

Self-Denial Part Two

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In Part One, we looked at Christ's command of self-denial and its definition. In Part Two, we'll examine ways in which Scripture describes its practice and benefits. Self-denial accompanies obedience of every kind, which is why Christianity without self-denial is impossible. *Biblical commands are almost always 180 degrees opposite of our natural way of doing things* (Tim LaHaye). How true! "There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov 14:12). Every area of obedience Scripture calls for requires self-denial. No wonder Charles Spurgeon offered this observation, "Superficial religion will always be fashionable because it does not require self-denial."

The Christian astronomer Johannes Kepler stated, *the law cannot be broken, only illustrated*. How fascinating and true. The law of God cannot actually be broken because the moral law is fixed. It is immutable because God's righteous character is the law of the universe. Sinners cannot abrogate God's law. Their law-breaking only *illustrates* its fixity as they reap sin's consequences. "The way of the transgressor is hard" (Prov 13:15). Unbelievers break themselves upon God's law by presumptuous sin. What delusional folly to seek friendship with a world that defines freedom as 'liberty' from God's commands (Jas 4:4).

Because of the fixity of His law, God's calls to repentance are acts of compassion. "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation" (Rom 2:4-8).

Those led by the Spirit practice self-denial. Romans chapter 8 in the William's translation is especially clear: ". . . the people who live by the standard set by their lower nature are usually thinking the things suggested by that nature, and the people who live by the standard set by the Spirit are usually thinking the things suggested by the Spirit" (Rom 8:5). For the things you think upon regularly or

habitually will translate into actions, whether your thoughts are prompted by the flesh or by the Spirit.

Taking our thoughts captive in obedience to Christ requires self-denial (2 Cor 10:5-6). The benefits are eternal, for renewal of the mind by Scripture produces transformation, and out of transformation comes the presentation of ourselves to God. “Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:1-2).

In Galatians chapter 5, believers are urged to walk by means of the Spirit, so as not to fulfill the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:16). Being Spirit-filled is manifested in the edification of one another in the Body of Christ (Eph 5:18-21). When we yield to the Holy Spirit, He energizes our self-denial. He assists us in mortifying sin, and putting to death the deeds of the flesh. “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom 8:12-13). The Holy Spirit is at work in our sanctification, ‘both to will and to do His good pleasure’ (Phil 2:12-13). To work out our salvation with fear and trembling is to marvel that God’s Spirit is empowering the deeds which advance our sanctification through self-denial.

A word to men on self-denial

In view of eternity, man is but a vapor; a mist that soon vanishes (Jas 4:14). Yet from our perspective, life is long, filled with toil, and often monotonous. The Christian walk requires day-by-day living by DVP, by *divine view point*. For slackness, discouragement, distraction and self-seeking are all enemies of a god-fearing husband and father. It would not be a stretch to say that self-denial is the primary conduit by which life in the Spirit flows into our lives with joy and assurance. Every sanctified man longs to hear those words, “well done good and faithful slave” (Mt 25:21). Yet, without daily training of conscience in self-denial a man will lack the confidence to hear those words (Acts 24:15-16). He will find himself sputtering through life with a hit and miss agenda of double-mindedness in how he loves, protects, guards, and nourishes his wife and children.

So much of godly husbandry and fatherhood involves the masculine calling of self-denial. A man cannot walk in the Spirit without self-denial. For love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control all pivot upon death to self (Gal 5:24). The more a man dies to self, the more that man will exhibit the spiritual characteristics of Christ.

Self-denial involves hating our life in this world (Jn 12:25). “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.” To hate your life in this world means completely reordering your priorities around the gospel. To hate your life in this world does not mean hating your vocation, your talents, your pastimes, or your appreciation of beauty. It does mean letting go of your cherished fleshly mechanisms. To do so, you must exercise biblical self-confrontation in identifying the things which oppose Christian love. These include subtle things, ‘acceptable sins’ that you’ve let slide in the past; your masks, your manipulations, your boasting, your anger, your defenses, your complaining, your self-protection, etc. Locate your pet flesh mechanisms—what you cling to, to differentiate yourself from others (2 Cor 10:12). These carnal behaviors block the formation and expression of Christ’s virtues. Self-denial in this context means abandoning these fleshly responses, and then embracing the replacement behaviors enjoined in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Philippians 2:1-8; Colossians 3:8-4:6.

A man’s lusts are not merely signs of moral weakness, our lusts wage war against the soul (1 Pet 2:11). “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.” Do we truly perceive that our fleshly lusts have declared war on the soul, that they desire to drag us into slavery and corruption? Sin has the personality of Satan. Like the devil, sin won’t settle for a tranquil peace treaty. It wants complete domination in every area. Sin is ‘spiritual suicide’ (L. S. Chafer). Sin wants you to offer your faculties and bodily members to its service (Rom 6:16-20ff.).

It has been said that a male is born with two vicious dogs inside of him, lust and violence. Self-denial addresses the need for their control. But before we pronounce ourselves innocent of letting the violent dog off the leash, consider the following. There is a form of verbal violence which is an abomination to God. It is sowing discord through gossip, back-biting, challenging others, tale-bearing, stirring up strife, feeding division, etc. (Prov 6:19; 16:28; Rom 16:17-18; Jas 3:5-6ff.). Scripture likens destroying the reputation of another to a violent physical act.

“But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal 5:15). “Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another” (Gal 5:26).

Collectively the ‘two dogs’ of lust and violence comprise the voracious insatiable beast known as a man’s fleshly self. With the law as his prosecutor, Paul labeled his pre-Christ self-life as engaged in *coveting of every kind* (Rom 7:8). No wonder self must be denied, its potential for causing trouble is immense! Self-denial is about controlling where we look for satisfaction and fulfillment. Scripture informs us that godliness and contentment are found together (1 Tim 6:6). Thus, self-denial will involve ‘starving’ the beast of self, of the lusts it craves, while feeding the renewed soul on the true Bread of Christ (Jn 6:48-58).

Sanctified men are hardwired by regeneration to put off sin, and to put on Christ (Rom 13:14). In other words, completing the ‘*put off; put on*’ loop is necessary for fullness of joy. Deep contentment and satisfaction in our salvation is the grace God dispenses when we walk in self-denial. “For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. 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” (2 Pet 1:4–7).

The qualities stated by Peter (2 Pet 1:5-8) involve both putting off and putting on. Self-denial is not an end in itself. It is accompanied by clothing ourselves in kindness and love. For example, I have two 11-year-old boys about to embark on serious changes mentally and bodily. I have repeatedly reinforced the theme that we are not raising teenagers but men. Godly men know that integrity is not only buffeting one’s body in self-mastery, it is followed by the positive expression of Christian character (1 Cor 9:26-27).

When does a man’s desire to achieve lapse into coveting?

Covetousness and contentment form a paradigm with the two at opposite ends of the spectrum. In other words, the more content I am in the things of the Lord, the less I will be seduced by coveting. The converse is true, the more

discontent I am, the more vulnerable to lust. Discontentment is a volatile state, all too willing to welcome sin. How is Christian contentment cultivated? By prayer, Scripture meditation, spiritual fellowship, waiting on the Lord, and practicing the promises of God, etc.—in a word, by self-denial. Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a landmark book in 1648, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. It has stood the test of time. Here are quotes from his work. “If I become content by having my desire satisfied, that is only self-love; but when I am contented with the hand of God and am willing to be at His disposal, that comes from my love to God.” “My brethren, the reason why you do not have contentment in the things of the world is not that you do not have enough of them. The reason is that they are not things proportional to that immortal soul of yours that is capable of God Himself.” “So be satisfied and quiet, be contented with your contentment. I lack certain things that others have, but blessed be God, I have a contented heart which others have not.”

Young men need to be taught that their contentment is tied to theologizing—which is nourishing oneself on sound doctrine (1 Tim 4:6). It is not enough to be content with having enough of the world’s goods. Contentment has to do with fulfilling the purpose of proclaiming His excellencies and gracious benevolence (1 Pet 2:9-10). A content man fosters a culture in which declaring God to others is normative. Another word for contentment is joy. Notice that the enjoyment of God is the byproduct of proclaiming God. “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed, our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1 Jn 1:3–4). Fellowship with God and receiving the blessing of His joy has to do with proclaiming what we have experienced. Discipling men to follow Christ and seeing them produce followers is God’s grand design to fill the earth (2 Tim 2:2). When our purpose is in sync’ with His, then joy is the result. Therefore, self-denial has to do with replacing self-serving behavior with behaviors that serve God and His children.

Next to knowing our Lord, nothing brings more joy than the confidence a man is on the right path in leading his wife and children. True, none of us have arrived. We are aware we need each other and the daily grace of God as our strength. The Lord has oriented us in such a way that our daily prayer is to see our wives, children and grandchildren following the Lord. The most prominent means God uses to bring His children to Himself is the vehicle of the nuclear family (Acts

11:14; 16:31). His plan to spread His grace in the rearing of spiritual offspring is through the headship of godly husbands and fathers (Deut 6:1-9; Ps 78:1-8).

Godly manhood is tied to enjoying the presence of God the Father

To those who practice biblical self-denial, God offers the incentive of close, intimate relations with Himself.

He grants to believers the joy of experiencing sonship. He will gladly receive them as their Heavenly Father and will impart close fellowship with Himself. But this requires, according to 2 Corinthians 6, that we live a separated life. Self-denial demands we do not form close relationships with unbelievers nor let the pattern of this world shape us. “Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a Father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ says the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor 6:16-18). Our success in spiritual fathering is nourished by the intimacy of sonship with God the Father.

Therefore, having these matchless promises of sonship, let us heed 2

Corinthians 7:1. “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” This command requires self-denial. This is the believer's responsibility, for self-denial means caring for, and maintaining his relationship with the Lord by his separation from sin, and by his practice of ongoing repentance. Self-denial is the logical response to God's offer to commune with us. Zeal is required in ridding oneself of ‘all defilement of flesh and spirit’. In the context of this passage, motivation flows from the glorious wealth of the Father's presence. These promises touch our longings, satisfying the depths of our Father hunger. Our Lord describes this consecration as follows: “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.” “. . . If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him” (Jn 14:21, 23b).

The promise to those who abide in obedience to Christ's commands is they shall know the truth, and the truth shall set them free (Jn 8:31-32). Jesus

reveals that the truth is not something merely recognized by an institution, or audited by a pupil, or enshrined in a crystal case. Truth is to be practiced (Lu 6:47-48). To practice the truth is to practice self-denial. But if one is living to gratify fleshly desires, he is not practicing the truth. Being controlled by lusts is the opposite of being controlled by the truth. This is a vital dynamic in obeying Christ. The truth must be made manifest in what we do (John Frame). “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (Jn 3:21). “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 Jn 3:18).

Christ links self-denial to daily taking up one’s cross (Lu 9:23)

Paul saw the theology of the cross as the key to an exchanged life—i.e. *Christ’s life in place of his own*. “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). But to the dismay of the Corinthians, Paul states, “. . . for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). The flesh hates the theology of the cross in all of its forms. Much heavenly scourging is required for us to learn the theology of the cross—until it’s worked into the depths of our being. For our flesh response to the taste of personal adequacy is to cast away the mild yoke of dependency on the Spirit, and resume polishing the badges of our achievements.

Paul weaves the theology of the cross throughout the Corinthian correspondence, especially in Second Corinthians. He exemplifies what the cross applied means in numerous situations. For Paul, *Christ and Him crucified* answers every abuse, every false belief, and every criticism lodged at him by the false apostles. Each problem is answered by the theology of the cross (1 Cor 2:1-16). Though the Corinthians had received his epistles, they were not delivered from their addiction to man’s wisdom. They had a deep Greek affection for the ideal man; wherein adequacy is asserted, exhibited, and praised. Thus, they boasted in men who were eloquent (1 Cor 3:3-4, 21). Their need was for the theology of the cross to be repeated and applied. For they had evaluated Paul’s afflictions through a humanist lens of problem-free adequacy as the mark of spirituality.

Consequently, they concluded Paul was unspiritual because of his frequent troubles. Paul keeps returning to the theology of the cross—explaining that his

afflictions are traceable to the cross. The Corinthian believers found the theology of the cross to be a stumbling block, for it asserts that God uses human weakness as His staging area to display His strength. Thus, instead of relying on fleshly wisdom, a response of trust and obedience to the theology of the cross will call for self-denial.

Second Corinthians has been called the *Epistle of Death*—it is filled with the theology of the cross. This is one of the reasons it is preached rarely. This epistle hits us head-on with a paradox, namely, that God’s power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Paul states that the Apostles are constantly delivered over to death, that the life of Christ might be manifested in their bodies. “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So, death works in us, but life in you” (2 Cor 4:7-12).

Because the cross is at the center of the new covenant, showcasing human strength tends make void the gospel (1 Cor 1:17). Thus, self-denial is essential in the exchange of self-reliance for adequacy in the Lord (2 Cor 3:4-6). For our Savior has said, “. . . apart from me, you can do nothing.” That is the theology that the flesh hates. Therefore, to pursue fruitful obedience is to cultivate dependency on God in prayer, and to prioritize abiding in Christ (Jn 15).

One of the most ironic commands in Scripture is ‘stay free’ (Gal 5:13; Ex 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21). “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Christian freedom is not safe if divorced from self-denial. For Paul tells us that our freedom is to be channeled into love’s service. You’d think our sense of self-preservation would incline us toward freedom. But if we could truly take the measure of the deviousness and attraction of the lusts of the flesh, we would better understand what threatens the experience of our Christian freedom. The saint who is practicing self-denial has the clearest view of the battlefield. “The mature, because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb 5:14).