

The Duty of Self-Denial

and Ten Other Sermons

Thomas Watson



Soli Deo Gloria Publications

... for instruction in righteousness ...

The Duty of Self-Denial and Ten Other Sermons

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The
Duty
of
Self-Denial

by
Thomas Watson
Minister of the Gospel

To the Reader

Christian Reader,

The weightiness of the argument here discoursed on justly merits a larger volume. But I have contracted 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 oracles of Scripture.

It is my request to the reader to peruse this manual with seriousness, knowing that the practice of self-denial is that wherein his salvation is nearly concerned. May the Lord work with His Word and cause the dew of His blessing to fall with this manna, which is the prayer of,

Thy Friend and Servant in the Gospel,
Thomas Watson
Dowgate, 1675

Chapter 1

“And He said to them all, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself.” Luke 9:23

A Preliminary Discourse Wherein the Proposition Is Comprised

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine,” 2 Timothy 3:16. The Word is compared to a lamp for its illuminating quality, Psalm 119:105, and to refined silver for its enriching quality, Psalm 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 was the “stone which the builders refused,” Psalm 118:22.

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.” 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, if he will arrive at that place of glory where I am going.

3. "Let him deny himself." Beza and Erasmus 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: "If any man will come after Me."

Second, an imposal: "Let him deny himself." This word "let him deny" is not only a permission but an injunction. It carries in it the force of a command. It is as if a king should say, "Let it be enacted."

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

Chapter 2

The Explaining of the Proposition

QUESTION 1. In what sense must a Christian *not* deny himself?

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

RESPONSE 2. 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.

QUESTION 2. In what sense must a Christian deny himself?

RESPONSE. I answer in general that he must deny that carnal 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. 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 to reason. But who God is and the right mode of worship is such an arcane matter that reason can no more find out than the Philistines could Samson's riddle. Job 11:7: "Canst thou by searching find out God?"

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

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

The doctrine of the Trinity. The well is deep, and who can with the plumbline 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 subtly of the magnitude and influence of the stars, 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.

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.

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 reason to imagine. The Epicureans and Stoics derided Paul when he preached to them of the resurrection, Acts 17:22. Here reason must be taken captive, John 5:28. "Marvel not at this, for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice and shall come forth," 1 Corinthians 15:42-43. The chemist can, out of several means mingled together, extract the one from the other, the silver from the gold, the alchemy 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. Acts 26:8: "Why should it be thought incredible that God should raise the dead?" God can do it because of His power, Matthew 22:29. And He cannot *but* do it because of His truth.

The doctrines of faith do not oppose reason but transcend it.

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, "It is the glory of a man to pass by an offense," Proverbs 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. Proverbs 3:17: "Her ways are ways of pleasantness."

No, says reason, they are severe and cynical. I must crucify my delights and drown my mirth in tears.

God says that religion is gainful. 1 Timothy 6:8: "Godliness is great gain." It brings contentment arising from the favor of God. It brings temporal riches. Proverbs 3:16: "In her left hand riches and honor." The way to be prosperous is to be pious.

No, says reason, if I follow the trade of religion I shall break. 2 Chronicles 25:9: "What shall I do for the hundred talents?" In this case, carnal reason must be denied and fought against. He who will go no farther than reason will come many leagues short of heaven.

2. A Christian must deny his will. This is Brugensis' gloss upon the text: "The will is the great wheel in the soul that moves all the affections." The will in innocence was regular. It echoed God's will. But since the fall, though it retains its freedom in moral actions, yet spiritually it is depraved. If the will could cease from sinning, said Bernard, there would be no hell. The greatest wound is fallen upon the will. The mariner's compass, being stricken with thunder, 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. Acts 7:51: "Ye have always resisted the Holy Ghost."

Here we must deny our will and bring it to God's will. If a crooked stick is laid upon ground that is level, we do not try to bring the ground even with the stick, but to make the stick even with 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." The way to have our will is to deny it.

3. A Christian must deny his own righteousness, his civilities, duties, and good works. Philippians 3:9: "That I may be found in Him not having mine own righteousness." 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. Isaiah 64:6: "Our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Our best duties are fly-blown with sin. Put gold in the fire and there comes out dross. Our most golden services are mixed with unbelief. The angel pouring sweet odors into the prayers of the saints, Revelation 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.

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 painted with civility 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, Luke 18:11, but he could not say he was not proud.

The civilized person may have a secret antipathy against goodness. He may hate grace as much as vice. Civility is but a cracked 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, "Yet thou lackest one thing," Mark 10:31. 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 [Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*], but instead of that his courage melted. The same Hebrew word signifies both confidence and folly. Self-confidence betrays folly. Peter presumed too much on his own strength, Matthew 26:34: "Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee." But how soon was his confidence shaken and blown down with the breath of a maid? Matthew 26:71-72: "He denied with an oath, saying, I know not the man." Peter's denying of Christ was for lack of denying himself. Self-jealousy is good. Romans 11:20: "Be not high-minded, but fear." 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 shined like stars in the church's hemisphere yet have been falling stars? Porphyry, Julian, Cardinal Pool, Gardner, Judas. 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.

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

Deny self-confidence. 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Let him

that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." '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, twists by faith about Christ. Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ's strengthening me." Samson's strength lay in his hair. Ours lies in our head, Christ.

5. A Christian must deny self-conceit. Job 11:12: "Vain man would be wise." In the Hebrew it is "empty man." Man is a proud piece of flesh. He is apt to have a high opinion of himself. Acts 8:9: "There was a certain man named Simon, giving out that himself was some great one." Sapor calls himself "Brother of the Sun and Moon." Commodus 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, their wit and parts, and are ready to despise others. The Chinese say that Europe has one eye and they have two, and all the rest of the world is blind.

Deny self-conceit. Romans 12:3: "I say to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think." Proverbs 23:4: "Cease from thy own wisdom." It does not say cease from *being* wise, but from *thinking* yourself wise, Proverbs 3:7 and Philippians 2:3.

That you may deny all high, supercilious thoughts of yourselves, consider: