

Who Will You Deny? Yourself or the Lord?



"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."
LUKE 9:23

Denying ourselves and taking up our cross isn't a little side issue - it is **absolutely necessary** to becoming or continuing to be a disciple of Jesus. If we don't practice self-denial, we aren't His disciples. It's useless to try to follow the One who was crucified without taking up our **own** cross daily. Unless we deny ourselves, it will be impossible not to deny the Lord.

But so many who have written about self-denial (some of them large volumes) don't seem to have an understanding of the subject. Either they couldn't explain it to others, or they didn't know how far to take it, or they didn't sense the absolute necessity of it. Others speak of it in such a dark, mystical way, that the average man can't understand what it's supposed to mean.

Still others speak very clearly on the necessity of self-denial, but they never get down to any specifics about what to do. And if some of them **do** get specific, they only talk about those things that hardly affect anyone, since they almost never occur in common life. They speak of things like enduring imprisonment or tortures, giving up houses or lands, husbands or wives, children, or even life itself. But most of us aren't likely to be called to endure things like these for the Gospel, unless God permits times of public persecution to return.

An Uphill Climb

What does it mean for a man to "**deny himself, and take up his cross daily**"? This is something which is so, so important to understand, because many powerful enemies oppose this Christian doctrine stronger than they oppose any other aspect of our spiritual lives. All of our natural feelings rise up against any kind of self-denial, and we immediately look for reasons to excuse ourselves from it. Those who love the world hate the very sound of it. And the great enemy of our souls, knowing full-well its importance, tries to roll every stone against it. But this isn't all. Even people who have pretty much shaken off the yoke of the devil, and who have sensed the work of God in their hearts, don't seem to

know much about this central doctrine of Christianity. Some are as deeply and totally ignorant about it as if there wasn't one word about it in the Bible. But self-denial is something that their Master insists on.

Others are even further off, having accepted a strong prejudice against it. They've gotten this idea from shallow "Christians" who like the easy things of life, and who don't want anything of godliness except the power.

It's not enough for a minister of the Gospel to **not oppose** the doctrine of self-denial. If he wants to be pure from the blood of all men, he must speak of it often, showing the necessity of it in the clearest and strongest way. Can you see how you're in constant danger of being fooled, cheated, or ridiculed out of this important command of Jesus, either by false teachers or false believers?

In the meantime, a good understanding of what self-denial really means is badly needed. And once you know what it means, you need to learn to practice it as a way of life.

All of the things that hold us back from being right with God or growing in the Lord can be boiled down to this: **either we won't deny ourselves, or we won't take up our cross.** Let deep prayer go before, accompany, and follow what you are now about to read, that it may be written in your heart by the finger of God, never to be erased.

I'll try to show, **First**, what it means for a man to deny himself and take up his cross; and, **Secondly**, show that if anyone isn't fully Christ's disciple, it's always because he won't obey this command of Jesus.

I. Self-denial

What is self-denial? How do we deny ourselves? Why do we have to? Self-denial is simply denying or refusing to follow our own will, from a conviction that the will of God is the only right way.

The first reason that God should be totally in charge of our lives, instead of us, is because He made us. "It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves." (*PSALM 100:3*). It's only a natural result of the relationship between man and His Creator. If God's way is the right way in everything, big and small, it follows that we shouldn't go our own way in **anything**. Self-denial holds true for the angels of

God in heaven as well as with man, innocent and holy, as he came out of the hands of his Creator. The second reason that God should be totally in charge of our lives is because of the condition that all men are in since the fall. Our own will leans toward indulging our natural desires. But it's God's plan and desire that we resist and overcome that temptation, not at **some** times or in **some** things only, but at **all** times and in **all** things.

Let me illustrate this. The will of God is like a road leading straight to God. The will of man, which once ran parallel with it, is now another road, which runs in the opposite way. It leads **away** from God. If we walk on one, we have to leave the other. We can't walk on both at the same time. It's impossible for a man to follow his own will and follow the will of God. You have to choose one or the other - either denying God's will to follow your own, or denying yourself to follow the will of God.

Without a doubt, it's more pleasing, for a while, to follow our own will and desires. But by following our desires in anything, we strengthen the rebellion of our heart. So, by eating the food we enjoy, we often increase a bodily disease. It satisfies our taste, but it makes us sicker; it brings pleasure, but it also brings death.

On the whole, then, to deny ourselves, is to give up our own will, no matter how much we may want our own way, whenever it doesn't fall in line with the will of God. It's to deny ourselves any pleasure which doesn't come from, or lead to, God.

Now, in running "**the race that is set before us**" according to the will of God, many times there's a cross lying in the way. That cross is something which will not only bring no pleasure, but something that is a burden or a pain. Picking up our cross is not just denying ourselves something that is pleasurable, it is allowing something that is unpleasurable to enter into our lives. What do we do when we are faced with this? The choice is plain: either we take up our cross, or we turn aside from the way of God.

In order to bring our lives back in line with what the Lord originally intended us to be, it's often necessary to pluck out, so to speak, an eye, or to cut off a right hand. We're so attached to some habits of sin that we can never be separated from them without intense

pain. The Lord then purifies the soul like a refiner's fire, to burn up all the impurity. It's painful all right, and it must be, because the soul cannot pass through the fire without pain.

The Good Doctor

If God puts us through any kind of pain, it's only in order to heal us. Jesus is our Great Physician and He cuts away what is infected or rotting, in order to preserve the healthy part. And if we would freely choose the loss of a limb, instead of letting our whole body perish, how much more should we choose, figuratively, to cut off a right hand, rather than to have our whole soul cast into hell!

When our Lord said to the rich young man, "**go and sell all you possess, and give it to the poor**"

(knowing this was the only way to heal his greed), the very thought of it gave that young man so much pain that "he went away grieved" (*MARK 10:22*). He chose to part with his hope of heaven, rather than part with his possessions on earth. This was a pain he would not agree to endure. A cross he would not take up. And in one way or another, every follower of Christ will surely have to take up his cross **daily**.

Taking up our cross doesn't mean literally tearing our own flesh, wearing uncomfortable clothes, purposely exposing ourselves to extreme heat or cold, or anything else that would hurt our bodily health. It means embracing the will of God, even though it may be totally different from what we want. It means choosing the good, though it may be bitter medicine. It means **freely accepting** hardships, trials, and temporary pain of whatever kind, as we walk on the path of eternal life.

II. Self-indulgence

Secondly I want to show that it's always because of a lack of self-denial, or taking up his cross, that someone doesn't completely follow Christ and is not fully His disciple. Let me show you what I mean with a few examples:

Five Kinds of People

1. The first kind of man hears the Word which is able to save his soul. He likes what he hears,

acknowledges the truth, and his heart is touched, yet he remains dead in sin, senseless and unawakened: Why is this? Because he won't part with the sin he loves, though he now knows it is utterly hated by the Lord. He came to hear, full of lust and unholy desire, and he leaves the same way because he will not deny himself these things. This man doesn't wake up, even though the trumpet is blown.

2. The second kind of person begins to wake up, and his eyes even open a little. He's convicted by the Spirit of God and receives the truth. But soon the conviction wears off and his eyes are closed again. Why does he again sink into the sleep of death?

Because he continues to yield to the sin he loves. He drinks again of the pleasing poison. Although he begins to wake up, he has no deep conviction. Therefore, it's impossible that any lasting work can be done in his life because he will not deny himself.

3. The third type of man has really woken up. The things God has shown him don't fade away. The impressions are deep and lasting. And yet, he never feels at peace with God, although he really desires it. Now, why is this? It's because he doesn't bring forth fruit in keeping with his repentance. He doesn't "**cease to do evil**" and "**learn to do good**" according to the grace he has received.

These people don't completely let go of their sinful habits, or they continue to avoid doing the good they know they **should** do, because it's something they don't want to do. That is, they never come to a point of saving faith, because they don't deny themselves, or take up their cross.

4. The fourth person is someone who has tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come. The peace which passes all understanding ruled his heart and mind; and the love of God was poured out in his heart by the Holy Spirit - yet now he is weak. He again loves the things of the world and desires them more than the things that are not seen. The eye of his understanding is closed again, so that he can't see Him who is unseen. His love has grown cold, and the peace of God no longer rules in his heart. And no wonder, for he has again given a place to the devil, and grieved the Holy Spirit of God. He has turned again to some pleasing sin, if not in some outward

act, yet in his heart. He has given a place to pride, or anger, or lust, to self-will, or stubbornness.

Maybe he didn't stir up the gift of God which was in him - he gave way to spiritual laziness and wouldn't be bothered with the pains to "pray at all times ... watching thereunto with all perseverance" (*EPHESIANS 6:18*). That is, he made shipwreck of his faith, for lack of self-denial and taking up his cross daily.

5. The fifth kind of man hasn't made a total shipwreck of his faith. He still has a measure of the Spirit of adoption, which continues to witness with his spirit that he is a child of God. However, he's not **"going on to perfection"**. He isn't, as he once was, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, as the deer pants after the water brook. Instead he's tired and worn out in his mind, wavering between life and death.

And why is he this way? Because he has forgotten the Word of God. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect." (*JAMES 2:21-22*). That is, he isn't diligent in working the works of God. He doesn't continue in prayer, either personal or group prayer, in communicating with Jesus, meditating on the Word of God, fasting, and in staying in fellowship. And why doesn't he continue in prayer? Because in times of dryness it's a pain and bother to him.

Or he isn't zealous in helping others. He doesn't fervently serve the Lord by doing good to men, in every way he can, to their souls as well as their bodies. He doesn't continue to yield to God at all opportunities, because he'd rather go to sleep, or it's just too cold outside, or dark, or rainy. Why can't he feed the hungry or clothe the naked? Because he might have to do it at the expense of his **own** clothes, or use cheaper and less pleasing food. Besides, visiting the sick or those in prison is surrounded with all kinds of uncomfortable circumstances. And so are most works of spiritual mercy, like correction, for example.

He won't help his neighbour by correcting him because shame, sometimes fear, comes between. He may have to expose himself to ridicule or worse inconveniences. When he considers these and other things, he leaves out one or more, if not all, works of mercy and love. Therefore, his faith is not being perfected, and he can't mature in his faith, because he won't deny himself, and take up his cross daily. Tired of carrying his cross, he stops diligently pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

We can see that it's **always** because a man will not deny himself or take up his cross that he doesn't completely follow his Lord. It's for this reason that he's not fully a disciple of Christ. This is the real reason why so many people who were once burning and shining lights have now lost both their light and heat. They didn't value self-denial according to its high importance, or take any pains in practising it.

Lastly, see that you apply this, every one of you, to your own soul. Meditate on it when you're in secret. Consider it in your heart! Take care not only to understand it thoroughly, but to remember it to your life's end! Cry to the Strong for strength, that as soon as you understand, you will practice it! Don't put it off, but practice it immediately, from this very hour! Practice it on every one of the thousand occasions, which occur in all circumstances of life! Practice it daily, without intermission, from the hour you first set your hand to the plough, and enduring to the end, until your spirit returns to God!

by John Wesley