

## Part Six: “Self-Denial and Self-Control”

“Then Jesus said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’” (Luke 9:23)

The next chapter in this series on spiritual disciplines covers (though all too briefly) a difficult subject. No, it’s not so difficult to understand, just difficult to consistently apply! In fact, the spiritual disciplines involving self-denial are usually why Christians avoid the subject in the first place. However, an awful lot of this bad feeling is based simply on “bad data.” Too many have twisted the Scriptures out of context, throwing in their own errors of interpretation and application, creating pride, legalism, and even asceticism where Jesus desired us instead to find safety, contentment, a tender relationship with Him, and greater effectiveness as a spiritual warrior for His kingdom. So let’s kick the false teaching to the curb and receive with thanksgiving the Bible’s teaching on the disciplines of self-control.

“Some Christians want enough of Christ to be identified with Him but not enough to be seriously inconvenienced; they genuinely cling to basic Christian orthodoxy but do not want to engage in serious Bible study; they value moral probity, especially of the public sort, but do not engage in war against inner corruptions; they fret over the quality of the preacher's sermon but do not worry much over the quality of their own prayer life. Such Christians are content with mediocrity.”  
(D. A. Carson)

Titus 2:11-13 -- “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

A cornerstone of this call to surrender is the understanding that the biblical teaching on self-denial is never mere negation. The spiritual disciplines are not a matter of “just say no” but rather the joyful embrace which “just says yes” to the glorious life God offers us. Self-denial is not asceticism; it is never an end in itself. It is the pathway to the positive, the pure, and the enduring. You see, the Christian never exists in neutral; he or she is either living “in the flesh” (their own power and their own desires) or living “in the Spirit” and making choices based on God’s Word. The sanctified life is a constant choosing to walk in the light rather than darkness; to act in love rather than self-interest; to show mercy rather than meanness; to exercise faith in God rather than wallow in unbelief, worry, or fear.

Does that require effort? Of course. Does it mean denial of the self? Again, the answer is of course. But the sanctified life of the genuine disciple of Jesus Christ is moves forward by the same Power that brought us our salvation in the beginning. We repented of our sin and relinquished ownership of our life by faith in God’s grace. In turn, we received redemption, adoption, and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. In the sanctified life, we live for the Lord in the same way, wisely exchanging our ways for God’s. To use the Scriptures above, we deny ourselves (the negative) but then take up His cross (the positive). We deny ungodliness and

worldly desires (the negatives which are a curse to us) and choose instead to live sensibly righteously, and godly (the positives which yield peace, power, and heavenly reward). Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:23) So, as we abide in Christ, His power enables us to make the right choices and to follow through, day after day.

Viewed in this perspective, all spiritual disciplines are practices of self-denial. They are all practices in which we walk in God's way, rather than our own, trusting in Him to always give us the best and brightest of His blessings. And as we have previously noted, we can never outgive God. Therefore, the life of self-control should not be seen as a binding, bothersome thing. It is for today and forevermore for our good.

Should we consider the doing of good deeds a discipline? Of course. Like all the others, we need to wisely plan, be directed and empowered by the Spirit, and sacrificially engage in fulfilling all those 'action commands' we are given in the Scriptures. Naturally then, we must be alert to the sudden opportunities God brings your way each day. But remember too that "scheduled appointments" can be "divine appointments" as we seek to diligently invest our time, talents, and treasure in His Kingdom.

Why are we so prone to miss this? The basic reason is because our sin nature is a stubborn, stupid beast which requires a constant check. Indeed, we are continually at war with the flesh. Plus, living in the West's advertisement-driven culture, it is all too easy to give in to selfishness. We become insistent on comfort, pleasure, status, having our own way. We want what we want...and we want it right now. In fact, as we are constantly told by advertisers, we deserve it! And so, like Felix who became so frightened by the apostle Paul's comments about righteousness and self-control (Acts 24:25) that he rejected the opportunity for salvation, we too are told by the devil, our sin nature,

and the sin-stained cosmos to choose the perks of this life over the beautiful, bountiful blessings offered us by our heavenly Lord.

Let me remind you of just a handful of those blessings (in three general categories) that flow from a believer's exercise of self-control. First, a more godly character:

1 Timothy 4:7 -- "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."

2 Peter 1:5-8 -- "Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Hebrews 5:14 -- "But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."

The second area of blessings coming from self-control is in the heightened value of our service to Jesus. Examples? Check out the Scriptures which speak of being a holy vessel, consecration, abiding in the Vine, righteousness increasing the efficiency of our prayers, righteousness increasing the power of our witness, being better able to withstand temptation and attacks from your enemies, more consistent consecration to the Lord's purposes, higher levels of happiness and peace, a more intense fellowship with God and one's fellow Christians, and so on. Like I stressed earlier, self-denial and self-control do not mean mere negation. They do not, at the final word, mean "just say no." They are paths to peace, spiritual prosperity, and promise.

And what about that last item; namely, the promises of self-control's ultimate reward?

Hebrews 11:26 -- Moses considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt for he was looking to the reward."

Psalm 58:11 -- "And men will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous. Surely there is a God Who judges on earth.'"

2 John 8 -- "Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward."

Other wonderful advantages of the Spirit-controlled life are seen in the power it provides to avoid the traps and snares of the devil; to reject the appeals of temptation; to "grow up" in our knowledge of our enemies' tactics. There are also the momentous exhortations which use the phrase "lay aside" that we see in places like Romans 13:12 and Hebrews 12:1. In the former, the things we are to "lay aside" (self-denial) are the deeds of darkness -- falsehood, wickedness, and other preoccupations of the "old self."

But, in the second passage, we are commanded to "lay aside" anything that might encumber us. That means anything that could possibly weigh us down or obstruct our purposes. Particularly dangerous are those sins that "easily entangle" us. Get the picture? If it's not a wing, it's a weight. Drop it and fly free! Once again, we see how the Bible's call to a life of self-denial is actually a very positive and proactive perspective. It's freedom and confidence and joy -- with a whole host of heavenly rewards tossed in!

A quick word on fasting.

A serious consideration of this subject is overdue but, when finally undertaken, that study will include the proper motivations for fasting, realizing that God's desire is not for radical fasts like Jesus experienced, and that God's preferred purposes for such disciplines are spiritual growth and the blessing of others.

Isaiah 58:6-7 -- "Is this not the fast that I choose: to release the bonds of wickedness, to undo the ropes of the yoke and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke?  
Is it not to break your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house?"