains all the time."

"Let me tell you something about the mountains," she responded. "They're . . . always . . . THERE." Meaning, they don't move, they don't change, and it takes a long time to get from A to B because those mountains are always THERE.

Like God's faithfulness.

We can have hope that God will remain faithful to His promises, such as Jesus promising, "I will be with you always."

Sports Illustrated covered a memorable incident at the 1992 Olympics when runner Derek Redmond tore his hamstring near the end of the race. He fell face first onto the track in agony.

As the medical attendants were approaching, Redmond fought to his feet. "It was animal instinct," he would say later. He set out hopping, in a crazed attempt to finish the race. When he reached the stretch, a large man in a T-shirt came out of the stands, hurled aside a security guard and ran to Redmond, embracing him. It was Jim Redmond, Derek's father. "You don't have to do this," he told his weeping son. "Yes, I do," said Derek. "Well, then," said Jim, "we're going to finish this together." And so they did.

Fighting off security men, the son's head sometimes buried in his father's shoulder, they stayed in Derek's lane all the way to the end, as the crowd gaped, then rose and howled and wept.[\[1\]](#)

Most people don't remember who won the gold medal in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, but millions will never forget the faithful love of a father who left his seat in the stands to enable his son to finish his race.

What a picture of our faithful heavenly Father who sent His Son from His seat in glory to earth to rescue and redeem us! Jesus promises that He will be with us always, to the end of the age—just as Derek Redmond's father was with his son to the end of the race.

God is at work in my life.

Philippians 1:6 promises that He who began a good work in me will continue to complete it. Once God gets started on the process of making us like Jesus, He doesn't quit!

One of my pastors has said that if you don't like how things are, it means the story's not over and God's not finished.

How encouraging is that??!

Romans 8:28 teaches us, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose."

Since God is at work in us, then He has a plan to make us like Jesus, and He's using every situation and every circumstance in our lives as His tools.

When we open our hearts and minds to God's plans to make us like Jesus, and we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the process, it strengthens our hope that our future will be different from the past or the present.

But to be like Jesus means we have to follow Him, which means denying ourselves, and taking up our cross. It means not fighting the tools of sanctification He is using to make us like Jesus. The best way to do that is to obey scripture, which says to give thanks IN everything, FOR everything. If God has allowed it, there must be a purpose in it. It means developing an attitude of gratitude by disciplining ourselves to say, "This stinks, Lord, but You have allowed it in my life so I will give You thanks for this crummy boss, or this difficult roommate situation, or this physical challenge, or this thorn in my flesh."

When we realize we are not content with WHO we are or HOW we are, because we long to be better, it means God's not finished with us. We are still a work in progress. The story's not over.

It means there is hope. Biblical hope.

God is good, God is faithful, and God is at work in me. Those are the truths that will feed our hope and allow us to look at the future with confident expectation that it's going to be better than OK . . . it's going to be amazing. Either in this life, or on the other side, we can have hope.

A living hope. Hope has a name. His name is Jesus.

1. vault.si.com/vault/1992/08/17/track-and-field-ode-to-joy-carl-lewis-exulted-along-with-all-of-barcelonas-gold-medalists-many-of-whom-vanquished-giants-to-win-their-events. Accessed 4/21/2020.

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Scraping Ceilings and Souls: Lessons on Sanctification From a Home Improvement Project

The process of upgrading and repairing Byron Barlowe's home helped him to see how God does the same kind of transformation in the souls of Christ-followers.

My wife and I are living in a suspended state of misery in our own home. It's like camping in a plastic-lined dustbin after a tornado blew furniture and books into random piles. Hidden in every crevice there's a thin fog of whitish dust and snow that won't melt. "How long, O Lord?" This odyssey started as we launched a long-awaited kitchen remodel, which would be stress enough: "Where's that sink they took out with the bulk waste—we need it back until the granite people come to install the new one!" Camping indoors again.

But then we succumbed to the contractor's compelling sell-job on removing popcorn from our ceilings—you know, that lumpy stuff hanging from 20th century ceilings. "They'll get it done and clean it up for you." No sweat, right? Right!

Anyone who's lived through a major renovation or addition can testify to the disturbance. It's an all-encompassing project. "How many more trips to Home Depot?" I'm at the library writing this and will head to the shower at the YMCA. The paint makes it hard to sleep. Finally, we left for vacation. Disruption of routines and an exploded sense of place overwhelms and badgers us.

Yet God is in it. The ordeal is bringing out loads of attitudes and frustrations in me, especially since God seems to be doing an *attitude renovation* within me simultaneously. Is that dual lesson cruel of God, or spiritually strategic? Do I really grow when things sail smoothly along?

Yes, the promise of a new look and feel gets lost in the temporary tiresomeness of it all. The more you have, the more you pay in so many ways! Yet, what we had was not up to grade. Some of it was poised to cause disaster, like some plumbing in our kitchen. Replacing the working fridge with a cooler one (accidental pun) revealed a faulty valve. It had to be replaced. In the same way, my soul needs a makeover.

Like a master plumber, the Lord needs to hook up the new pipes of grace he has for me. He's renovating my heart. I need to grow into the new creation I already am. New openings for new blessings, old things made new. Getting hung up on my way of seeing issues or settling for an inadequate view of God's goodness calls for a major overhaul. The Lord is committed to make this happen as I somewhat grudgingly lay my life before him in submission—again. It hurts and is a mess, like the unexpected plumbing issue. But like the fridge fix, it makes possible a bounty of unspoiled fruit and prevents a nasty flood!

Back to the originally intended project: the process for the ceiling redux is a multi-step process. It requires the following:

- **scraping**: complete with the roar of compressor to spray water, a sharp scraper, and the old junk that falls to floor (and into everything) like oatmeal or, well, wet popcorn
- **"mud"** to fill holes and fix gouges, a lot like grout for tile or what painters do with picture hanger holes
- **texture** for a new, updated look, smoother than the stuff from the days of puffy hairdos and disco music!

- And **paint** to “top” it off and complete the enjoyable and more livable change.

Simple processes aside, the disarray and disruption of either kind of renovation cannot be overstated. Every last physical item, habit, and way of life has been overturned, from sleeping to showering, eating to breathing itself. Repeat after me, self: *temporary pain for years of gain*. And isn't that what spiritual growth is like? Is it worth it? This is the operative question each time the Lord convicts us of sin or a character issue. Sanctification—the project of turning us into the real likeness of Christ—promises *eternal* reward and glory! It showcases the goodness and truth of God. Maturity matters, even though its development stinks at efficiency and convenience from a human perspective.

Because negative thought patterns burn into our minds and even have bodily effects, they need to be peeled off, removed. Kind of like the dragon skin of the character Eustace, the unbearably cynical and snooty boy character in C.S. Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. His spiritual blindness and insensitivity had to go but was painful to remove. Sin sticks and separates us from God, goodness and others. Due to its toxic spiritual effects, transformation can't be kept waiting. We, like young Eustace, need to release our sense of entitlement and thanklessness, rid ourselves of a false sense of pleasure and pride. He have to grow new skin. We too must be scraped over, repaired, remade and painted afresh.

What does this spiritual scraping of sanctification look like in more detail? Well, not unlike ceiling refurbishment in so many ways.

Necessary Disruption

First, like those old popcorn ceilings, coverings in my soul simply must be replaced, and not for reasons of fashion. *Scraping ceilings and hearts is inconvenient*—the workers are

in our house all day. The Lord does his work while we do our lives. There is never a “good time” for it. You just have to suck it up and have your life turned around a bit. I have been forced, in no small part by dealing with contractors and suppliers, to wrestle down thoughts like, “People are clueless—I wish they’d smarten up and pay attention.” While there is truth behind those convictions as we all know, people have reasons for distraction and the unredeemed have no choice but to be self-centered and confused. The Lord has been revealing what it means to “value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). When my protective and cynical dragon skin layers are removed, I begin to appreciate how gentle and ordered others’ minds can be. Their skills and especially their ability to roll with messy, changeable situations amazes me. They are better than me at a lot of things. Regardless of my perceptions, God sees them as priceless and since he loves me supremely, so I can afford to regard them as more important than myself.

Healing Takes Time, Repetition

Second, filling in the holes and cracks means going over the same “ground” again. It’s detailed work and has to set up and dry before you can move on. This does not feel efficient, yet it ensures that things are permanently restored. Often, the soulish equivalent of this comes in the form of deep fellowship and counseling—filling in the injury done to our souls with solid truth and love. The old becomes new again, the cracked smooth, the damaged healed. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:12).

The Grace of Preparation and Protection

In fact, prepping the house took the most time: taping plastic to the floor, draping furniture and ceiling fans, disconnecting light fixtures and removing air vents. It’s as if the protection of our belongings and dwelling takes

precedence over the new look and underlying stuff. Isn't this God's way? As his Spirit renovates our lives, he lines us with protective layers of grace and love, draping us with the encouragement of prayers he evokes on our behalf and the love of fellow Christ-followers.

Renovation Takes Force

Third, just like ceiling overhauls, *retexturing* is yet another wearying pass over the same square footage for the purpose of renewal—and *it has to be forced*. Workers hold a little orange plastic tank attached to a hose that's hooked up to a compressor, then spray the new coating on the freshly prepared surface. The pneumatic motor kicks into a whining screech that fills the house. Without that push, the spray can't come out of the nozzle ten feet in the air. Similarly, the Spirit's regeneration of our souls is noisy, messy, pushy and downright unpleasant. We may tire of reaching up to do our part in spreading newness onto the same surface from which God has removed the old stuff. Our shoulders and hearts get exhausted, sore from holding up our part of the work. The air is a bit nasty to breathe. But if our new life is to be realized, it has to be done, forcibly.

The Stuff of Spiritual Renovation

Just what is such *spiritual newness*? The material used is God's Word illumined by his Spirit, creating new pathways for our minds, hearts and wills, right down to the bone and marrow of our beliefs. It means filling our minds with "whatever is true . . . honorable . . . right, . . . pure . . . lovely . . . of good repute . . . any excellence [and] anything worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8), being "transformed" and "renewed" in our minds (Romans 12:1-2), reckoning (deciding to be so) ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). All of these fresh Spirit-pumped coatings can cover our internal overheads with new, living realities. That is,

thinking and believing in a life-giving outlook that takes seriously the promise that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) is the ultimate renewal. Now, the house has a new sky, if you will, and the sun is ready to shine a bit brighter. As we capitulate to the often onerous process of scraping, mudding, and texturing, we experience a brand new covering for ceilings and souls-in-Christ. And now for the *coup de grace*!

New Paint, New Spiritual Robes

Painting is the final stage of this household transformation. Gone are the ugly, useless bits, replaced with the smoothness of shalom—peace-filled blessedness—where defects get filled in and fixed as we submit to the work. Likewise, as we are molded into Christ’s likeness, we put on robes of pure white righteousness (Revelation 19:8; 3:4). So much can be said about the glory of holiness produced in willing saints. Suffice to say that the glory that awaits us outshines even the brightest hues applied to earthly surfaces. Our spiritual man is growing brighter, even as our bodies break down and fade. “We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Many of us have ceilings that overhang us with old, outdated looks. All believers in Christ have rooms—perhaps whole houses—that need reworking. Let the scraping begin. It’s worth it!

Remodeling a Home—and a Soul



We are in the midst of a major remodeling project in our home as it is made wheelchair-friendly. Doors are being widened, our closet is being reconfigured so I can reach my hanging clothes, and our bathroom's tub and step-in shower are being replaced by a roll-in shower.

I have been struck by the similarities between remodeling a home and remodeling a soul—otherwise known as the sanctification process. Sanctification means “being made holy,” and holy means set apart. I am being set apart for God's kingdom, for His purposes, and with a plan to make me into the image of His own dear Son (Romans 8:29).

The first thing that happened was that things got moved. Our bed was moved to an enclosed porch, which is a great blessing given the amount of construction dust in our bedroom. Our hanging clothes got moved to rented racks in our dining room, along with all the suitcases and other kinds of things on shelves. (It pretty much looks like a bomb went off in our home!)

When God is remodeling our soul, He also moves things, particularly moving us out of our comfort zone. We get moved into a *discomfort* zone—a change zone, a growth zone. In this part of the process, we can find out how easy it is to make

idols of comfort and the status quo. And like all other challenges and trials, the answer to the test is to trust God and rely on Him.

Before making any changes, the project director went up in the attic to check the load-bearing walls. I was so glad to learn this; it meant that nothing would be torn down and taken out that would weaken our home and make it unstable.

When God is doing the remodeling, He takes into account how we were designed and built (by Himself!). He knows how much stress we can take, and won't violate His own design for us. Just as He promises us not to allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able (1 Cor 10:13), He always remembers that we are but dust (Psalm 103:14), and He knows our limits.

The trim around doors was pulled out, and sections of sheet rock were cut out and removed. The garden tub was cut up and hauled away, and the huge mirror over it is now gone. The glass shower was taken out.

I've noticed that part of the sanctification process means God removes the old things in our hearts that have outlived their usefulness—things like coping strategies and childish ways of thinking and living. In order to grow us up to maturity, the old has to go.

They parked a trailer outside our back door, and it was soon filled with sheet rock, wood, marble and glass that needed to be taken to the city dump because it was trash. I mentioned this to the man in charge, who cheerfully agreed that "You gotta get rid of the ugly!" Since I also shared with him my thoughts about the parallel to sanctification, he laughed with me that that's what God does: He gets rid of our ugly. He targets anything that's not glorifying to Himself or helpful to us, and pulls it out. Or calls us to let it go into His hands.

I noticed there is a definite order to things. The open spaces

for closets and bathrooms were widened before installing new doors. The walls were textured before being painted. The bathtub was pulled out, and its faucet and spigot were removed, before the tiler comes to give us a beautiful new wall.

This made me realize that God knows the best order for addressing issues in our lives that need to be changed. Like knowing which are the load-bearing walls, He knows what needs to wait until He deals with other problems first. For example, we often want Him to get rid of nasty habits or addictions, but He's more interested in working on our hearts so that the change in our behaviors is a more (super)natural, organic result of growth.

Remodeling a house means a lot of inconvenience. I have to go to a gym that has a roll-in shower because our other shower is in a bathtub, and I can't climb in and out of bathtubs anymore. We are having trouble finding some things that were moved temporarily. There is dust everywhere. I can't have people over very easily. These are all temporary, but they are still inconvenient.

God's remodeling process also feels inconvenient because there are so many adjustments to new ways of thinking and reacting and living. We have to practice new ways of thinking when God makes changes in our belief system and our trust system. Adjustment means change, and change is rarely convenient!

The owner of a construction company that does these remodeling jobs for mobility-challenged people like me has a picture in his mind of what all these changes will look like in the end. I have a vague idea of what changing the entrance to our bedroom will look like, and how the reconfigured closet will work, and what it will be like to roll into the shower, but he has a very specific plan in mind based on experience and knowledge and wisdom.

My heavenly Father has a very specific plan for my remodeling too. He knows what making me over into the image of His Son means, so I will look like Sue and Jesus both.

And just as I need to trust the architect of our home remodel, even more I need to trust my Father, who knows what He's doing in remodeling my soul and does it all well . . . and in love.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/remodeling_a_home-and_a_soul
on May 2, 2017.

Unrealistic Expectations

Lots of things can keep us stuck in places that are hard to get out of.

Like harboring unrealistic expectations.

When my first son was four years old, I found myself angry and frustrated with him a lot. One day I “happened” to see a book on the inspirational display at the grocery store, *Overcoming Hurts and Anger*. I don't remember anything else from that book except the wise counsel to adjust your unrealistic expectations. I realized that although my son was four, and a smart, prodigious four at that, it was still not fair to expect him to be and do things appropriate for a twelve-year old. It was amazing how much happier I was when I decided to expect four-year-old things of him!

Many people have unrealistic expectations of what growth and change should look like. The downside of our microwave culture is that we expect things to be fixed instantly. Last week a friend who is just starting out a long journey of overcoming a lot of hurts from her past asked what she could do to speed up

the process. I suggested she work to build daily the always-popular habit of saying no to her flesh and yes to self-control, loving others, and doing the opposite of what comes naturally. Fifteen minutes later she texted me with a question: "I hate people today. Can I stay home from church?"

So much for the fast track!

One of the most dangerous places for our unrealistic expectations, though, is what we think God should do. Some of the most bitter and angry people I know, or who have loud voices in the culture (think of the ["new atheists"](#) like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris) are those who feel betrayed by God, so they decide He isn't there.

That sense of betrayal and disappointment comes from having expectations of God according to how we *think* He should act:

- Protect the innocent from pain and suffering
- Protect the people who maybe-aren't-so-innocent-but-not-as-bad-as-axe-murderers from pain and suffering
- Show the same grace to all of us by treating us all the same
- Give us an easy life
- If I do all the right things to be "a good person," God should do His part to make life work the way I want it to

When we pray fervently for what we want and He doesn't answer the way we want, many of us get angry with Him. That's a part of [my story](#). It's easy to decide God doesn't care, or He is evil, or He isn't there at all.

Many times, we pray in faith, believing God will give us what we ask for, but we ask for things He never promised in the first place. Or even worse, we "claim" them on the basis of a scriptural promise wrenched out of context, such as "all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22). Jesus never promised that if we believe *in our prayers*, we would receive what we ask for. *Believing* in the Bible is all about trusting in and surrendering to the

goodness and character of GOD, not our prayer list. We will always receive an answer to our prayers because God is good. Sometimes the answer is “No, beloved,” because we ask amiss. Psalm 84:11 promised, “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” If God says “no,” it’s because it’s not a good thing *for us*. [His “no” is a “yes” to something else.](#) But because we have such a limited perspective, it is essential that we trust in the unlimited perspective of the God who sees everything.

When we feel disappointed in God, when we think, “God didn’t come through for me,” that’s the time to take a step back and ask, “What kind of unrealistic expectations did I have in the first place?” That may be a great question to talk through with a mature trusted friend who can see things more clearly. Then we can place the unrealistic part of our expectations into God’s hands as an act of worship and trust . . . and watch our anger and frustration subside.

I’ll share some thoughts about why those expectations of God are unrealistic in [my next blog post](#).

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/unrealistic_expectations
on Oct. 11, 2010.

“Should My Husband Get Baptized If He Still Wants to

Get Drunk?"

My husband is now a newly born again believer and wants to get baptized. My concern is that even though he has asked Jesus to be his savior and wants to get baptized, he won't give up getting drunk. He says it is his "one thing" he isn't ready to give up. Should he still get baptized?

I'm so glad you wrote! What's your understanding of what it means to be baptized? It is an outward symbol of an inward reality: that he has trusted in Christ, is now a member of His family, and wants to testify that a very important change has happened inside.

It doesn't mean he has his act together. <smile>

You can read all the way through the New Testament and not find any specifications for being baptized other than deciding to follow Christ, and no reasons *not* to be baptized. As your husband walks with the Lord and starts to realize that the abundant life starts with Jesus living inside him, He will provide a different way of viewing getting drunk. But that's going to take time, and I want to encourage you, one wife to another, to let the Lord be in charge of the timing of that dealing with that behavior. There are reasons he gets drunk that God is fully aware of, and will deal with at the right time.

Please, give your husband a break. . . and a baptism party! ☐ Celebrate this great, great news. . . and let the Holy Spirit be the Holy Spirit. He knows all about your husband's drinking. You pray, and trust God.

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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After reading this article on our website, this wise wife wrote to me:

Twenty-six years ago, my husband and I started going to a local church sometimes. God had been calling us to Him for some time, and at that point I fully committed my life to Him. My husband was born again when a man from church took the time to befriend my husband and explain the gospel to him. My husband continued drinking (I didn't only because I was pregnant).

I didn't say anything to him, but he later told me that he started hiding from me how much he was drinking because he was feeling guilty. One day our pastor stopped by with his family when they were out for a bike ride, and my husband offered him a beer! I was mortified; I didn't know much about being a Christian, but I did know that it wasn't socially acceptable to offer a pastor a beer!

Thank God for that pastor, though, and the people of that church who welcomed us and took a genuine interest in us. The pastor graciously declined with "no thanks" but continued visiting and didn't make my husband feel like a leper or give him a lecture. Not too long after that, an elder of the church encouraged us to start coming to Sunday School Bible study classes instead of just worship services. Because my husband felt comfortable with the pastor, he talked to him about this. He told our pastor, "I want to come to church more often, but I like drinking beer and don't want to stop, and I don't want people to judge me." The pastor told him, "Whether or not you should be drinking beer is between you and God, and no one at church is going to say anything to you about it. Don't let that thought keep you from coming to church or growing closer to God."

So we started going to Bible studies and became more involved in the church. Within a few months, just after our son was born, my husband quit drinking. It happened this way: My husband later told me that he had been feeling the conviction

that he shouldn't be drinking and he knew that he didn't want his son to grow up like he had, with an alcoholic father. But he liked beer so much that he kept ignoring the thoughts. One day when my husband was in the garage, he felt that conviction so strongly that he knelt down on the floor there in the garage and surrendered himself completely to God, and vowed not to drink again. He quit that very day, and God helped him keep that vow. He came into the house to find me, very emotional, and told me what had happened.

I can't take credit for being wise enough not to say anything to him about drinking; that had to be the Lord's work. But I do think that because I didn't say anything to him about it, the struggle stayed between my husband and God and didn't become a power struggle between him and me. I know enough now to know that a wife should not attempt to be her husband's conscience on matters such as this; God calls her to love and honor her husband.

God does not always use the same timeline or the same routes with everyone, and not everyone is equally responsive to God. But that woman can be sure that God IS working with her husband, just as He is working with her, and that His Spirit is dealing with anything He wants her husband to change. She can trust God enough to leave the conviction to Him, and to guide her in what her responses should be in difficult decisions (such as if he wants her to drink with him) and how to honor her husband without compromising her beliefs. I will pray for this woman and pray that her husband will respond to the Lord and fully commit his life to Him.

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“How Can Dementia Turn a Mature Christian So Ugly?”

I am worried by the behaviour of Christians I know who suffer from dementia. I have frequently seen them displaying racism, sexually suggestive behaviour, and generally rude and difficult behaviour unthinkable to their pre-dementia selves. How does this tie up with the idea of a Christian being transformed within? I am bothered by the thought that sanctification is only skin deep, as it were—a learned veneer.

That’s an excellent question!

I too have seen incredibly godly, mature Christians heartbreakingly transformed by Alzheimer’s and dementia into ugly caricatures of their former selves. I believe the answer lies in the nature of the two kinds of “flesh” the Bible talks about. Our “new creation” is housed in a body of physical flesh that has been impacted by the fall and marred by sin. The fall makes our brains subject to decay and disease which leads to the tragic behavior you describe. The other flesh—not our physical bodies, but that part of us which operates in our own strength, apart from God (see Romans 7:18, 8:8, 13:14; Galatians 3:3, 5:17)—is never transformed, which is why we have to crucify it and die to self. The transformation of sanctification happens to our souls and in our spirits, but our flesh is unredeemable and still occupies a place in our physical bodies. Racism, sexually suggestive behavior, and rude and difficult behavior are all fruits of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21). Praise God, the flesh will fall away when we die or are taken up to heaven!

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin