

Christian Classic Series



THE DUTY OF
SELF-DENIAL

THOMAS WATSON (1620-1686)

THE DUTY OF SELF-DENIAL

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The Duty of Self-Denial

*And he said to them all, If any man will come
after me, let him deny himself.*

—Luke 9:23

Christian Reader,

The weightiness of the argument here discoursed on justly merits a larger volume, but I have contracted¹ it because it may possibly come into more hands. I must profess I do not know a more necessary point in divinity. Self-denial is the first principle of Christianity. It is the life-blood which must run through the whole body of religion. Self-denial is learned not out of the topics of philosophy but the oracles² of Scripture.

It is my request to the reader to pursue this manual with seriousness, knowing that the practice of self-denial is that wherein his salvation is nearly concerned.³ May the Lord work with His Word and cause the dew of His blessing to fall with this manna (Exo 16:14-15), which is the prayer of thy friend and servant in the gospel,

Thomas Watson, Dowgate, 1675

Introduction

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine” (2Ti 3:16). The Word is compared to a lamp for its illuminating quality (Psa 119:105), and to refined silver for its enriching quality (Psa 12:6). Among other parts of sacred writ, this is not the least: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself.”

These words are dropped from the lips of Christ, the oracle of truth. In the preceding verse, our blessed Savior foretold His passion: “The Son of man must suffer many things.” And His suffering is set down in two expressions:

1. He must “be rejected.” Thus He is the “stone which the builders refused” (Psa 118:22).

¹ **contracted** – reduced.

² **oracles** – divine revelation.

³ **nearly concerned** – closely related.

2. He must “be slain.” This diamond must be cut. He Who gave life to others must Himself die. And as Christ thus abased Himself for us, so we must deny ourselves for Him. “And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself.”

Exposition

Self-denial is the foundation of godliness; and if this is not well laid, all the building will fall.

Let me explain the words:

1. “And he said to them all.” Self-denial is of universal extent. It concerns all; it respects both ministers and people. Christ spoke it as well to His apostles as to the rest of His hearers.

2. “If any man will come after me.” If he will follow Me as the soldier does his general, then he will arrive at that place of glory where I am going.

3. “Let him deny himself.” Beza⁴ and Erasmus⁵ render it, “Let him lay aside or reject himself.” Self-denial is a kind of self-annihilation. The words have two parts. First, a supposal:⁶ “If any man will come after me.” Second, an imposal:⁷ “Let him deny himself.” This word “let him deny” is not only a permission but an injunction. It carries in it the force of the command. It is as if a king should say, “Let it be enacted!”⁸

The proposition I shall insist on is that a good Christian must be a self-denier. “Let him deny himself.”

In what sense must a Christian not deny himself?

He must not deny his promise. A man’s promise should be sacred. He is to keep it though it is to his loss (Psa 15:1, 4). He who makes no reckoning of his promise, God makes no reckoning of his profession.

A Christian must not deny his grace. He must not disown any good work wrought in him. He ought not to say that he is a dry tree when the dew of heaven lies upon his branches. As it is a sin for a man to make himself better than he is, so it is to make himself worse. To say he has grace when he has none is presumption. To say he has no grace when he has is ingratitude; it is bearing false witness against the Spirit of God.

⁴ **Theodore Beza** (1519-1605) – French Protestant Christian theologian and scholar who played an important role in the early Reformation. He was a disciple of John Calvin and lived most of his life in Switzerland.

⁵ **Desiderius Erasmus** (1466-1536) – Dutch Renaissance humanist, Catholic priest, and theologian.

⁶ **supposal** – condition, here expressed by “if.”

⁷ **imposal** – command; “let” is imperative.

⁸ **enacted** – done; decreed as law.

In what sense must a Christian deny himself?

I answer in general that he must deny that carnal⁹ part, which is near to him as himself, that which is the apple of his eye. But more particularly,

1. A Christian must deny his reason.

I do not say renounce it, but deny it. Some cry up the Diana of reason, making it the rule and standard of faith (Acts 19:24-35). Indeed, that there is a God, and that this God is to be worshipped, is a law written in the heart of man and is consonant to¹⁰ reason (Rom 1:19-21). But Who God is and the right mode of worship is such an arcane¹¹ matter that reason can no more find out than the Philistines could Samson's riddle (Jdg 14:12-14). "Canst thou by searching find out God?" (Job 11:7).

Reason must be denied in *credendis*¹² and in *agendis*.¹³

a. In *credendis*, that is, in doctrines proposed to be believed:

1) *The doctrine of the Trinity*. The well is deep, and who can with the plumb line of reason fathom it! The persons in the Trinity are distinguished but not divided. They are three subsistences but one essence. The Trinity is purely an object of faith. There are some truths in religion demonstrable by reason, such as that we should flee vice and do to others as we would have them do to us. But the Trinity of persons in the unity of essence is of divine revelation and must be assented to by faith. Those illuminated philosophers who could discourse subtly¹⁴ of the magnitude and influence of the stars [and] the nature of plants and minerals could not by their deepest investigation find out the mystery of the Trinity. This is wholly supernatural and must be adored with humble believing.

2) *The doctrine of the incarnation*. This is the doctrine that eternity should be born, that He who rules the stars should suck the breasts, that a virgin should conceive, that the branch should bear the root, that in Christ there should be two natures yet but one person, that the divine nature should not be translated into the human, yet the human nature should be assumed into the person of the Son of God, the human nature not God yet one with God. Here reason must be denied.

3) *The doctrine of the resurrection*. That the body interred, nay, crumbled into a thousand factions and the ashes scattered in the air should rise again is above

⁹ **carnal** – fleshly; sensual, as opposed to spiritual.

¹⁰ **consonant to** – consistent with.

¹¹ **arcane** – secret or mysterious.

¹² **credendis** – that which is to be believed.

¹³ **agendis** – that which is to be done.

¹⁴ **subtly** – skillfully.

reason to imagine. The Epicureans¹⁵ and Stoics¹⁶ derided¹⁷ Paul when he preached to them of the resurrection (Act 17:32). Here reason must be taken captive. “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth” (Joh 5:28-29; 1Co 15:42-43). The chemist can, out of several means mingled together, extract the one from the other, the silver from the gold, the alchemy¹⁸ from the silver, and can reduce every metal to its own species. So, when the bodies of men are mixed with other substances, the wise God can make a sudden extraction and clothe every soul with its own body. Did not the same particular body rise, it would be rather a creation than a resurrection. “Why should it be thought a thing incredible...that God should raise the dead?” (Act 26:8). God can do it because of His power (Mat 22:29). And He cannot but do it because of His truth. The doctrines of faith do not oppose reason but transcend it (Eph 3:19).

b. Reason must be denied in *agendis*, that is, in duties enjoined to be practiced.

There are many duties in religion which carnal reason quarrels at. God said [that it is a man’s] “glory to pass over a transgression” (Pro 19:11). No, says carnal reason, it is cowardice. The heathens thought it gallantry of spirit to avenge injuries.

God says that the paths of holiness are strewn with roses. “Her ways are ways of pleasantness” (Pro 3:17). No, says reason, they are severe and cynical.¹⁹ I must crucify my delights and drown my mirth in tears.

God says that religion is gainful. “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1Ti 6:6). It brings contentment arising from the favor of God. It brings temporal riches—“in her left hand riches and honour” (Pro 3:16). The way to be prosperous is to be pious. No, says reason, if I follow the trade of religion I shall break.²⁰ “What shall we do for the hundred talents?” (2Ch 25:9). In this case, carnal reason must be denied and fought against. He who will go no farther than reason will come many leagues²¹ short of heaven.

¹⁵ **Epicureans** – followers of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus.

¹⁶ **Stoics** – followers of Stoicism, a school of Hellenistic philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early 3rd century BC.

¹⁷ **derided** – mocked.

¹⁸ **alchemy** – impurities.

¹⁹ **cynical** – negative.

²⁰ **break** – become poor.

²¹ **leagues** – measurement of distance.

2. A Christian must deny his will.

This is Brugensis'²² gloss²³ upon the text: "The will is the great wheel in the soul that moves all the affections." The will in innocence was regular;²⁴ it echoed God's will. But since the Fall, though it retains its freedom in moral actions, yet spiritually it is depraved.²⁵ If the will could cease from sinning, says Bernard, there would be no hell. The greatest wound is fallen upon the will. The mariner's compass, being stricken with thunder,²⁶ causes the point of the needle to be wrong. Man's nature, being corrupted, causes the will to point wrong; it points to evil. There is in the will not only impotence but obstinacy. "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost" (Act 7:51).

Here we must deny our will and bring it to God's will. If a crooked stick is laid upon the ground that is level, we do not try to bring the ground even with the stick, but to make the stick even to the ground. So God's will is not to be brought to ours, but our will being crooked must be brought to God's will. We pray, "Thy will be done" (Mat 6:10). The way to have our will is to deny it.

3. A Christian must deny his own righteousness, civilities, duties, and good works.

"And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness" (Phi 3:9). The spider weaves a web out of her own bowels; a hypocrite would spin a web of salvation out of his own righteousness. But St. Paul, like the bee, sucked salvation from the flower of Christ's righteousness. "Our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). Our best duties are fly-blown²⁷ with sin. Put gold in the fire and there comes out dross.²⁸ Our most golden services are mixed with unbelief. The angel pouring sweet odors into the prayers of the saints (Rev 8:3) shows that they are in themselves unsavory and need Christ's sweet odors to perfume them. Use duty, but trust Christ's righteousness for salvation. Noah's dove made use of her wings to fly, but trusted the ark for safety (Gen 8:9).

And, if we must deny our holy things in point of justification, then much more our civilities. A stake may be finely painted, but it has no root. A man may be

²² **Brugensis** (1549-1619) – Catholic scholar.

²³ **gloss** – comment.

²⁴ **regular** – proper.

²⁵ Though man acts as a free moral agent, because of his evil nature he acts wrongly and is morally unable to obey God (Rom 8:7). The reader may wish to read Walter Chantry's *Man's Will—Free Yet Bound* published by CHAPEL LIBRARY.

²⁶ **thunder** – lightning.

²⁷ **fly-blown** – fouled as by flies.

²⁸ **dross** – impurity.

painted with civility,²⁹ and yet have no root of grace. A moral person is washed, not changed. The life may be civil when the heart is wicked, just as the sea may be calm when the water is salty. The Pharisee could say he was no adulterer, but he could not say he was not proud (Luk 18:11).

The civilized person may have a secret antipathy against goodness. He may hate grace as much as vice. Civility is but a cracked³⁰ title to heaven. A piece of brass may shine, but, lacking the king's image, it will not pass as currency. A man may shine with moral virtues, but lacking the image of God consisting in holiness, he will not pass as currency at the Day of Judgment. Morality is good; but God will say, "One thing thou lackest" (Mar 10:21). Civility is a good Jacob's staff to walk with among men, but it is a bad Jacob's ladder to climb up to heaven.

4. A Christian must deny all self-confidence.

How confident was Pendleton of himself! "This fat of mine shall melt in the fire of Christ," he said; but instead of that, his courage melted.³¹ The same Hebrew word signifies both confidence and folly; self-confidence betrays folly. Peter presumed too much on his own strength: "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee" (Mat 26:35). But how soon was his confidence shaken and blown down with a breath of a maid: "He denied with an oath, I do not know the man" (Mat 26:72). Peter's denying of Christ was for lack of denying himself. Self-jealousy³² is good: "Be not highminded, but fear" (Rom 11:20). The trembling reed often stands when the confident cedar falls. Who that knows the fierceness of a trial or the falseness of his heart will not fear? How have some professors shone like stars in the church's hemisphere yet have been falling stars? [Such were] Porphyry,³³ Julian,³⁴ Cardinal Pool,³⁵ Gardener,³⁶ [and] Judas (Mar 14:10). The apostles have been called by some of the ancients "the eyes of the world," Christ's feet, the church's breasts. Judas was one of these, yet a traitor.

²⁹ **civility** – courteous behavior; politeness.

³⁰ **cracked** – defective.

³¹ John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 1563 edition, Book V, p. 1118.

³² **self-jealousy** – suspicion of self.

³³ **Porphyry of Tyre** – neo-platonic philosopher in the 3rd to 4th century AD.

³⁴ **Julian the Apostate** – 4th century Roman emperor, nephew of Constantine. Though given Christian training, he opposed Christ.

³⁵ **Reginald Pole** – 16th century Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury in Counter-Reformation.

³⁶ **Stephen Gardener** (or Gardiner) – Roman Catholic bishop in England during the Reformation.

Nay, some of the saints, through God's withdrawing the influence of His Spirit, have relapsed for a time, such as Cranmer,³⁷ and Origen,³⁸ whose heart fainted in the seventh persecution when he offered incense to the idol.

Deny self-confidence. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1Co 10:12). 'Tis just with God that he who trusts himself should be left to himself. The vine being weak twists about the elm to support it. A good Christian, being conscious of his own imbecility,³⁹ twists by faith about Christ. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phi 4:13). Samson's strength lay in his hair; ours lies in our head, Christ.

5. A Christian must deny self-conceit.⁴⁰

"Vain man would be wise" (Job 11:12). In the Hebrew it is "empty man." Man is a proud piece of flesh. He is apt to have a high opinion of himself. "There was a certain man, called Simon...giving out that himself was some great one" (Act 8:9). Sapor⁴¹ calls himself "brother of the sun and moon." Commodus⁴² the emperor called himself "the golden Hercules." The Persian kings had their images worshipped by all who came into Babylon. Such as view themselves in the flattering glass of self-love appear bigger in their own eyes than they are. They think their spark is a sun, their drop a sea. They are highly conceited of their acumen,⁴³ their wit and parts,⁴⁴ and are ready to despise others. The Chinese say that Europe has one eye and they have two—and the rest of the world is blind.

Deny self-conceit. "I say...to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think" (Rom 12:3). "Cease from thine own wisdom" (Pro 23:4). It does not say cease from being wise, but from thinking yourself wise (Pro 3:7; Phi 2:3).

That you may deny all high, supercilious⁴⁵ thoughts of yourselves, consider: self-conceit is no small sin. Chrysostom⁴⁶ calls it the mother of hell. It is a kind of idolatry, a self-worshipping.

³⁷ **Thomas Cranmer** – leader in English Reformation; first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury; under threat of death, he initially renounced his Protestant beliefs but later died a martyr.

³⁸ **Origen** (c. 184-c. 253) – early church scholar and theologian.

³⁹ **imbecility** – weakness.

⁴⁰ **self-conceit** – pride.

⁴¹ **Sapor** – 4th century Persian king.

⁴² **Commodus** – 2nd century Roman emperor.

⁴³ **acumen** – keen insight.

⁴⁴ **parts** – abilities.

⁴⁵ **supercilious** – arrogant.

⁴⁶ **Chrysostom, John** (c. AD 347-407) – Bishop of Constantinople, an important Early Church Father; known for his eloquence in preaching and public speaking, and his denunciation of abuse of authority by both ecclesiastical and political leaders. (Greek: "golden mouthed").

Whatever noble endowment you have is borrowed. As the man said of the axe which fell in the water: “Alas, master! for it was borrowed” (2Ki 6:5)—all a man’s gifts, his pregnancy⁴⁷ of parts and ripens⁴⁸ of wit, are borrowed from heaven. And what wise man would be proud of a jewel that was lent to him? “What hast thou that thou didst not receive?” (1Co 4:7). The moon has no cause to be conceited of her light for which she is beholden to the sun.

Whatever acuteness⁴⁹ of wit or sageness⁵⁰ of judgment you have, think how far short you come. How far short do you come of that knowledge which Adam had in innocence? He was the oracle of wisdom. He could unlock nature’s dark cabinet and find out those secrets which amuse us. Adam had a full inspection into the cause of things. He was a kind of earthly angel. But how far short do you come of him? Your knowledge is checkered with ignorance. There are many hard knots in nature which cannot be easily untied, like why the lodestone⁵¹ should draw iron and leave gold and pearl, or why the Nile should overflow in the summer when waters are usually lowest. “By what way is the light parted?” (Job 38:24). Why is the sea higher than the earth and yet does not drown it?⁵² How do the bones grow in the womb (Ecc 11:5)? What is the reason of all occult⁵³ qualities? He who sees clearest has a mist before his eyes. By eating of the tree of knowledge, we lost the key of knowledge.

How far short do you come of that knowledge Satan has? He is called “demon” from his knowledge. We read of “the depths of Satan” (Rev 2:24) and his stratagems (2Co 2:11). Satan is an intelligent spirit. Though he has lost his sanctity, yet not his knowledge; though he has lost his breastplate, yet not his headpiece. He has wit enough to deceive the nations (Rev 20:3). His understanding is nimble and, being compared with ours, is like the swift flight of an eagle compared with the slow motion of a snail. Why, then, should any be puffed up with conceit of their knowledge wherein the devil far outstrips them?

How far short do you come of the knowledge they have who are perfected in glory? He who is higher than a dwarf may be lower than a giant. Such as excel others in natural abilities are of a lower stature than the glorified saints. “We see through a glass, darkly” (1Co 13:12), but the saints in bliss have a full-eyed vision

⁴⁷ **pregnancy** – fullness.

⁴⁸ **ripens** – full development.

⁴⁹ **acuteness** – sharpness.

⁵⁰ **sageness** – wisdom.

⁵¹ **lodestone** – magnet.

⁵² The application of God-given skill and discipline to the modern scientific method has found answers to many of the author’s questions but has also opened vast new horizons of wonder that demonstrate even more how far short we come in understanding our God and His power in creation.

⁵³ **occult** – secret.

of God (Job 17:24). Their light which burned here like fire when it is smothered is now blown up into a pure flame. An infant glorified knows more than the most profound rabbis on earth. In heaven, all shadows fly away—the Sun of righteousness having risen there with His illustrious beams. This may pull down the plumes of pride and self-conceit.

Your dark side is broader than your light side. Your ignorance is more than your knowledge. Your knowledge is but the light of a torch; your ignorance as the Cimmerian darkness.⁵⁴ “How little a portion is heard of him?” (Job 26:14). The Septuagint renders it, “How little a drop!” To think to comprehend the Deity is as if we should go to span the ocean. Christians, the greatest part of your knowledge is not as much as the least part of your ignorance. This may demolish all high imaginations. You have no cause to be conceited of the knowledge you have, but rather to be humbled for what you lack!

Think of what a hell of sin you carry about you. Sin is the accursed thing (Job 7:13). It is the quintessence⁵⁵ of evil. It is like a stain to beauty. It was typified by the menstrual cloth, which was the most unclean thing under the Law (Isa 64:6). Though you have knowledge, sin eclipses it. It is as if a woman should have a fair face but a cancer in her breast. Your knowledge does not so much adorn you as sin debases you.

Grace can never thrive where self-conceit grows. As a body cannot thrive in a dropsy,⁵⁶ so neither can the soul thrive which is swelled up with this dropsy of pride and self-conceit. A proud head makes a barren heart.

A supercilious conceitedness is odious, and much lessens any worth in a person. 'Tis like a cloud in a diamond. The more one values himself, the less God and angels value him. Let a person be eminent; yet, if he is self-conceited, he is loved by none. He is like a physician who has the plague. Though he may be admired for his skill, yet none care to come near him.

Such as have a high opinion of their own excellencies are on the ready way to ruin. Either God infatuates them⁵⁷ (Isa 29:14), or denies a blessing to their labors, or suffers them to fall into some great sin. Peter, who was so well conceited of himself, as if he had more grace than all the apostles besides—the Lord let him fall very far. He denied Christ with an oath, nay, an imprecation⁵⁸ (Mat 26:74). Peter wished a curse on himself if he knew Christ; nay, some think he cursed Christ.

⁵⁴ **Cimmerian darkness** – mythical land of perpetual darkness.

⁵⁵ **quintessence** – most perfect example or representation.

⁵⁶ **dropsy** – unnatural collection of water in a part of the body, causing swelling.

⁵⁷ **infatuates them** – makes them appear foolish.

⁵⁸ **imprecation** – curse.

The Lord sometimes lets vain, conceited persons fall not only foully, but finally. The doves, says Pliny,⁵⁹ take pride in their feathers and in their flying high; at last they soar so high that they are prey to the hawk. So, when men fly high in self-conceitedness, they become prey to the prince of the air. Let all this make us deny ourselves. Let it kill the worm of self-conceit. If we are proud of our knowledge, the devil does not care how much we know. Let St. Paul be our pattern. Though he was the chief of the apostles, he calls himself the least of the saints (Eph 3:8). “Though I be nothing” (2Co 12:11)—this illustrious apostle, a star of the first magnitude, shrank into nothing in his own eyes. ’Tis excellent to be like Moses, whose face had a luster on it, but he “wist not that the skin of his face shone” (Exo 34:29).

6. A Christian must deny his appetite.

The sensitive appetite is sick or a bulimia;⁶⁰ it cries, “Give, give” (Pro 30:15). St. Paul beat down his body (1Co 9:27). Such a proportion only is to be taken for the recruiting⁶¹ of nature as may help forward God’s service. More are hurt by excess in lawful things than by meddling with unlawful, as more are killed by wine than poison. Many make their belly their god (Phi 3:19), and to this god they pour drink offerings. Clemens Alexandrinus⁶² writes of a fish whose heart is in his belly, an emblem of epicures⁶³ whose heart is in their belly—they are devoted to sensuality. Excess in meat or drink clouds the mind, chokes good affections, and provokes lust. The rankest weeds grow out of the fattest soil. Intemperance shortens life as too much oil extinguishes the lamp. Many dig their own graves with their own teeth! Christ cautioned His apostles, “Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness” (Luk 21:34). Seneca⁶⁴ could say he was born to higher things than to be a slave to his body. What a shame is it that the soul, that princely thing which sways the scepter of reason and is akin to the angels, should be enslaved to the brutish part! Deny the sinful cravings of the flesh. What has God given conscience for but to be a golden bridle to check the inordinacy⁶⁵ of the appetite?

⁵⁹ **Pliny the Elder** (Gaius Plinius Secundus, AD 23-79) – Roman author, naturalist, and natural philosopher, as well as naval and army commander of the early Roman Empire.

⁶⁰ **bulimia** – binge eating.

⁶¹ **recruiting** – strengthening.

⁶² **Clemens (Clement) of Alexandria** (c. 150 – c. 215) – Early Church theologian and teacher.

⁶³ **epicures** – people devoted to sensual pleasures.

⁶⁴ **Lucius Annaeus Seneca** (c. 4 BC – AD 65) – Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and humorist; tutor and advisor to the Roman emperor Nero.

⁶⁵ **inordinacy** – excessiveness.

7. A Christian must deny his ease.

Ease slays the simple (Pro 1:32). The flesh is full of sloth and effeminacy;⁶⁶ 'tis loath to take pains for heaven.⁶⁷ “A slothful man hideth his hand in his bosom” (Pro 19:24). He is loath to pluck it out though it is to lay hold on a crown. Weeds and vermin grow in untilled ground; and all vices grow in an idle, untilled heart. How can they expect to reap a harvest of glory who never sowed any seed? Is Satan so busy in his diocese⁶⁸ (1Pe 5:8), and are Christians idle? Are they like the lilies which “toil not, neither do they spin” (Mat 6:28)? Oh, deny your ease! Seneca, a heathen, devoted himself to labor and spent part of the night in study. Hannibal⁶⁹ forced his way over the Alps and craggy rocks. We must force our way to Paradise (Mat 11:12). Let us shake off sloth as Paul did the viper (Act 28:3-5).

Never think to be brought to heaven as the passengers in a ship are brought to their ports sleeping. “Arise...and be doing” (1Ch 22:16). God puts no difference between the slothful servant and the wicked (Mat 25:26). Those people in Etruria,⁷⁰ who like drones entered into the hive and consumed the honey, were expelled from others and condemned to exile. Such as idle away the day of grace⁷¹ and fold their hands to sleep, when they should be working out salvation (Phi 2:12),⁷² God will condemn to a perpetual exile in hell.

8. A Christian must deny carnal policy.

This is the wisdom of the flesh (2Co 1:12). Carnal policy is craft.⁷³ The politician does not consult what is best but what is safest. The politician is made of willow; he can side with all parties. His religion is cut according to the fashion of the times; he can bow either to the east or to the west. Zeal for truth is blotted out of the politician's creed. It was a speech of Sir Thomas More⁷⁴ that he would not follow truth too near the heels lest it should dash out his brains.⁷⁵ 'Tis judged by some a piece of policy not to declare against error for fear of losing a party.⁷⁶

⁶⁶ **effeminacy** – unmanly softness.

⁶⁷ **'tis loath to take pains for heaven** – it dislikes strenuous exertions in seeking God.

⁶⁸ **diocese** – district.

⁶⁹ **Hannibal** (247-c. 182 BC) – Punic leader of Carthage's military force against Rome.

⁷⁰ **Etruria** (Tyrrhenia) – region of central Italy.

⁷¹ **day of grace** – time in which we are commanded to repent and believe the gospel and be saved.

⁷² This passage is addressed to believers and calls them to obedience. The unconverted are called to repent and believe the gospel (Act 16:30-32).

⁷³ **craft** – cunning; art or skill.

⁷⁴ **Sir Thomas More** (1478-1535) – English lawyer, social philosopher, author, statesman, and noted Renaissance humanist.

⁷⁵ **dash...brains** – a reference to following a horse too closely.

⁷⁶ **party** – following.

The politician is a latitudinarian.⁷⁷ He has distinctions beyond Aquinas⁷⁸ and can digest those things which others tremble at. The ostrich's wings help her to outrun other creatures. Sinful policy makes men run further than they can who are of purer consciences. In short, the politician is like a chameleon, who can change into all colors and be as his company is. He can be either serious or feathery. He can imitate either Cato⁷⁹ or Catiline.⁸⁰ I grant that Christian prudence⁸¹ is commendable, but the serpent must not devour the dove (Mat 10:16). That policy is unjustifiable which teaches people to avoid duty. Deny carnal policy; dare to be honest. The best policy is to hold fast to integrity.

9. A Christian must deny his inordinate passions.

“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue...this man's religion is vain” (Jam 1:26). Every member of the body is infected with sin, as every branch of wormwood⁸² is bitter; but the tongue is “full of deadly poison” (Jam 3:8). Augustine⁸³ compares the tongue to a furnace, and too often sparks of anger fly out of it. The Holy Ghost once descended in cloven tongues of fire (Act 2:3), but the Apostle James speaks of a tongue that “is set on fire of hell” (Jam 3:6). Some cannot rule their own spirit, but are carried away with their passions as a chariot with wild horses. Many, said Jerome,⁸⁴ who will not be drunk with wine will be drunk with rash anger. “Anger resteth in the bosom of fools” (Ecc 7:9). Anger may be in a wise man, but it rests in a fool. There is, I know, a holy anger against sin, but the fury of passion is the scum⁸⁵ which boils off from an unsavory heart.

⁷⁷ **latitudinarian** – tolerant of variations in religious opinion or doctrine; initially a pejorative term applied to a group of 17th-century English theologians who believed in conforming to official Church of England practices, but felt that matters of doctrine, liturgical practice, and ecclesiastical organization were of relatively little importance.

⁷⁸ **Thomas Aquinas** (1225-1274) – Italian Dominican priest of the Roman Catholic Church; an immensely influential philosopher and theologian in the tradition of scholasticism.

⁷⁹ **Cato** (95-46 BC) – politician, statesman, and orator in the late Roman Republic, and a follower of the Stoic philosophy; remembered for his legendary stubbornness and tenacity (especially in his lengthy conflict with Gaius Julius Caesar), as well as his immunity to bribes, his moral integrity, and his distaste for the corruption of the period.

⁸⁰ **Catiline** (108-62 BC) – Roman politician who is best known for the Catiline conspiracy, an attempt to overthrow the Roman Republic and the aristocratic Senate.

⁸¹ **prudence** – wisdom applied to practice.

⁸² **wormwood** – bitter herb.

⁸³ **Augustine** (AD 354-430) – Bishop of Hippo and early church theologian; known by many as the father of orthodox theology; born in Tagaste, North Africa.

⁸⁴ **Jerome** (c. AD 347-419) – biblical scholar and translator of the Latin version of Scripture known as the Vulgate.

⁸⁵ **scum** – layer of impure matter that forms on the surface of a liquid being boiled.

Passion disturbs reason and makes a person unfit for holy duties. Hot passions make cold prayers.

O Christians, deny yourselves! Pray that God will set a watch before your lips (Psa 141:3). Labor to quench the fire of wrath⁸⁶ with a flood of tears. It is recorded of Mr. John Bruen,⁸⁷ in the county of Chester, that though he was naturally of a hasty, choleric⁸⁸ spirit, yet at length he got the victory over his passions, and grew so meek and calm that his very nature seemed to be quite altered. Grace does to the passions what Christ did to the sea when it was stormy. In Mark 4, He said, "Peace, be still...and there was a great calm" (Mark 4:39). Grace turns the fierceness of the lion into the meekness of the dove.

10. A Christian must deny his sinful fashions.

"Be not conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2), to the guise and mode of it. If the old Christians were to rise out of their graves, our strange fashions might frighten them into their graves again. Was there ever such excess in hair? "If a man have long hair, it is a shame" (1Co 11:14). More money is sometimes laid out for a wig to cover one head than would clothe twenty poor persons! One asked Reverend Dod⁸⁹ why he did not preach against those ruffians who wore long hair. He replied, "If grace comes into their heart, it will make them cut off their hair."

Nor can the female sex be excused for their excess in apparel (Isaiah 3:19-20). Seneca complained of those in his time who hung two or three patrimonies⁹⁰ on their ears. Some wear half their revenues upon their backs. Lysander⁹¹ would not allow his daughters to be too gorgeously attired, saying it would not make them so comely as common. What spotted faces and bare shoulders appear in the congregations! And that professors should conform and comply with others in their antic⁹² dresses is a reproach of religion. A tear in the eye would more adorn than a tower on the forehead. Oh, deny yourselves! Pull down these flags of vanity. Have not God's judgments humbled you? "I will therefore...that women adorn themselves in modest apparel" (1Ti 2:8-9). Let the hidden man of the heart be beautified and be-

⁸⁶ **fire of wrath** – our natural tendency to anger. Only the blood of Christ can quench God's wrath against sin.

⁸⁷ **John Bruen** (1560-1625) – English Puritan layman, celebrated in his time for piety.

⁸⁸ **choleric** – easily irritated; inclined to anger.

⁸⁹ **John Dod** (c. 1549-1645) – non-conformist English pastor.

⁹⁰ **patrimonies** – inheritance from one's father or other ancestor.

⁹¹ **Lysander** (died 395 BC) – Spartan general who commanded the Spartan fleet when it defeated the Athenians at Aegospotami in 405 BC.

⁹² **antic** – grotesque; bizarre.

spangled⁹³ with grace (1Pe 3:3-4). “The king’s daughter is all glorious within” (Psa 45:13).

11. A Christian must deny his own aims.

He must not look with one eye at religion and aim at himself more than God with the other. He must not aim at self-enriching and self-applause.

a. *He must not aim at self-enriching.* Some espouse⁹⁴ the gospel only for gain. They court this queen not for her beauty but for her jewels. It is not the fire of the altar they regard but the gold of the altar, “supposing that gain is godliness” (1Ti 6:5). Camero, a French divine of Bordeaux, relates a story of one Santangel, a lawyer, who turned Protestant only out of worldly respects that he might grow rich. Judas preached and wrought miracles, but his eye was chiefly to the bag (Mat 26:14-16; Joh 12:4-6). How do many heap benefice⁹⁵ upon benefice, minding the fleece more than the flock. Dumb dogs are greedy dogs (Isa 56:10-11). These make use of the ministerial function only as a net to catch preferment.⁹⁶ This is to be profane in sacred things. ’Tis sordid and unworthy of a Christian to make religion bow to secular interest.

b. *A Christian must not aim at self-applause.* The Pharisees were herein guilty who gloried in the creature. They prayed and gave alms that they might be seen of men (Mat 6:1-5). The oil of vain-glory fed their lamp. “Verily I say unto you, They have their reward” (Mat 6:5). They might make their acquittal and write, “Received in full payment.” ’Tis a saying of Spanhemius⁹⁷ that there is in every man by nature a spice of Pharisaism, a seeking after the glory and applause of the world. Luther⁹⁸ confessed that, although he was never tempted with covetousness, yet he was sometimes with vain-glory! The moth breeds in the finest cloth, and self-seeking is apt to breed in the best duties. Sinister aims corrupt religion. A good aim will not make a bad action good, but a bad aim will make a good action bad.

To blame are they who, when they have done any glorious service in the church, take the praise themselves—like those heathens who sacrificed the wax to their gods but kept the honey to themselves. Matthew Paris⁹⁹ speaks of one who, having in several lectures proved strenuously that Christ was God, and being

⁹³ **bespangled** – adorned.

⁹⁴ **espouse** – adopt; embrace.

⁹⁵ **benefice** – permanent church appointment, typically that of a rector or vicar, for which property and income are provided in respect of pastoral duties.

⁹⁶ **preferment** – advancement.

⁹⁷ **Spanhemius** (1600-1649) – Reformed theologian and professor at the University of Leiden.

⁹⁸ **Martin Luther** (1483-1586) – German theologian and leader of the Reformation.

⁹⁹ **Matthew Paris** (c. 1200-1259) – Benedictine monk, English chronicler, and artist.

highly applauded for it, cried out saying, “O Jesus, Thou art beholden to me for Thy divinity this day.” Whereupon this doctor was stricken suddenly with such stupidity and forgetfulness that he could never afterwards say the Lord’s Prayer unless a little child said it to him. Let this cause trembling and humility in Christians. Several ships which have escaped the rocks have been cast away upon the sands. Many who have escaped the rocks of gross scandals have been cast away upon the sands of self-seeking. Tacitus¹⁰⁰ said he would not have Erasmus’ fame and applause for all the world. No, but to have esteem in God’s church is a blessing. “By it [faith] the elders obtained a good report” (Heb 11:2). Much of the honor of religion depends upon the credit of those who profess it. But the sin is when self-applause is the only thing hunted after. Popular acclamation is the golden arrow which glitters in the eye but wounds the heart. How many have been blown to hell with the breath of popular applause.

O let us deny, yea, abhor, this vain-glorious humor.¹⁰¹ We have a famous example in John the Baptist, who sought to lift up Christ and beat down himself. “He that cometh after me is preferred before me” (Joh 1:15). It is as if he had said, “I am but the herald, the voice of one crying. Christ, Who comes after me, is the prince. I am but the morning star; He is the sun. I baptize only with water; He with the Holy Ghost.” Thus he sets the crown of honor upon Christ’s head.

When Joab had taken Rabbah, he did not arrogate¹⁰² the praise to himself, but sent for King David that he might carry away the glory of the victory (2Sa 12:27-28). So, when any eminent service in church or state has been done, the glory of all should be given to Christ and free grace. It is better that God should approve than that the world should applaud. If we are faithful, we shall have honor enough in heaven. Let this be our chief aim in duty: that we may grow more in love with God and be made more like Him, have more communion with Him, and bring more revenues¹⁰³ of honor to Him. “That God in all things may be glorified” (1Pe 4:11). We should not only advance, but design¹⁰⁴ God’s glory. It was a worthy speech of Philippe de Mornay¹⁰⁵ upon his deathbed, that he had, through the course of his life, made God’s glory his end and aim. As “all the rivers run into the sea” (Ecc 1:7), so all our actions must run into God, the infinite ocean.

¹⁰⁰ **Nicholas Tacitus Zegers** (c. 1495-1559) – Flemish Franciscan biblical exegete.

¹⁰¹ **humor** – disposition.

¹⁰² **arrogate** – take without right.

¹⁰³ **revenues** – returns.

¹⁰⁴ **design** – intend.

¹⁰⁵ **Philippe de Mornay** (1549-1623) – French Protestant writer.

12. A Christian must deny all ungodliness.

“The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly” (Ti 2:11-12). The Turks say in their Koran that God did not give men lustful desires to be frustrated. But let their Koran go with the Papist’s “Legend.” The Scripture seals no patents¹⁰⁶ for sin. It bids us deny *ungodly lusts*. It is not likely he will sacrifice his Isaac, his worldly profits, who will not sacrifice the ram, his vile lusts. A Christian must deny his malice, revenge, covetousness, uncleanness, superstition, and heterodoxy.¹⁰⁷ A man may as well go to hell for a drunken opinion as a drunken life. And let me especially instance two sins a Christian must deny:

The sin of rash censuring. “Speak not evil one of another” (Jam 4:11). Some make it a part of their religion to criticize others and clip their credit to make it weigh lighter. You shall hear them say, “Such a one is proud, factious,¹⁰⁸ and hypocritical.” “Who art thou that judgest another?” (Jam 4:12). Augustine could not endure that any should detract from the good name of others.

The root of censoriousness¹⁰⁹ is pride. A person thinks that by taking [down] another’s reputation he shall add something to [his] own. But let him who shall raise himself upon the ruin of another’s fame look to it.¹¹⁰ Do you think it is no sin to murder a man in his name? You who are such a critic, it is to be feared you can spy all faults but your own. O Christian, look inward. If you viewed your own spots more in the looking glass of the Word, you would not be as ready to throw the stone of censure at others. Deny this sin of rash censuring or smiting with the tongue (Jer 18:18). You who speak reproachfully of your brother without a cause, the time may come that he may be accepted and you rejected. He may be found gold and you “reprobate silver” (Jer 6:30).

*A Christian must deny his complexion sin.*¹¹¹ “I kept myself from mine iniquity” (Psa 18:23). As there is one master bee in the hive, so there is naturally one master sin in the heart. This must be denied. The devil can hold a man fast by one sin. A jailer can hold the prisoner fast by one fetter. One sin is enough to stop the current of mercy.¹¹² One sin may damn as well as more, just as one millstone is

¹⁰⁶ **seals no patents** – grants no rights.

¹⁰⁷ **heterodoxy** – beliefs not in agreement with sound teaching.

¹⁰⁸ **factious** – divisive.

¹⁰⁹ **censoriousness** – faultfinding.

¹¹⁰ **look to it** – be careful.

¹¹¹ **complexion sin** – sin which he is naturally disposed to.

¹¹² He is speaking here of temporal mercy which all men experience. There is no way that a believer’s sin can stop the covenant mercy of God (Rom 8:38-39), which will bring chastening for believer’s sin and cause him to persevere in holiness, though imperfectly, until the day of his death. However, sin continued in unconfessed and unforsaken could be an indication of an unregenerate heart.

enough to sink a man into the sea. If there be any lust which we cannot deny, it will be a bitter root either of scandal or apostasy¹¹³ (Heb 12:14-16).

13. A Christian must deny his relations.

“If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luk 14:26). The meaning is, when carnal relations come in competition with, or stand in opposition to Christ, we must hate them. When our friends would prove snares and hinder us from our duty, we must either leap over them or tread upon them. Here is faith in God. If my wife, said Jerome, should hang about my neck, if my mother should show me her breasts that gave me suck, and persuade me to deny Christ, I would break from them and fly to the cross. When Peter would be a tempter, Christ said, “Get thee behind me, Satan” (Mat 16:23).

14. A Christian must deny his estate for Christ.

A carnal heart will commend and profess Christ, but will part with nothing for Him. The young man in the Gospel was Christ’s hearer but not His follower. He had heavenly desires but an earthly appetite, as one has said. When Christ said to him, “Sell that thou hast, and give to the poor...he went away sorrowful” (Mat 19:21-22)...When riches are joined with a bad heart, they do much hurt.

The world lay nearer the young man’s heart than Christ. Have some of the heathens denied the world? Epaminondas, a Grecian captain who obtained many glorious victories, was a great condemner of the world. He refused vast sums of money sent him from the King of Persia, so that when he died he left scarcely enough to defray the charges of his funeral. Did a heathen go thus far in denying the world, and shall not Christians do much more? Let the wedge of gold be denied for the pearl of price (Mat 13:46). “We have forsaken all, and followed thee” (Mat 19:27). A true saint esteems the gleanings of Christ better than the world’s vintage. “For whom I have suffered the loss of all things” (Phi 3:8).

Galeacius,¹¹⁴ marquess of Vico, parted with a fair estate to enjoy the pure ordinances of Christ at Geneva. When a Jesuit persuaded him to return to his popish religion in Italy, promising him a huge sum of money, he said, “Let their money perish with them, who esteem all the gold in the world worth one hour’s communion with Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit.”

¹¹³ **apostasy** – abandoning the faith one had professed.

¹¹⁴ **Galeacius Carracciolus** – 16th century Italian, relative of Pope Paul IV, converted by means of the ministry of Peter Martyr; left his family and Italy for Geneva on account of his faith. Calvin dedicated the 2nd edition of his commentary on First Corinthians to him.

15. A Christian must deny his life for Christ.

This is in the text, “Let him...take up his cross.” Suffering for Christ must be free and spontaneous. He who suffers against his will *bears* the cross; he who suffers willingly *takes up* the cross. A fair virgin fell in love with Crates¹¹⁵ for his learning. He showed her his staff and his scrip.¹¹⁶ “This,” he said, “is your dowry.” Christ shows us His cross. If we will not have Him upon these terms, the match is not likely to go on. Sufferings will abide us (Act 14:22; 20:23; 2Ti 3:12). The devil has not grown kinder than he was.

Some think of reigning with Christ, but not of suffering. Joseph dreamed of his advancement but not of his imprisonment (Gen 37:5-11). The flesh cries out, “This cross is uneasy! There are nails in the yoke that tear.” But life must be denied, yea, hated for Christ. “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother...and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luk 14:26). Love for Christ must outweigh life. “They loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev 12:11). Paul carried the image of Christ in his heart as a saint, the message of Christ in his mouth as a minister, and the marks of Christ in his body as a martyr (Gal 6:17). The primitive worthies¹¹⁷ snatched up torments as so many crowns and were content to shed their blood for Christ, knowing they would exchange their sanguine¹¹⁸ for white robes. The prophet Isaiah was killed with a saw, Jeremiah with stones, Amos with an iron bar. Luke was hanged on an olive tree.¹¹⁹

I read that Irenaeus¹²⁰ was carried to a place where a cross was set on one side and an idol on the other. He was given a choice either to bow to the idol or suffer on the cross. He chose the latter.

Basil¹²¹ speaks of a virgin condemned to the fire. She was offered her life and estate if she would bow down to an image. She answered, “Let life and money go; welcome Christ.” Though every Christian is not actually a martyr, yet he has a preparation of mind and is ready to suffer if God calls. Luther said he would rather be a martyr than a monarch. Let us then take up the cross!

Can wicked men be content to suffer for their lusts, and shall we not suffer for Christ? We are to look upon our sufferings as a badge of honor. If we receive hon-

¹¹⁵ **Crates of Thebes** (c. 365-c. 285 BC) – Cynic philosopher, who gave away his money to live a life of poverty on the streets of Athens.

¹¹⁶ **scrip** – wallet; bag for provision.

¹¹⁷ **primitive worthies** – early martyrs of the faith.

¹¹⁸ **sanguine** – bloody.

¹¹⁹ According to historical tradition; Scripture does not record these details.

¹²⁰ **Irenaeus** (c. AD 130-202) – bishop of Lyons in southern France and apologist best known for his writings attacking Gnosticism.

¹²¹ **Basil** (c. AD 329-379) – Greek bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia, Asia Minor. He was an influential theologian who supported the Nicene Creed and opposed heresy.

or when we are reproached for Christ, much more shall we receive it when we die for Him. “The spirit of glory and of God resteth upon” us (1Pe 4:14). Our sufferings for Christ propagate religion. Paul’s being bound made the gospel to be more enlarged (Phi 1:12). Justin Martyr¹²² was converted to the faith by beholding the heroic patience and courage of the Christians in their sufferings.

The cross leads to the crown. “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him” (2Ti 2:12). Who would not be willing to venture on the seas, though rough and tempestuous, if he were sure to be crowned as soon as he came ashore? Persecutors may take away from us our goods, but not our God; our liberty, but not our freedom of conscience; our head, but not our crown (Rev 2:10).

He who cannot deny his life for Christ will deny Christ. And he who is ashamed of Christ, Christ will be ashamed of him. “Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mar 8:38).

Conclusion

The grand reason why we must deny ourselves is because we can be saved no other way. A town or castle may have several ways leading to it; but there is but one way leading to the celestial Paradise, and that is self-denial. Without self-denial, we can never come up to Christ’s terms.¹²³ If the world cannot be denied, Christ cannot be trusted. If the will is not denied, Christ cannot be obeyed. Therefore, self-denial is of as absolute necessity as heaven (Heb 12:14).

From all that has been said, see how hard a thing it is to be a Christian. Were it only to put on the mantle of profession, it would be easy. Even Satan can transform himself into an angel of light (2Co 11:14). But a man must deny himself. This self-emptying or self-annihilation is the strait gate through which a Christian must enter into the kingdom of God (Mat 7:13). He is not to deny only those things which are outside of him—his worldly profits, but those which are within him—his sins, nay, his righteousness. Self is an idol; and it is hard to sacrifice this idol, but this must be done. Either carnal self must be denied, or natural self damned.

¹²² **Justin Martyr** (c. A.D. 100-165) – early Christian apologist and Church Father.

¹²³ **come up to Christ’s terms** – the author is not laying down works as a condition which must be met before God grants salvation. Rather, he is highlighting that self-denial is an essential aspect of obedience to Christ.

A Check to Epicures and Sensualists

This justly indicts those who live in a contradiction to the text, who instead of denying themselves, let loose the reins and give themselves up to all manner of pleasure and licentiousness.¹²⁴ “The heart of fools is in the house of mirth” (Ecc 7:4). Such the prophet deciphers,¹²⁵ who do not mortify¹²⁶ but gratify the flesh: “That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches...that chant to the sound of the viol...that drink wine in bowls” (Amo 6:4-6).

Pleasure, like Circe,¹²⁷ enchants men’s minds and transforms them into beasts. There is a place in Africa called Tombutium where the inhabitants spend all their time in piping and dancing. And have we not many who consume their hours in plays and brothels? As if God has made them like the leviathan, to play in the water (Psa 104:26). How will their countenances be changed when God shall say, “Give an account of thy stewardship” (Luk 16:2)? These frolicking sensualists live as if there were no world to come. They pamper their bodies but starve their souls. As if one should feed his slave but starve his wife!

Do epicures deny themselves? Indeed, in one sense they do. Enjoying their lusts, they deny themselves a part in heaven! In the country of Sardinia there is an herb-like balm that if a man eats of it he shall die laughing. Such an herb is pleasure. If one feeds immoderately on it, he will go laughing to hell.

Esau lost the blessing while he was hunting. Oh, how many, while they are hunting after worldly pleasures, lose blessedness? There is a sin cup brewing which will spoil the sinner’s mirth. “In the hand of the LORD there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture” (Psa 75:8). This wine is the wrath of God, and it is mixed; the worm and the fire help to mix the cup (Isa 66:24; Mar 9:44-48). The Lord will proportion a sinner’s torment to his pleasure. “How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her” (Rev 18:7).

The Lack of Self-Denial Lamented

In the next place, we may sadly lay to heart the lack of self-denial. O self-denial, where have you gone? We live in a knowing age, yet few know how to deny themselves. Selfishness is the reigning sin of the world. This makes the times have a bad aspect. “Perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves” (2Ti 3:1-2).

¹²⁴ **licentiousness** – immorality.

¹²⁵ **deciphers** – portrays.

¹²⁶ **mortify** – put to death.

¹²⁷ **Circe** – in Greek mythology, a minor goddess of magic living on the island of Aea.

Self may have divers actions¹²⁸ brought against it. It is an enemy to the public. “Whence come wars?” Whence is robbery and bribery? Whence is oppression and circumvention but from those selfish lusts which men cannot conquer (Jam 4:1)? When Lentulus had declared Tiberius Caesar to be his heir in his will, so barely¹²⁹ selfish was Caesar that he sent and killed Lentulus, that he might have immediate possession of his goods.

Self-denial lodges but in a few breasts. It is a sacred, exotic herb which has grown very scarce. “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luk 18:8). May it not be said, “Shall he find self-denial on the earth?” Self-denial has gone on a long pilgrimage, and who can tell when it will return?

A Persuasive to Self-Denial

My next work is to persuade Christians to the practice of this momentous duty of self-denial. Man lost himself at first by self-exaltation, and he must recover himself by self-denial.¹³⁰

1. Self-denial is just and equal.

How much has Christ denied himself for us? He eclipsed His glory. He denied himself (Phi 2:6-7). What a wonderful self-denial was it for Christ to leave His Father’s bosom and be incarnate! For Christ to be made flesh was more than for all the angels to be made worms. Christ denied His name and reputation. He “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb 12:2). He denied worldly grandeurs and riches. “For your sakes he became poor” (2Co 8:9). The manger was His cradle, the cobwebs His curtains. He denied His life; He “became obedient unto death” (Phi 2:8). ’Tis but equity¹³¹ we should deny ourselves for Christ.

2. Self-denial is the sign of a sincere Christian.

Hypocrites may have great knowledge and make fair pretenses, but it is only the sincere saint who can deny himself and lay his life at Christ’s feet. This was a touchstone¹³² of Moses’ sincerity. He denied the pleasures of the court and chose affliction rather than iniquity (Heb 11:25).

I have read of a holy man who was once tempted by Satan. Satan said to him, “Why do you take all these pains? What do you more than I? Are you no drunkard, no adulterer? No more am I. Do you watch? I never sleep. Do you fast? I never eat. What do you more than I?”

¹²⁸ **divers actions** – various charges.

¹²⁹ **barely** – openly.

¹³⁰ We are forgiven of our sins on the basis of the work of Christ, not our self-denial (Gal 2:16-17). However, self-denial is an essential aspect of the Christian life as described by the Lord Jesus.

¹³¹ **equity** – right.

¹³² **touchstone** – test; criterion (from a stone used to test gold and silver).

“Why,” said the good man, “I tell you, Satan: I give myself to prayer; nay, more, I deny myself.”

“Nay,” said the devil, “you go beyond me, for I exalt myself.” And so he vanished.

3. Self-denial is a rational thing.

If self is an enemy, then it is wisdom to discard it. There is a rationality in all God’s commands. Why would He have us deny fleshly lusts but because they wage war against our souls (1Pe 2:11)? Why would He have us deny pride but because of its noxious¹³³ quality? “Pride goeth before destruction” (Pro 16:18). Where pride leads the van,¹³⁴ destruction brings up the rear. God would have us deny nothing for Him but that which will damn us if we keep it.

4. There is nothing lost by self-denial.

We shall be abundantly compensated. “Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life” (Mat 19:29). If we deny our name and reputation for Christ, God will give us inward peace. There is “an hundredfold” in this life, and He will honor us before the angels (Luk 12:8). How many hundredfolds that amounts to I am not able to tell. If we deny our estate to keep our conscience, God will give us a kingdom (Luk 12:32). What does he lose who parts with a flower and gets a jewel? We may lose all we have for Christ, yet lose nothing by Him.

Helps to Self-Denial

For the attaining of self-denial, let these rules be observed:

1. Be convinced of the incomparable excellency of Christ.

He has an equality and consubstantiality¹³⁵ with God the Father (Col 2:9). He is the quintessence of goodness. He is compared to a head of gold for riches (Song 5:11); to the rose of Sharon for perfume (Song 2:1); to a bright morning star for beauty (Rev 22:16). Jesus Christ is all that God can require for satisfaction, or that we can desire for salvation. He is fully commensurate to our wants.¹³⁶ He has eye salve to anoint us, white raiment to cover us, and His blood to heal us (Rev 3:18; 1Jo 1:7).

¹³³ **noxious** – harmful.

¹³⁴ **van** – body of advancing soldiers.

¹³⁵ **consubstantiality** – being of the same substance.

¹³⁶ **wants** – needs.

We shall never deny ourselves for Christ until we see a glory and a beauty in Him. Christ is all marrow¹³⁷ and sweetness. He is better than life, estate, or heaven!

2. Endeavor after a vital principle of grace.

Grace will do that which flesh and blood cannot. A man may do that by art which he cannot do by strength. A burden of great weight may be lifted up by screws and pulleys which cannot be lifted up by strength of arm. Grace will teach one the art of self-denial which cannot be done by strength of nature. In particular, labor for three graces:

Humility. A proud man admires himself; therefore he cannot deny himself. A humble man lays his mouth in the dust. He has lower thoughts of himself than others can have of him. He goes out of himself. He renounces himself. He opens to God as the flower does to the sun. He will do what God will have him do. He will be what God will have him be. He is like melting wax. God may set what stamp and impression He will upon him. The humble man is the self-denier.

Love. Who will not deny himself for a friend whom he loves? He will part with anything he has. He will gratify him whom he loves, though it is to his own loss. He whose heart is fired with love for Christ will stop at nothing for His sake. Gregory Nazianzen¹³⁸ said of his Athenian learning that he was glad he had anything of worth to esteem as nothing for Christ. Love for God will devour self-love.

Faith. Abraham was a great self-denier. He left his kindred and country and was willing to travel to any place where God would have him. Whence was this? It was from his faith. “By faith Abraham...obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went” (Heb 11:8). He who believes that Christ and heaven are his, what will he not relinquish for Christ’s sake? The stronger a Christian’s faith is, the more eminent will his self-denial be.

3. Pray much for self-denial.

Prayer sets God to work (Psa 10:17). Some pray for assurance but lack self-denial, as if God would set seal to a blank.¹³⁹ Let this be your grand request—a self-denying frame of heart. Self-denial does not grow in nature; it is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-24). Beg God that He will plant this heavenly flower in your soul. Say, “Lord, whatever Thou deniest me, deny me not self-denial. Let me rather lack great parts; nay, let me rather lack the comforts of the Spirit than self-denial.”

¹³⁷ **marrow** – choicest food.

¹³⁸ **Gregory Nazianzen** (c. AD 329-389) – Archbishop of Constantinople; Trinitarian theologian and orator.

¹³⁹ **set seal to a blank** – affirm the contents of an empty document; lack of self-denial shows there is no salvation to be assured of.

There may be going to heaven without comfort, but there is no going there without self-denial.

