

Scriptures and Doctrine :: Overcoming Sin & Temptation by John Owen

Overcoming Sin & Temptation by John Owen - posted by TrueWitness, on: 2009/2/24 21:21

Below is part of the introduction to a modern work on the writings of Puritan John Owen. The book is titled "Overcoming Sin & Temptation" and is available at Amazon here:

<http://www.amazon.com/Overcoming-Sin-Temptation-John-Owen/dp/1581346492/>

Product description:

The writings of John Owen are a challenge to any reader, to say the least. His intricacy and complexity are intimidating and his language is downright befuddling at times. However, the depth of thought and the immense value of Owen's works cannot be quantified. His three classic works on sin and temptation are profoundly helpful to any believer who seeks to become more like Jesus Christ.

In this volume, the editors have made updates to the language, translated the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and footnoted difficult or unknown phrases, all without sacrificing any of the wonderful content of Owen's work. It is a uniquely accessible edition of John Owen's previously daunting work.

Introduction excerpt:

Christians are called to war against sin. According to Owen, this means they are called to learn the art of battle, which includes understanding the nature of sin, the complexity of the human heart, and the goodness and provision of God. Following a classic stream of orthodox theology, Owen argues that humility is crucial to growth in the Christian life, and proper humility comes from "a due consideration" both of God and of oneself. Only from this perspective can one be in a right position to approach the call to holiness.

KNOWING YOURSELF

Owen's varied experiences, such as working with students (not to mention faculty) and providing pastoral care, gave him ample opportunity for reflection on the way that sin weaves its way into every aspect of people's lives. Two particular challenges about human nature that appear in these volumes deserve brief comment: his attempt to present a holistic view of the human person, and his belief that personality differences must be considered when dealing with sin. Engaging the Whole Person

Contemporary readers may at first glance struggle with Owen's detailed parsing of human nature and sin, believing that his reflections are dated and irrelevant. However, upon closer examination the reader may begin to recognize that although Owen does not use current labels, he is dealing with very contemporary issues, such as depression, addiction, apathy, and lust. One of Owen's concerns was that some people reduced the struggle with sin to a problem centered on the physical body. They had taken the biblical language of the "body of sin" (Rom 6:6, ESV) and inappropriately treated it as a literal reference to physicality. This misunderstanding leads to what Owen considers the monastic "mistake": believing that rigid regiments that yield greater physiological control will eventually diminish the sin that lies in a person. For Owen, while the body is important, it is but the instrument for the real problem. Using classic faculty-psychology categories of the mind, the will, and the affections, Owen consistently attempts to present a holistic perspective of the human person, and this informs his view of sin and sanctification. Originally humanity was created without sin, and thus their mind rightly reflected on the Creator and his creation, their affections properly loved God, and their will followed after the good. However, with the fall these faculties became disordered. Even after believers are redeemed by God they will continue to struggle with the abiding vestiges of sin that disorient the faculties, a condition that remains throughout their earthly life. Sin moves by drawing the mind away from God, enticing the affections and twisting desires and paralyzing the will, thus stunting any real Christian growth. One of the most frightening truths that Owen wants the believer to recognize is that "Your enemy is not only upon you . . . but is in you also." Part of understanding the battle against sin is seeing that the enemy, so to speak, is not only external, but internal, which is why Christians often have conflicting desires within them. Most Christians seem unaware of or apathetic about the sin that remains in them, but whether they recognize it or not there is a "living coal continually in their houses," which, if not properly attended to, will catch their home on fire. As the Scriptures often call attention to the "heart" or "soul" of a person, Owen argues that such references tend to be shorthand for the various faculties, and thus to deal with sin the whole person must be engaged. Although Owen gives ample attention to each of the faculties, let us focus on the affections as a test case to show the nature of sin and temptation. Far too often Christians working within the Reformed tradition have been guilty of confusing stoic ideals of emotional detachment with maturity in the Christian life. But this

Reformed tradition, which Owen self-consciously grows out of, has at its best made significant space for the importance of the affections. As early as the sixteenth century John Calvin, one of the great fathers of the Reformed tradition, saw this confusion and warned against it. Calvin chided those Christians who acted like “new stoics,” because they believed that groaning, weeping, sadness, and having deep concerns were signs of sinfulness. According to Calvin such comments tend to grow from “idle men who, exercising themselves more in speculation than in action,” do not understand the pain of this world and the ravages of sin, which the Savior who wept and mourned knew so well. The goal of Calvin and of others after him, like Owen, was not the absence of affections, but rightly informed and directed affections. Affections are a gift from God to all humanity. Far too often the faculties have been “gendered” in the church, for example, when people lump “rationality” with men and “emotions” with women. In addition to empirical evidence that easily contradicts such hastily drawn stereotypes, one should reject such schemas because all Christians are called to love God with their mind, will, and affections. Healthy affections are crucial to the life of faith, and numbing them cannot be the answer. In Owen’s estimation, because the affections are so important to faithful obedience, Scripture often interchanges the language of heart and affections, for here is “the principal thing which God requires in our walking before him. . . . Save all other things and lose the heart, and all is lost—lost unto all eternity.” The goal of the Christian life is not external conformity or mindless action, but a passionate love for God informed by the mind and embraced by the will. So the path forward is not to decrease one’s affections but rather to enlarge them and fill them with “heavenly things.” Here one is not trying to escape the painful realities of this life but rather endeavoring to reframe one’s perspective of life around a much larger canvas that encompasses all of reality. To respond to the distorting nature of sin you must set your affections on the beauty and glory of God, the loveliness of Christ, and the wonder of the gospel: “Were our affections filled, taken up, and possessed with these things . . . what access could sin, with its painted pleasures, with its sugared poisons, with its envenomed baits, have unto our souls?” Resisting sin, according to this Puritan divine, comes not by deadening your affections but by awakening them to God himself. Do not seek to empty your cup as a way to avoid sin, but rather seek to fill it up with the Spirit of life, so there is no longer room for sin.

KNOWING YOUR GOD

Affirming the importance of honest introspection does not blind Owen to the fact that this exercise will lead a person to despair if it is not also paralleled with a study of the grace of God. Since sin entered the world, it has become challenging for people to rightly view themselves, God, and his work. We are prone to have “hard thoughts” of God that tend to keep us from turning to him. Owen’s goal is not to have people remain focused on their sin but rather to embrace the redemption accomplished in Christ. The aim is not despair but freedom for what Owen often calls “gospel obedience.” Obedience rightly understood is always a response to God’s love. A crucial work of the mind in the process of sanctification is the consistent consideration of God and his amazing grace. This does not mean considering God as an abstract metaphysical principle. Rather, the Christian meditates upon him and with him. This distinction makes all the difference, placing the discussion within the framework of relationality, rather than mere rationality. Owen’s challenge is most instructive: “when we would undertake thoughts and meditations of God, his excellencies, his properties, his glory, his majesty, his love, his goodness, let it be done in a way of speaking unto God, in a deep humiliation . . . in a way of prayer and praise—speaking unto God.” The invitation here is not to impersonal theological studies but rather to life-changing encounters with Yahweh. One of the great promises of God is that he will preserve his people. In fact, the idea of the “perseverance of the saints” is frequently misunderstood, according to Owen, for so often discussion about remaining in the faith focuses on human efforts, as if it is up to us to avoid losing our salvation. In truth, the Christian hope rests not ultimately upon our own diligence, but on God’s faithfulness. It is God, not us, who will ultimately persevere, and that is why he is able to promise us eternal life: “where the promise is, there is all this assistance. The faithfulness of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Spirit, all are engaged in our preservation.” Christians can be confident about their growth in sanctification and eternal security because they are confident in the God who promises it. Ever deepening communion with God occurs as the Spirit draws us to the Father through the Son. The Father will allow none to be snatched from his hand, the Son incarnate is a truly sympathetic high priest who is the lover of our souls, and the Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ to us. Thus, Owen reminds believers to keep these truths in mind as they face temptation, bringing their “lust to the gospel,” lest they lose sight of the sufficient sacrifice and restorative grace found in God’s work. “What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the Son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace?” Notice that the love is preexistent, the blood shed, and the grace extended. The believer is not working to secure these realities, but seeking to live in light of them. Christians stand in the shadow of the cross, having experienced the tender mercy of God. They aim not to convince God that they are worthy of his love, but to grow in their knowledge and fellowship with him. It is through this ever-growing communion with the Father, Son, and Spirit that the believer is most able to resist sin and temptation. “Let a soul exercise itself to a communion with Christ in the good things of the gospel—pardon of sin, fruits of holiness, hope of glory, peace with God, joy in the Holy Ghost, dominion over sin—and he shall have a mighty preservative against all temptations.”

THE WORK OF SANCTIFICATION

How should the Christian understand the work of sanctification? Is the call of believers to holiness God's work or their own? There are two extremes often found in the church when dealing with these questions. On the one hand, there are those who seem to believe that we are saved by grace and sanctified by works: here grace is problematically reduced to the initial work of salvation. On the other hand, in an effort to avoid "works righteousness," others tend to collapse justification and sanctification; the danger here is that the biblical call to active, faithful obedience by the believer can be nullified, and inappropriate passivity can set in. Rather than these two extremes, Owen follows the more traditional Reformed perspective that upholds another model of sanctification. True and lasting resistance to sin comes not through willpower and self-improvement but through the Spirit who empowers believers with a knowledge and love of God. Throughout his writings Owen is always quick to highlight the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Not only does the Spirit of God bring life to those who are dead in sin, thus causing a new birth, but he also continues the work of God in the renewing of that person in the image of Christ. The fundamental difference between Owen's proposal and self-help programs is that he believes that only as the Spirit communicates the grace and love of the Father to us can we experience genuine relief. Mortification of sin is "the gift of Christ" to believers, and this is given by the Spirit of the Son. Efforts apart from the Spirit do not bring sanctification, even if they do produce changed behavior. Although the Spirit often uses beneficial activities such as "fasting and watching," rituals and human effort without the Spirit cannot ultimately bring liberation from sin and temptation. So is the work of sanctification God's work or our work? Or is it some combination of the two? Maybe such questions are themselves problematic. John Murray, writing several centuries after Owen, fairly communicates the kind of approach Owen employs, although Murray here states it more concisely:

God's working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required result. God works in us and we also work. But the relation is that because God works we work.

Owen's own view is similar, seeing sanctification as the work of God in and through the life of the believer. This is not passivity, but active living empowered by the Spirit of life. Two concepts commonly appear in early Reformed approaches to sanctification: mortification and vivification. Building on the language and imagery of Colossians 3:9-10, the idea of mortification was understood as a putting off of the "old man," and vivification was conceived as the reality of being made alive by the Spirit. Although the actual language of "vivification" is found less often in Owen than in earlier theologians like John Calvin or the renowned Puritan Thomas Goodwin, the idea is clearly present. These twin ideas of sanctification require not only the shedding of sin but also renewal in grace. A practical example of how this works out may prove helpful.

Consider a man who is struggling with inappropriate sexual thoughts about one of his female coworkers. What does holiness look like in this case? Very often Christians have a truncated view of sanctification, which stops far too short of true righteousness. Although it would be a good thing for this man to get to the point that he no longer looks at this woman as an object of lust, that is not all that is hoped for in sanctification. Rather, in the power of the Spirit the goal is to move to a life-affirming position. Thus, the objective is not the absence of thoughts about this woman but the presence of a godly appreciation for her. Under normal circumstances this man should not simply try to deny her existence by avoiding her, but rather begin treating her with dignity, offering words that build her up instead of dehumanizing her with his thoughts. Ultimately lust will be replaced by genuine and appropriate respect and love. Similarly, the goal of dealing with gossip is not merely the absence of slander (which is the good work of mortification), but eventually the creating of an environment of encouragement, peace, and trust (further fruits of the Spirit's enlivening presence and work). Following the trajectory of thought of theologians like Calvin and Owen, sanctification involves both putting sin to death and becoming free to love and obey.

Re: Overcoming Sin & Temptation by John Owen - posted by Dimlyviewed (), on: 2009/2/24 21:49

This is an excellent book. One of the best parts I've read from it, that stick in my head to this day are so convicting, yet so encouraging to cause one to lean on the Cross of Christ, and the power of His grace to overcome our sin once for all. To give us not an ability, but a mediator who can provide the strength, and better yet, the necessary means (The Holy Spirit) to conquer sin and the flesh. In speaking of the efforts of man to mortify sin he says...

Quote:
 -----"He may set himself against a particular lust that greatly disturbs his peace of heart. But the poor creature! He labours in the fire, and his efforts are destroyed. When the Spirit of Christ comes to the work, He works 'like a refiner's fire' and he will purge men as gold and silver (Mal 3: 2-3), take away their dross and tin, their filth and blood (Isa. 4:4). BUT men must be gold and silver before the refiner's fire will work. The prophet gives us the outcome of a wicked man's effort for self-mortification: 'The bellows blow fiercely; the lead is consumed by the fire; in vain the refining goes on, for the wicked are not removed. Rejected silver they are called, for the Lord has rejected them' (Jer. 6:29-30) What is the reason? Verse Jer. 6:28: they were bronze and iron when they were put into the furnace. Men may refine bronze and iron forever, but they will not become good silver."

Re: - posted by wtninChrist, on: 2009/2/24 23:27

Is that the same book as THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN? I have readed that one, but its been a few years.

Re: - posted by TrueWitness, on: 2009/2/25 8:26

wtninChrist wrote:

Quote:

-----Is that the same book as THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN?

Overcoming Sin and Temptation includes three of his works: "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers," "Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It," and "Indwelling Sin."