

Articles and Sermons :: The Extent and Reasonableness of Self-Denial--- George Whitefield

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(1714-1770)

Luke 9:23 - "And he said unto them all, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself."

Whoever reads the gospel with a single eye, and sincere intentions, will find, that our blessed Lord took all opportunities of reminding his disciples that his kingdom was not of this world; that his doctrine was a doctrine of the cross; and that their professing themselves to be his followers, would call them to a constant state of voluntary suffering and self-denial.

The words of the text afford us one instance, among many, of our savior's behavior in this matter: for having in the preceding verses revealed himself to Peter, and the other apostles, to be "The Christ of God;" lest they should be too much elated with such a peculiar discovery of his deity, or think that their relation to so great a personage would be attended with nothing but pomp and grandeur, he tells then, in the 22nd verse, that "the son of man was to suffer many things," in this world, though he was to be crowned with eternal glory and honor in the next: and that if any of them or their posterity would share in the same honor, they must bear a part with him in his self-denial and sufferings. For "He said unto them all, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself."

From which words I shall consider these three things:

I. FIRST, The nature of the self-denial recommended in the text; and in how many respects we must deny ourselves, in order to come after Jesus Christ.

II. SECONDLY, I shall endeavor to prove the universality and reasonableness of this duty of self-denial.

III. THIRDLY, I shall offer some considerations, which may serve as so many motives to reconcile us to, and quicken us in, the practice of this self-denial.

I. FIRST, I am to show you the nature of the self-denial recommended in the text; or in how many respects we must deny ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ.

Now as the faculties of the soul are distinguished by the understanding, will and affections; so in all these must each of us deny himself. We must not lean to our own understanding, being wise in our own eyes, and prudent in our own sight; but we must submit our short-sighted reason to the light of divine revelation. There are mysteries in religion, which are above, though not contrary to our natural reason: and therefore we shall never become Christians unless we call down imaginations, "and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." It is in this respect, as well as others, that we must become fools for Christ's sake, and acknowledge we know nothing without revelation, as we ought to know. We must, with all humility and reverence, embrace the truths revealed to us in the holy scriptures; for thus only can we become truly wise, even "Wise unto salvation." It was matter of our blessed Lord's thanksgiving to his heavenly father, that he had "hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and had revealed them unto babes." And in this respect also we must "be converted and become as little children," teachable, and willing to follow the Lamb into whatsoever mysteries he shall be pleased to lead us; and believe and practice all divine truths, not because we can demonstrate them, but because God, "who cannot lie," has revealed them to us.

Hence then we may trace infidelity to its fountain head; for it is nothing else, but a pride of the understanding, an unwillingness to submit to the truths of God, that makes so many, professing themselves wise, to become such fools as to deny the Lord, who has so dearly bought them; and dispute the divinity of that eternal Word, "in whom they live, and move, and have their being:" Whereby it is justly to be feared, they will bring upon themselves sure, if not swift destruction.

But, as we must deny ourselves in our understandings, so must we deny, or, as it might be more properly rendered, renounce our wills; that is, we must make our own wills no principle of action, but "whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we must do all, (not merely to please ourselves, but) to the glory of God." Not that we are therefore to imagine we

are to have no pleasure in any thing we do: "Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness;" but pleasing ourselves must not be the principal, but only the subordinate end of our actions.

And I cannot but particularly press this doctrine upon you, because it is the grand secret of our holy religion. It is this, my brethren, that distinguishes the true Christian from the mere moralist and formal professor; and without which none of our actions are acceptable in God's sight: For "if thine eye be single," says our blessed Lord, Matthew 6:22, that is, if thou aimest simply to please God, without any regard to thy own will, "thy whole body, (or all thy actions) will be full of light;" agreeable to the gospel, which is called light: "But if thine eye be evil, (if thine intention be diverted any other way) thy whole body, (all thy actions) will be full of darkness," sinful and unprofitable, we must not only do the will of God, but do it because it is his will; since we pray that "God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven." And no doubt, the blessed angels not only do every thing that God willeth, but do it cheerfully, out of this principle, because God willeth it: And if we would live as we pray, we must go and do likewise.

But farther, as we must renounce our wills in doing, so likewise must we renounce them in suffering the will of God. Whatsoever befalls us, we must say with good old Eli, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good;" or with one that was infinitely greater than Eli, "Father, not my will, but thine be done." O Jesus, thine was an innocent will, and yet thou renouncedst it. Teach us, even us also, O our Savior! To submit our wills to thine, in all the evils which shall be brought upon us; and in every thing enable us to give thanks, since it is thy blessed will concerning us!

THIRDLY, we must deny ourselves, as in our understandings and wills, so likewise in our affections. More particularly, we must deny ourselves the pleasurable indulgence and self-enjoyment of riches: "If any man will come after me, he must forsake all and follow me." And again (to show the utter inconsistency of the love of the things of this world with the love of the Father) he tells us, "unless a man forsake all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."

Far be it from me to think that these texts are to be taken in a literal sense; as though they obliged rich persons to go sell all that they have and give to the poor, (for that would put it out of their power to be serviceable to the poor for the future) but however, they certainly imply thus much, that we are to sit loose to, sell and forsake all in affection, and be willing to part with every thing, when God shall require it at our hands: that is, as the apostle observes, we must "use the world as though we used it not;" and though we are in the world, we must not be of it. We must look upon ourselves as stewards, and not proprietors, of the manifold gifts of God; provide first what is necessary for ourselves and for our households, and expend the rest, not in indulgencies and superfluous ornaments, forbidden by the apostle, but in clothing, feeding, and relieving the naked, hungry, distressed disciples of Jesus Christ. This is what our blessed Lord would have us understand by forsaking all, and in this sense must each of us deny himself.

I am sensible that this will seem an hard saying to many, who will be offended because they are covetous, and "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God;" but if I yet pleased such men, I should not be the servant of Christ. No, we must not, like Ahab's false prophets, have a lying spirit in our mouths, but declare faithfully the whole will of God; and like honest Micajah out of pity and compassion, tell men the truth, though they may falsely think we prophecy not good but evil concerning them.

But to proceed: As we must renounce our affection for riches, so likewise our affections for relations, when they stand in opposition to our love of, and duty to God: For thus saith the Savior of the world: "If any man will come after me, and hateth not his father and mother, his children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." Strange doctrine this! What, hate our own flesh! What, hate the father that begat us, the mother that bare us! How can these things be? Can God contradict himself? Has he not bid us to honor our father and mother? And yet we are here commanded to hate them. How can these truths be reconciled? By interpreting the word hate, not in a rigorous and absolute sense, but comparatively: not as implying a total alienation, but a less degree of affection. For thus our blessed Savior himself (the best and purest expositor of his own meaning) explains it in a parallel text, Matthew 10:37, "He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; He that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me." So that when the persuasions of our friends (as for our trial they may be permitted to be) are contrary to the will of God, we must say with Levi, "we have not known them;" or, agreeably to our blessed Lord's rebuke to Peter, "Get you behind me, my adversaries; for you favor not the things that be of God, but the things that be of man."

Farther, we must deny ourselves in things indifferent; for it might easily be shown, that as many, if not more, perish by an immoderate use of things in themselves indifferent, as by any gross sin whatever. A prudent Christian therefore, will consider not only what is lawful, but what is expedient also: not so much what degrees of self-denial best suit his inclinations here, as what will most effectually break his will, and fit him for greater degrees of glory hereafter.

LASTLY, To conclude this head, we must renounce our own righteousness: For, though we should give all our goods to feed the poor, and our bodies to be burned, yet, if we in the least depend on that, and do not wholly rely on the perfect and sufficient righteousness of Jesus Christ, it will profit us nothing. "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." We are complete in him, and him only. Our own righteousnesses are but as filthy rags. We must count all things but dung and dross, so that we may be found in him, not having our own righteousness, but the righteousness which is of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And is this the doctrine of Christianity? Is not the Christian world then asleep? If not, whence so much self-righteousness, whence the self-indulgence, whence the reigning love of riches which we every where meet with? Above all, whence that predominant greediness after sensual pleasure, that has so over-run this sinful nation, that was a pious stranger to come amongst us, he would be tempted to think some heathen Venus was worshipped here, and that temples were dedicated to her service. But we have the authority of an inspired apostle to affirm, that they who live in a round of pleasure, "are dead while they live." Wherefore, as the Holy Ghost saith, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." But the power of raising the spiritually dead belongeth only unto God. Do thou therefore, O Holy Jesus, who by thy almighty word commandest Lazarus to come forth, though he had lain in the grave some days, speak also as effectually to these spiritually dead souls, whom Satan for many years hath so fast bound by sensual pleasures, that they are not so much as able to lift up their eyes or hearts to heaven.

II. But I pass on to the second general thing proposed, to consider the universal obligation and reasonableness of this doctrine of self-denial.

When our blessed master had been discoursing publicly concerning the watchfulness of the faithful and wise steward, his disciples asked him, "Speakest thou this parable to all, or only to us?" The same question I am aware has been, and will be put concerning the foregoing doctrine: for too many, unwilling to take Christ's easy yoke upon them, in order to evade the force of the gospel precepts, would pretend that all those commands concerning self-denial, and renouncing ourselves and the world, belonged to our Lord's first and immediate followers, and not to us or to our children. But such persons greatly err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of godliness in their hearts. For the doctrine of Jesus Christ, like his blessings self, is "the same yesterday, today, and for ever." What he said unto one, he said unto all, even unto the ends of the world; "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself:" and in the text it is particularly mentioned that he said it unto them ALL. And lest we should still absurdly imagine that this word ALL was to be confined to his apostles, with whom he was then discoursing, it is said in another place, that Jesus turned unto the multitude and said, "If any man will come after me, and hateth not his father and mother, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." When our blessed Lord had spoken a certain parable, it is said, "the scribes and Pharisees were offended, for they knew the parable was spoken against them:" and if Christians can now read these plain and positive texts of scripture, and at the same time not think they are spoken of them, they are more hardened than Jews, and more insincere than Pharisees.

In the former part of this discourse I observed, that the precepts concerning forsaking and selling all, did not oblige us in a literal sense, because the state of the church does not demand it of us, as it did of the primitive Christians; but still the same deadness to the world, the same abstemious use of, and readiness to part with our goods for Christ's sake, is as absolutely necessary for, and as obligatory on us, as it was on them. For though the church may differ as to the outward state of it, in different ages, yet as to the purity of its inward state, it was, is, and always will be invariably the same. And all the commands which we meet with in the epistles about "mortifying our members which are upon the earth, of setting our affections on things above, and of not being conformed to this world;" are but so many incontestable proofs that the same holiness, heavenly-mindedness, and deadness to the world, is as necessary for us, as for our Lord's immediate followers.

But farther, as such an objection argues an ignorance of the scriptures, so it is a manifest proof, that such as make it are strangers to the power of godliness in their hearts. For since the form and substance of religion consists in recovery from our fallen estate in Adam, by a new birth in Christ Jesus, there is an absolute necessity for us to embrace and practice the self-denial before spoken of. If we are alive unto God, we shall be dead to ourselves and the world. If all things belonging to the spirit live and grow in us, all things belonging to the old man must die in us. We must mourn before we are comforted, and receive the spirit of bondage before we are blessed with the unspeakable privilege of the spirit of adoption, and with a full assurance of faith can say, "Abba, Father."

Were we indeed in a state of innocence, and had we, like Adam before his fall, the divine image fully stamped upon our souls, we then should have no need of self-denial; but since we are fallen, sickly, disordered, self-righteous creatures, we must necessarily deny ourselves (and count it our privilege to do so) ere we can follow Jesus Christ to glory. To reject such a salutary practice on account of the difficulty attending it at first, is but too like the obstinacy of a perverse sick child.

d, who nauseates and refuses the portion reached out to it by a skillful physician or a tender parent, because it is a little ungrateful to the taste.

Had any of us seen Lazarus when he lay full of sores at the rich man's gate; or Job when he was smitten with ulcers, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot: And had we at the same time prescribed to them some healing medicines, which, because they might put them to pain, they would not apply to their wounds, should we not most justly think, that they were either fond of a distempered body, or were not sensible of their distempers? But our souls, by nature, are in an infinitely more deplorable condition than the bodies of Job or Lazarus, when full of ulcers and boils: for, alas! "our whole head is sick, and our whole heart faint, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, we are full of wounds and bruises and putrifying sores, and there is no health in us." And if we are unwilling to deny ourselves, and come after Jesus Christ in order to be cured, it is a sign we are not sensible of the wretchedness of our state, and that we are not truly made whole.

Even Naaman's servants could say, when he refused (pursuant to Elisha's orders) to wash in the river Jordan, that he might cure his leprosy, "Father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith to thee, wash and be clean?" And may not I very properly address myself to you in the same manner, my brethren? If Jesus Christ, our great prophet, had bid you to do some far more difficult thing, would you not have done it? Much more then should you do it, when he only bids you deny yourselves what would certainly hurt you if indulged in, and he will give you a crown of life.

But to illustrate this by another comparison: In the 12th chapter of the Acts, we read, that "St. Peter was kept in prison, and was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains. And behold an angel of the Lord came upon him, and smote Peter on the side, saying, arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands." But had this great apostle, instead of rising up quickly, and doing as the blessed angel commanded him, hugged his chains and begged that they might not be let fall from his hands, would not any one think that he was in love with slavery, and deserved to be executed next morning? And does not the person who refuses to deny himself, act as inconsistently, as this apostle would have done if he had neglected the means of his deliverance? For our souls, by nature, are in a spiritual dungeon, sleeping and fast bound between the world, the flesh, and the devil, not with two but ten thousand chains of lusts and corruptions. Now Jesus Christ, like St. Peter's good angel, by the power of his gospel comes and opens the prison door, and bids us "deny ourselves and follow him." But if we do not arise, gird up the loins of our mind and follow him, are we not in love with bondage, and do we not deserve never to be delivered from it?

Indeed, I will not affirm that this doctrine of self-denial appears in this just light to every one. No, I am sensible that to the natural man it is foolishness, and to the young convert an hard saying. But what says our Savior? "If any man will do my will, he shall know the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." This, my dear friends, is the best, the only way of conviction. Let us up and be doing; let us arise quickly, and deny ourselves, and the Lord Jesus will remove those scales from the eyes of our minds, which now, like so many veils, hinder us from seeing clearly the reasonableness, necessity, and inexpressible advantage of the doctrine that has been delivered. Let us but once thus show ourselves men, and then the spirit of God will move on the face of our souls, as he did once upon the face of the great deep; and cause them to emerge out of that confused chaos, in which they are most certainly now involved, if we are strangers and enemies to self-denial and the cross of Christ.

III. Proceed we therefore now to the third and last general thing proposed, to offer some considerations, which may serve as so many motives to reconcile us to, and quicken us in, the practice of this duty of self-denial.

1. And the first means I shall recommend to you, in order to reconcile you to this doctrine, is, to meditate frequently on the life of our blessed Lord and Master Jesus Christ. Follow him from his cradle to the cross, and see what a self-denying life he led! And shall not we drink of the cup that he drank of, and be baptized with the baptism that he was baptized with? Or think we, that Jesus Christ did and suffered everything in order to have us excused and exempted from sufferings? No, far be it from any sincere Christian to judge after this manner: for St. Peter tells us, "He suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow his steps." Had Christ, indeed, like those that sat in Moses' chair, laid heavy burdens of self-denial upon us, (supposing they were heavy, which they are not) and refused to touch them himself with one of his fingers; we might have had some pretense to complain: But since he has enjoined us nothing, but what he first put in practice himself, thou art inexcusable, O disciple, whoever thou art, who wouldst be above thy persecuted self-denying master: And thou art no good and faithful servant, who art unwilling to suffer and sympathize with thy mortified, heavenly-minded Lord.

2. Next to the pattern of our blessed master, think often on the lives of the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly

ellowship of the prophets, and the noble army of martyrs; who by a constant looking to the author and finisher of our faith, have fought the good fight, and are gone before us to inherit the promises. View again and again, how holily, how self-denyingly, how unblameably they lived: And if self-denial was necessary for them, why not for us also? Are we not men of like passions with them? Do we not live in the same wicked world as they did? Have we not the same good spirit to assist, support, and purify us, as they had? And is not the same eternal inheritance reached out to us, as was to them? And if we have the same nature to change, the same wicked world to withstand, the same good spirit to help, and the same eternal crown at the end; why should not we lead the same lives as they did? Do we think they did works of supererogation? If not, why do not we do as they did? Or why does your own church set apart festivals to commemorate the deaths and sufferings of the saints, but in order to excite you to follow them as they did Christ.

3. Thirdly, Think often on the pains of hell; consider, whether it is not better to cut off a right hand or foot, and pull out a right eye, if they offend us (our cause us to sin) "rather than to be cast into hell, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." Think how many thousands there are now reserved with damned spirits in chains of darkness unto the judgment of the great day. And think withal, that this, this must be our case shortly, unless we are wise in time, deny ourselves, and follow Jesus Christ. Think you, they now imagine Jesus Christ to be an hard master; or rather think you not, they would give ten thousand times ten thousand worlds, could they but return to life again, and take Christ's easy yoke upon them? And can we dwell with everlasting burnings more than they? No, if we cannot bear this precept, deny yourselves, take up your crosses; how shall we bear the irrevocable sentence, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels?" But I hope those, amongst whom I am now preaching the kingdom of God, are not so disingenuous as to need to be driven to their duty by the terrors of the Lord, but rather desire to be drawn by the cords of love.

Lastly, Therefore, often meditate on the joys of heaven: think, think with what unspeakable glory those happy souls are now encircled, who when on earth were called to deny themselves as well as we, and were not disobedient to that call: Lift up your hearts frequently towards the mansions of eternal bliss, and with an eye of faith, like Stephen, see the heavens opened, and the Son of man with his glorious retinue of departed saints, sitting and solacing themselves in eternal joys. Hark! Methinks I hear them chanting forth their everlasting Hallelujahs, and echoing triumphant songs of joy. And do you not long, my brethren, to join this heavenly choir? Do not your hearts burn within you? As the hart panteth after the water brooks, do not your souls so long after the blessed company of these sons of God? Behold then a heavenly ladder reached down to you, by which you may climb to this holy hill. Let us believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and deny ourselves! By this alone, every saint that ever lived ascended into the joy of their Lord. And then, we, even we also shall ere long be lifted up into the same most blissful regions, there to enjoy an eternal rest with the people of God, and join with them in singing doxologies and songs of praise, to the everlasting, blessed, all-glorious, most adorable Trinity, for ever and ever.

Which God of his infinite mercy grant, &c.
