

“HARD THINGS ARE GLORIOUS”¹: TEACHING MORTIFICATION IN A THERAPEUTIC AGE

JOEY SHERRARD²

Recently a clip of a well-known megachurch preacher came across my timeline. In this widely-shared video, the preacher described an experience of perceived spiritual abandonment, where friendships and other comforts run dry and the Christian feels as if she is alone in darkness. But, the preacher continued, there is a reason for this spiritual night. It is in the darkness that we can see the singular light of God’s goodness without competition and with greater clarity.

While the preacher who shared this truth is of dubious theological integrity, the experience he described familiar from the Church’s storehouse of spiritual wisdom. From time to time it may be the case that providence allows certain comforts to flee so that the Christian can find comfort in the only lasting and sure refuge: God himself. Theologians and pastors as diverse as John Newton and St John of the Cross have described in broadly similar terms this spiritual *askesis* that takes place in the course of a person’s Christian life. In the designs of providence, our suffering may be used to the end of our sanctification.

What was remarkable about this restatement of that tradition was the immediate online response. The preacher’s message was rebuked sharply. What the preacher described was not providence’s design; instead, it was an instance of clinical depression. What was shared was not spiritual wisdom; it was dangerous folly, bordering on spiritual abuse. One should not name this moment as a loving design of the Father’s providential care; it is a mental condition that should be addressed by a trained therapist in order to be alleviated.

This minor twitter controversy is representative of a larger tension that runs through basic questions of human flourishing, sanctification, and pastoral guidance. There is no need to set the church’s theological reflection upon Scripture and the common grace insights of psychology and psychotherapy against one another in a false dichotomy. But certain visions of the human in our therapeutic culture appear to be incongruent with the dynamics of the spiritual life given to the church in Scripture. One

¹ From, “Providence” by George Herbert.

² Joey Sherrard is an Associate Pastor at Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church in Signal Mountain, Tennessee.

perspective sees an act of violence that cuts against the very grain of the creature's existence. The other perspective sees an act of loving obedience that recognizes intermediate suffering as a meaningful, and indeed necessary, prerequisite to the fullness of life the Creator intends.

In a culture where therapeutic language has a certain priority, the church must consider how to speak about the Christian life so that an alien vision of human flourishing does not capture our discipleship. This articulation of discipleship and sanctification should be internally intelligible to the church, not isolating this doctrine, but instead locating it within the body of Christian doctrine that the church has received and allowing it to speak within the context of the creating, saving, and redeeming work of the Holy Trinity. Jesus' invitation, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23) is a word of love to the broken and lost sinner. The church must learn to speak this word anew so that it can speak it with conviction.

To that end, this essay is a work of theological description of the Christian doctrine of the mortification of sin. We will proceed by naming the dynamics of the therapeutic culture that has occluded this doctrine and led the church to be hesitant to articulate it. Then we will locate mortification within other loci of systematic theology: theological anthropology, justification and union with Christ as aspects of the *ordo salutis*, and finally eschatology. In so doing we will situate mortification within the wider story of God's intentions for his creation. And finally, we will see how this work informs pastoral practice for those who preach, counsel, and lead God's people in worship.

THE TRIUMPH OF THE THERAPEUTIC

In his 1987 book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Philip Rieff described the emergence of a new culture in the West, founded upon the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud. In this new world, men and women found themselves asking different questions of perennial human problems and reaching different conclusions. Humanity has always been faced with competing desires, with internal struggles, and with difficult decisions that take place when personal fulfillment and the moral life appear to diverge. But in therapeutic culture, this tension between fulfillment and morality is resolved to the point of being collapsed together.

Previously, renunciation was considered an essential part of the good life. In this world, deeply formed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, men and women knew that life was bound inextricably to an order outside of the self: relationships, institutions, and ideals. But that world has increasingly dissipated, replaced by one that locates the good life primarily internally in the desires of the individual. So Rieff explains, "What is revolutionary in modern culture refers to releases from inherited doctrines of...deprivation; from a predicate of renunciatory control, enjoining releases from impulse need, our culture has shifted toward a predicate of impulse release,

projecting controls unsteadily based upon an infinite variety of *wants raised to the status of needs*.³

The problem in the new therapeutic culture was no longer (to paraphrase C.S. Lewis' memorable quote from *The Abolition of Man*) how to conform the soul to the demands of reality and the good life. Instead, it was how to conform reality to the desires of the self. As Rieff's description above implies, the solution is therefore not to learn to renounce certain improper uses of good things in order to attain the good life; it is instead to realize those impulses as essential to attaining the good life. As Rieff goes on to say, "Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man is born to be pleased."⁴

Rieff's narrative resonates with what we find in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Taylor tells a similar story of the eclipse of divine purposes which are in tension with immediate human flourishing, in favor of the collapse of the good into that which is immediately and perspicuously intelligible to humans. In a secular age it becomes increasingly difficult to name as good those actions which contradict "ordinary human flourishing." What is increasingly lost is "a notion of our good which goes beyond human flourishing, which we may gain even while failing utterly on the scales of human flourishing, even *through* such a failing (like dying young on a cross)."⁵

What we are left with is an environment where the idea of postponing or forswearing certain human desires becomes less and less morally intelligible. To the contrary, to make such a request could be interpreted as an act of violence, causing harm to creatures and actually preventing them from receiving what their Creator desires for them now in this world. This tension is felt in manifold ways, but perhaps nowhere more sensitively than in the arena of sexual ethics. It is increasingly difficult for Christians to speak confidently and coherently about why the existence of sexual desire does not necessarily lead to the permission or even the responsibility to act upon those desires. This is certainly true rhetorically in the debate surrounding same-sex attraction. But it is just as true in the inability of pastors and ministry leaders to articulate to their flock and demonstrate in their own lives the spiritual wisdom that enables men and women to live faithfully in marriage and chastely outside of it.

In such an environment Christian teaching about the mortification of sin is hard pressed. To ears that have been formed by this vision of the good life, what does the following sound like? "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you" (Colossians 3:5). What is needed is a careful and comprehensive articulation of this teaching that informs and accompanies the church's proclamation. Mortification must be framed within the wider

³ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2007), 13. Emphasis added.

⁴ Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 19.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 151. Emphasis original.

context of the Trinity's saving work of bringing fallen creatures into the fulness of the Creator's intended purposes of communion and beatitude. It is to that task that we now turn.

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A description of the shape of human flourishing can only be properly ordered when it is done with a view to the ends of human life. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes the gradual emergence of an understanding of the world which is increasingly plausible without reference to the transcendent, an understanding Taylor calls "the immanent frame."⁶ Within this immanent frame of life within a secular age, it is increasingly difficult to attach moral value to that which transcends what can be realized in the course of the life we possess before life after death. The loss of transcendence and flattening of human existence in the modern world, the ambivalence within much contemporary Christian preaching and teaching regarding heaven and hell, and the decline of practices of contemplation and meditation on the excellencies of God all contribute to this situation. To imagine a life well-lived that postpones or declines the enjoyment of created goods for the enjoyment of the Uncreated Good requires swimming against this stream.

We can find assistance in the writings of John Owen, the Puritan theologian who penned one of the most well-known treatises on mortification, *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. In this work, Owen frames mortification within the greater good of communion with God. Mortification is not isolated as an act of obedience. To do so is to lose the biblical and theological context for putting to death "what is earthly in you": enjoyment and experience of the goodness of God. In naming the necessity of mortification of sin, Owen describes the human end that sin frustrates: "[Sin] diverts the heart from the spiritual frame that is required for vigorous communion with God; it lays hold of the affections...so expelling the love of the Father, so that the soul cannot say uprightly and truly to God, 'You are my portion.'"⁷ For Owen, the importance of mortification is really a complement to the corresponding significance of communion with God. Owen's writings on mortification do not stand alone but are instead only coherent in their connection to his other works of practical divinity such as *Communion with the Triune God*.

Owen is a helpful resource from which Protestant theologians can draw because he also articulates a robust doctrine of the beatific vision. This doctrine, which was a central component of theology in the classical tradition, affirms that the great hope of the Christian is that she will in the new creation behold God in his glory. Owen is representative of the wider catholic tradition in his belief that the creature's beholding of the beauty and goodness of God was significant not just in the life to come but in the life that Christians experience now. So Suzanne McDonald writes,

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539-593.

⁷ John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 64.

“For Owen, it matters for our lives now and for all eternity that we should aside time for our minds to be shared by the foretaste that is offered to us of the beatific vision, in part because if this does not shape our minds and mold our desires, something else will.”⁸ Indeed, mortification and contemplation intertwine with one another so as to reinforce one another. The act of contemplation and the pursuit of the beatific vision is an act of mortification: “We are changed into the likeness of whatever most stamps itself on our thoughts, and our actions reflect the molding of our minds.”⁹ In setting our minds on things above, we are in the midst of the work of putting to death the things of the flesh (Colossians 3:2-5).

Surely it is a significant loss in our understanding of what it means to be human when we do not give a place to the great joy of seeing our God face-to-face. The promises of Scripture—the wedding feast, the bride being met by her bridegroom, the dwelling place of God being with man—remind us that for all the good things that we will know in the new creation, the greatest will be the beatitude of being with our God. Indeed, this is the end to which we were made. As Michael Allen has written recently in his evaluation and corrective of modern eschatology, “A loss of focus upon the beatific vision can skew a Christian account of humanity by foreclosing or, worse yet, dismissing a constituent facet of human teleology.”¹⁰ While life in the “immanent frame” places pressure upon us to be silent at this key juncture, to do so is to be silent about the nature of Christian hope.

All of human existence cannot be circumscribed in the end of contemplation of God. Any full description of creaturely existence will give great attention to ethical responsibilities that we have to our neighbors and all of the creation that will be made new. But there is love of God that cannot be collapsed into love of neighbor, as is the modern tendency. And so in order to preserve the important work of mortification that fits us for the new creation, we would do well to preach and teach that we have been created for friendship with God, our greatest Good. “Whom have I in heaven but you? / And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25).

THE ORDO SALUTIS

Within the Reformed tradition, we can locate mortification doctrinally within the *ordo salutis*, or the “order of salvation.” This theological concept, which organizes the various aspects of the God’s reconciling work of human creatures, was the fruit of a sustained tradition of exegesis on Romans 8:28-30: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

⁸ Suzanne McDonald, “Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ,” *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 143.

⁹ McDonald, “Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ,” 143.

¹⁰ Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 64.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (ESV). We can see how this passage served as a framework for understanding how all the different aspects of God's restoration of humanity are connected to one another.¹¹

While it is helpful to situate mortification within wider teaching about God's justifying and sanctifying work of humanity, the *ordo salutis* is also helpful in a complementary way for our present study. Paul's concerns in Romans 8 mirror those that drive this study: how can we speak of God's continuing good work in the midst of struggle and suffering? How is it that God makes use of suffering for the end of conforming Christians to the image of his Son? Resetting the *ordo salutis* in its initial exegetical register allows us to make sense of God's loving work of bringing creatures to their intended end as fully alive in Christ.

Within the tradition the *ordo salutis* has been put to a number of different uses, alternately giving logical, temporal, causal, and natural order to God's saving work.¹² For our purposes in this study we will consider how it gives expression to the logical unfolding of salvation. We shall do this because it frames two important distinctions within Paul's thought in Romans 8: the logical priority of justification over sanctification, and the material priority of vivification, the renewal of the creature in its created nature, over mortification. With these two distinctions in hand we will be able to better convey the place of God's mortifying work on the way to presenting us complete in Christ.

JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

It is one of the great insights of the Reformation that justification must be distinguished from sanctification. Note the language of the Westminster Larger Catechism in response to Question 70, "What is justification?" Answer: "Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts them righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone." In describing justification in this manner, the catechism is not relegating sanctification to an endnote in God's saving work. Instead, what we find is this distinction actually helps secure important aspects of sanctification.

¹¹ See Richard A. Muller, "The 'Golden Chain' and the Causality of Salvation: Beginnings of the Reformed *Ordo Salutis*" in *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 161-201.

¹² Richard A. Muller, "Union with Christ and the *Ordo Salutis*: Reflections on Developments in Early Modern Reformed Thought" *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 243.

The declarative, forensic nature of justification by grace through faith in Christ, that the Westminster Catechism describes logically, precedes sanctification. It is important to say in the next breath that the two cannot be separated; John Calvin's description of justification and sanctification as a "double grace" that is given to the Christian in union with Christ is here instructive.¹³ But even while he notes the inseparable nature of these two doctrines within the one gift of Christ, Calvin also notes the need to order them within our minds. Thus he writes, "For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one which to build your piety toward God."¹⁴ Justification provides a foundation on which sanctification can proceed.

The way in which justification has both logical priority and also foundational importance with respect to sanctification is a topic over which much ink has been spilled. But, in the therapeutic society we have previously described, and for our purposes, we can draw attention to the way in which justification provides a context for understanding mortification and its sometimes painful work in our lives. Properly understood in its exegetical context, the *ordo salutis* demonstrates how the declarative nature of justification allows the Christian be secure and serene in his submission to God's mortifying and vivifying work.

Following Paul's description of the struggle between the sinful nature and the redeemed "inner being" (7:22) in Romans 7, we turn to Romans 8 with a declaration of the Christian's security within the justifying work of Christ: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). Paul's argument flowers from this "therefore" in various directions, but it is significant that at multiple points within this chapter we find a connection to perseverance through suffering. And this suffering is for Paul always within the context of God's loving, redemptive work for the sinner. The Spirit's work in justification allows the Christian to be without fear (v.15) so that even as she suffers, she does so in the knowledge she is being transformed into the image of Christ (v. 17). Enclosed securely within God's justifying "yes," the Christian can consider that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (v. 18). The way in which justification provides the context for the Holy Spirit's work in our lives also allows us to live freely in weakness as well (v. 26).

All of this builds to the climax of this passage, which includes 8:28-30, the foundational text for the *ordo salutis*. Within the declaration of "no condemnation" we can be sure that God is indeed working all things for the good of those whom he has called. There is a pastoral logic that

¹³ "By partaking of [Christ], we receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life" (John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004] 725.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 725.

builds throughout this passage, urging the Christian to understand that all of her experience, even when it includes great suffering or self-denial, is enclosed within the security of God's settled judgment of love and favor upon her. Hence the final, resounding cry of the passage: "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

This truth is one crucial piece of the context of mortification within our modern therapeutic age. The uncomfortable work of self-denial and mortification must be narrated within the larger story of God's care and provision for his people. The therapeutic obsession with acceptance, security and love is a distortion of a good and beautiful truth that the gospel protects. The pastor must not deny the suffering Christian this comfort. Set within the order of salvation, we see how justification is one of the words of the gospel—indeed, a foundational, primary word. Giving justification that descriptive place within God's redemptive work allows the Christian to then enter into seasons of weakness, suffering, and self-denial secure in God's yes to her, free from the fear.

THE PRIORITY OF VIVIFICATION

Alongside the logical priority of justification, the *ordo salutis* also allows us to understand the material priority of vivification over mortification. When we speak of mortification, we are speaking of a "negative" work (in the sense that it is only preparatory), which is accompanied by the positive work of vivification that brings the Christian to fullness of life. Thus John Webster writes, "Vivification...has material priority, because mortification is a practice of negation, opposing old habits of life."¹⁵

Vivification describes the redeemed and renewed creature. We are implored to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14). In vivification, we move toward becoming fully alive according to the Creator's design in all of our relations: toward God, toward others, and with our own selves. Scripture provides a multifaceted description of this doctrine. The creature is given a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26), new clothing (Colossians 3:12-15), and new life (1 John 3:14). Biblical teaching details the new character that Christians receive (Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 4:17-25). The vivified life manifests in the ecclesial community as Christians are exhorted to relate to one another in love (Romans 12:9-21; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13). Mortification is not an end within itself; it is understood in relation to and directed toward vivification.

Within Christian teaching and preaching, this proportion is important. When doctrines lose either their context or their proportion, they begin to have unintended effects on divine proclamation and instruction. And

¹⁵ John Webster, "Communion with Christ: Mortification and Vivification," in *Sanctified by Grace: A Theology of the Christian Life*, edited by Kent Eilers and Kyle C. Strobel (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 133.

when mortification loses its relation and ordering to vivification, the result is that the good news of God's work of redeeming creatures begins to sound hollow, a word not of death and then life but instead only of death. Because of this, we must approach and handle this doctrine with care.

We have to this point spoken of mortification and vivification as categories within God's saving work for women and men, but to continue we must say more. In the life of the Christian mortification and vivification are specific actions, habits, and postures that are performed, enacted and assumed in response to and furthering the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Christian participates in mortification, then, they do so not as an end within itself, but ordered to and alongside a corresponding vivifying work. The material priority of vivification is in how the renewed Christian is the end to which all mortification works.

Mortification is not a permanent condition within the Christian life. Although it will be a perennial practice until the Christian enters glory, it is nonetheless only required as a part of the Christian participating in God's redeeming and renewing work. But vivification, rather than ending, is instead the state at which the Christian will arrive. Webster writes, "Mortification is not a permanent, essential practice of the regenerate nature but an interim necessity, and once its goal of clearing away the diseased remainders of the old nature is reached, it will no longer be required. Vivification, by contrast, is the implementation of the new nature and stretches out to perfection."¹⁶ Vivification is the end; mortification is a necessary means to attaining that end.

Because of this, practices of mortification must resonate with corresponding vivified habits. "Mortification is not hatred of embodied life but opposition to death-dealing vice, its purpose being not nature's destruction but the ordering and forming of regenerate conduct."¹⁷ The distortion of mortification within the Christian life occurs often where this principle is not recognized. The "no" which mortification speaks to the sinful nature is not matched with the "yes" vivification speaks to the creature as it assumes the renewed and intended goal of the Creator. Habits of fasting do not correspond to the proper use of the appetite. The use of silence or solitude is separated from the good exercise of speech or community. For each practice of mortification that is submitted to, there must be a parallel manifestation of the regenerate nature.

We can recognize this principle in Paul's letters. Whenever the Gospel commands us to put to death desires—"sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness" (Colossians 3:5)—we are almost immediately told to put on the redeemed nature: "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience" (Colossians 3:12). The fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) is received in coordination with putting to death the "works of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21). The priority is always upon the

¹⁶ John Webster, "Communion with Christ: Mortification and Vivification," 133.

¹⁷ John Webster, "Communion with Christ: Mortification and Vivification," 133.

new life. And so even when it is by “interim necessity,” mortification is constantly in relation to vivification.

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Mortification is one word of the gospel, and the gospel is good news. In a therapeutic culture that finds difficulty in saying “no” to distorted desires that have been elevated to the level of needs, speaking this good news compels us to describe how each “no” we are commanded to say corresponds to a good “yes” that God is saying as he puts disordered humanity into its good relation with the itself, the neighbor, and the world.

ESCHATOLOGY

We have just described how mortification is ordered to vivification, giving the renewed humanity material priority in Christian proclamation and instruction. The unfolding of God’s work in the Christian’s life works to the end of the renewed creature. In speaking this truth, though, there is more to say. In particular, how can we recognize this ordering and priority in all of Scripture? To this point, we have made much of the letters of Paul. Where else can this truth be seen as the Church speaks from its Scriptures?

To answer this question, we turn to one of the more remarkable biblical studies of the past five years, Jonathan T. Pennington’s *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary*. In a work of impressive biblical, historical and philosophical synthesis, Pennington sets a body of teaching that has some of Jesus’ main teaching about mortification—the Sermon on the Mount—within the contexts of both Jewish wisdom literature and the Greco-Roman virtue tradition. Within that context, Pennington suggests that the overwhelming concern of the Sermon is “the great theological and existential question of human flourishing.”¹⁸

The question of the shape of human flourishing is at the very center of the friction that arises between Christian teaching on mortification and our therapeutic culture. The accusation proceeds in this way: “Religion actuated by pride or fear sets impossibly high goals for humans, of asceticism, or mortification, or renunciation of ordinary human ends. It invites us to ‘transcend humanity,’ and this cannot but end up mutilating us; it leads us to despise and neglect the ordinary fulfillment and happiness which is within our reach.”¹⁹ Christian faith, it is argued, is an enemy of human flourishing.

Pennington argues the precise opposite. Jesus’ sermon, with its commands regarding speech, desire, and mammon, is not unaware of the perennial search for happiness, fulfillment and flourishing. Rather it is focused upon that question, providing an answer to the age-old question of the shape of a life well-lived. Pennington suggests that the best translation of *makarios* in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:2-11) is not “blessed” or “happy” but

¹⁸ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 1.

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 625.

is instead “flourishing.”²⁰ These statements, and indeed the sermon on the whole, are describing how this flourishing life might come to us.

One of Pennington’s central insights is that the virtue tradition and the eschatological backdrop of the coming Kingdom of God are not mutually exclusive options that we must choose between as we interpret Matthew 5–7. Instead, what the Sermon does within the context of both the virtue tradition and Second Temple Judaism is to marry these two visions of the moral life. Thus Pennington writes, “I fully agree that there is a thoroughly Isaianic kingdom-restoring eschatological backdrop to the Beatitudes (indeed, all of Matthew), but this in no way undercuts the vision of human flourishing that the Beatitudes speak to. One is not forced to choose between these or to put asunder what Second Temple Judaism has joined together.”²¹ The Sermon on the Mount—and indeed Jesus’ entire moral vision for his followers—is concerned with both human flourishing *and* the coming Kingdom.

What is crucial about this context for our description of mortification in the Christian life is that it provides an account of how mortification, vivification, and progress in sanctification can simultaneously lead to discomfort and suffering and also be a work that leads to fullness of life and flourishing. Sanctification has an eschatological aspect, not only in the sense that the Christian awaits the day when he will be made new, but also because sanctification takes place in the overlap of the ages. Christians are those “on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11), and sanctification is experienced both in that internal conflict between the old and new self and also in the tension between the old age which is passing away and the new age that has been established and is coming.

The Sermon on the Mount specifically and the Christian life generally are deeply concerned with the question of human flourishing and fulfillment. But this question is pursued within the biblical narrative’s description of both creatures and a creation alienated from its Creator, deeply compromised by sin and in need of renovation. Because of this, Christians will find that the work of sanctification will require them to put to death actions and habits that are fit for the world that is passing away, all the while putting on actions and habits that put them at home in the new kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated. Pennington writes, “As the church awaits the return of the risen Savior, the disciples of Jesus are invited into a way of being in the world that leads them into an experience of present-but-not-yet-full human flourishing, aligning them with the reason God created the world as the place of life and peace for his beloved creatures.”²²

Proclamation and instruction that provides a coherent account of mortification within the Christian life will give attention to the eschatological nature of the Christian experience of sanctification. This attention will be done with a confidence in the promise that the Triune God will satisfy our desires, untroubled by complaints that this confidence is too “pie-in-the-sky.” “The lure of self-denial flows from a good that outweighs and

²⁰ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 41–67.

²¹ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 63.

²² Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 310.

outstrips the fleeting and faint allures of this present age.”²³ This attention will also, though, be paid to the ways in which the church is an outpost of the coming Kingdom, a place where renovated desire is at home. The Christian will find herself alternately at odds and at home in her experience of growth in the Christian life as she experiences both the “not yet” and the “already” of the Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

We have sketched the shape of an account of mortification within the Christian life that is attentive to the age in which we proclaim the gospel now and is aware of how the doctrine must be located within the wider context of Christian theology. At a time when the word of God’s redemption of distorted human desire and habits is heard not as good news, but as an act of violence upon the creature, we have said that mortification must be understood within the wider spectrum of Christian teaching—of theological anthropology, the order of salvation, and the cosmic eschatological nature of sanctification—so that the good news might be heard in all of its fullness.

What might this mean for pastor-theologians as they provide theological leadership in their contexts? A number of ways forward present themselves:

CATECHESIS: The renewed need to locate and contextualize mortification is a result of the continued movement of Western culture away from the legacy it has to some extent inherited from the Christian tradition. There is the increasing need to be more explicit and give more attention to certain doctrines so that they can be lived and experienced as they are in reality—as good news. This need is nothing more than a return to the practice of catechesis, of forming disciples who are grounded in the way of Jesus. Our approach here is one way that this may be done: locating God’s saving acts between an aspect of the doctrine of creation (theological anthropology) and the ends to which his saving acts work (eschatology).

SPIRITUAL FORMATION: We have suggested that proclaiming the doctrine of mortification as good news in our therapeutic age involves reclaiming both the beatific vision and maintaining the material priority of vivification over mortification. Both of these are dogmatic decisions which require corresponding formative instruction and practices so that the Christian might experience the blessing mortification intends. Reclaiming the beatific vision, for instance, would require Protestants to engage in rigorous theological retrieval in order to give proper place to contemplation and prayer in a way that is congruent with other Protestant and Reformed commitments. Similarly, describing not only mortification but also vivification will also require an account of humanity that makes use of various theological disciplines and presents them to the church for practice and the putting on of Christ’s character.

ECCLESIOLOGY: If the church is to be a foretaste of the coming Kingdom and the sphere in which the mortified and vivified life is at home, the church must examine its own life and ask to what extent its life is reflective of that

²³ Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*, 143.

reality. In our relationship to the world around us, do we possess a clarity regarding the relationship between “wants and needs” that our therapeutic culture finds difficult to distinguish? Is there a compelling witness found among us of those who have faithfully said “no” to a desire and can continue to tell the story of God’s faithful “yes” to them? Is our community a place where those who wait for their wounded and disordered desires to be healed and transformed can find compassion? These are questions that push us to examine the nature of the church and how it serves as a hospital for sinners.

The doctrine of mortification is not the entirety of the gospel. It is one part of the good news of God bringing new life to men and women who have been estranged from him. But it is a necessary word, a word that God speaks to Christians that creates the space for his renovating work. For this reason, it is a doctrine worth reclaiming, so that the church may articulate with care and with wisdom the gospel of God’s saving work in the world.