

On Self-Denial

by Charles Finney

Self-denial is necessary for spiritual growth and development, and it leads to the development of spiritual affections and a deeper sense of joy.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23, Romans 12:1, Galatians 5:24

Topics: "Self-Denial", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of self-denial in the Christian life, explaining that true discipleship requires denying one's appetites and desires that conflict with God's law of love. He argues that self-indulgence leads to spiritual emptiness, while self-denial opens the heart to deeper communion with God and true joy. Finney highlights that the struggle against self-indulgence is a moral obligation for rational beings, and that through daily cross-bearing, believers can cultivate their spiritual nature and find true happiness. He encourages Christians to persistently deny themselves in order to align their lives with God's will and experience the fullness of spiritual life. Ultimately, Finney calls for a return to the biblical principle of self-denial as essential for genuine faith and joy.

Transcript

"And he said to them all, 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.'" Luke 9:23

In order to understand this solemn declaration of our Lord, the first important point to be ascertained is this--What is the true idea of taking up the cross and denying one's self?

This question presupposes the existence of appetites and propensities which call for indulgence, and then it means, obviously, that in some cases this indulgence must be refused. This is the precise point of the text--a man who will follow Christ must deny himself in the sense of denying the gratification of all appetites and propensities whenever and how far soever such gratifications are forbidden by the law of benevolence. All impulses towards self indulgence, whether in the line of avoiding things we fear, or seeking things we love, must be denied, and ruled down by a determined will whenever indulgence is not demanded but is forbidden by the law of love. Within the limits of God's law, these constitutional appetites may be indulged; beyond those limits, they must be denied. At whatever point they run counter to the law of love to God or love to man, they must be put down.

The thing demanded therefore by this law of Christ's kingdom is, that you consult and obey the will of Christ in this whole matter of self-indulgence; that you obey neither desire nor appetite--that you never gratify your love of approbation--never seek any forms of personal enjoyment in disobedience to Christ. You must never do this where duty is known, lest you displease God, for plainly he has rightful control over all your powers.

Under this principle you must do all your duty to your fellow men--whether to their bodies or to their souls, denying all those worldly desires and propensities which would conflict with this duty, making Jesus Christ himself your model and his expressed will your perpetual rule.

The question will arise in many minds--Why does Christ demand of us self-denial?

Is it because God loves to see us self-mortified--because he takes pleasure in crucifying the sensibilities to enjoyment which he has given us? By no means. But the true answer is to be found in the fact that he has made us rational and moral beings--our rational faculties being intended for the control of our entire voluntary activities, and our moral nature rendering us properly responsible for the self-control which God requires. In the lower orders of creation around us, we see animals void of moral responsibility because they are constituted irrational and incapable of responsible moral action. To them, propensity must be law, because they can know no other. But we have a higher law to obey than they. Their highest good is promoted by their obedience to mere physical law; but not so with us. Our sensibilities are blind, and therefore were never intended to be our rule of life. To supply such a rule, God has given us intelligence and conscience. Appetite therefore cannot be our rule, while it can and must be the rule of all the lower, irrational animals.

Now it is a fact that our sensibilities are out of harmony with our conscience, often clamoring for indulgence which both reason and conscience forbid.

If we give ourselves up to the sway of appetite and unguided sensibility, we are surely misled. These appetites grow worse by indulgence, a fact which of itself shows that God never intended them to be our rule. Often artificial appetites are formed, of such a nature, moreover, as to be exceedingly pernicious in their effects.

Hence we are thrown into a state of warfare. Constant appeals are made to us to arouse our propensities to indulgence; and over against these, constant appeals are made by the law of God and the voice of our reason, urging us to deny ourselves and find our highest good in obeying God. God and reason require us to withstand the claims of appetite sternly and firmly. Note here that God does not require this withstanding, without vouchsafing his aid in the conflict. It is remarkable how the resolute opposition of any appetite, in the name of Christ and under the demands of conscience will readily overcome it. Cases often occur in which the most clamorous and despotic of these artificial appetites are ruled down by the will, under the demands of conscience and with the help of God. At once they lie, all subdued, and the mind remains in sweet peace.

Here let us consider more attentively that we are conscious of having a spiritual and moral nature as well as a physical. We have a conscience, and we have affections correlated to God, as truly as we have affections correlated to earthly things. There is a beauty in holiness, and there are things correlated to our spiritual tastes as truly as to our physical. Under proper care and effort, our religious nature may be developed towards God, even as our physical nature is towards earthly objects. We are social beings in our earthly relations and not less so in our spiritual nature. We are social spiritually as well as physically,

though we may not be aware of it, because our spiritual sociality may have been utterly uncultivated and undeveloped. But we really need divine communion with God and social fellowship with our Infinite Maker. Prior to regeneration this moral capacity of ours is a waste. All men have a conscience and may be aware of it, but they have no spiritual affections towards God, and hence they assume that religion must be a very dry thing. They cannot see how they can enjoy God's presence and prayer. They are all awake to earthly fellowship and friendship, but dead to fellowship and friendship with God. Their love in the form of affection has been drawn out towards man but not towards God. They seem not aware that they have a nature capable of being developed in loving affections towards their divine Father. Hence they do not see how they can ever enjoy religion and religious duties. The coldness of death come[s] over their souls when they think of it.

This spiritual side of our nature needs to be cultivated. It has been so long kept back and crushed down, it greatly needs to be brought up. But in order to do this and develop the spiritual side of our nature, it is indispensable that the worldly side be crushed and brought under. For flesh is a dangerous foe to grace. There is no harmony, but only repellency and antagonism between the earthly affections and the heavenly. Unless we subdue the flesh we shall die. It is only when, through the Spirit, we mortify the deeds of the body that we can live.

The Roman church has in past ages distinguished itself for its mortifications of the flesh--externally considered. These mortifications have thrown off the Protestant world into the opposite extreme. Among all the Protestant sermons I have heard, I do not recollect one on the subject of bearing the cross and denying one's self. I must think that this subject is exceedingly neglected among our Protestant churches. Papal Rome having run wild with this idea, Protestants have taken fright and run off into the opposite extreme. Therefore we need a special effort to guard against this tendency and to bring us back to reason, sense and scripture.

Until I was converted I never knew that I had any religious affections. I did not even know that I had any capacity for spontaneous, deep, outgushing emotions towards God. This was indeed a dark and fearful ignorance, and you may readily suppose I knew little of real joy while my soul was so perfectly ignorant of the very idea of real spiritual joy. But I take it this absence of all right ideas of God is by no means uncommon. If you search, you will find this to be the common experience of unconverted men.

We all know that the gratification of our animal nature is pleasure--not the highest sort indeed, yet is a kind of pleasure. How much more must the gratification of our nobler moral affections be joyful! When the soul comes to feast on its spiritual affections, it begins to taste real happiness--a bliss like that of heaven! I fear many have never comprehended what the Bible means by "blessedness."

Now let it be well considered that the spiritual side of our nature can be developed and gratified only by a benevolent crossing of our appetites--a crossing of them, I mean, under the demands of real benevolence towards our fellow men and towards God. This must be our aim, for if we make our personal happiness the end, we can never attain to the exalted joy of true fellowship with God.

It is curious to see how the sensibility is related to self-denial, so that denying ourselves from right motives becomes the natural and necessary means of developing our spiritual affections. Beginning with taking up the cross, one goes on from step to step, ruling down self-indulgences and self-gratification, and opening his heart more and more to fellowship with God and to the riper experience of his love.

A further reason why men should deny themselves, is that it is intrinsically right. The lower appetites ought not to govern us; the higher laws of our nature ought to. The evidence of this is simply the evidence which proves it to be the duty of beings created rational to use their reason and not degrade themselves down to the level of beasts.

Another reason is that we can well afford it, for we are surely the gainers by it. I admit that when we resist and deny the demands of self-indulgence, it goes a short way and on a small scale, against happiness; but on the spiritual side we gain immensely, and immensely more than we lose. The satisfaction which arises from real self-denial is precious. It is rich in quality and deep and broad as the ocean in amount.

Many think that if they would find pleasure they must seek it directly and make it their direct object, seeking it moreover in the gratification of their appetites. They seem to know no other form of happiness but this. It would seem that they never have conceived the idea that the only way to enjoy themselves really is to deny self, fully up to the demands of right, reason, and of God's revealed will. Yet this is the most essential law of real happiness. Where shunning the cross begins, true religion ends. You may pray in your family; you may sternly rebuke sin wherever it is disagreeable to yourself, and do all this without Christian self-denial; but while living in habits of self-indulgence, you cannot stand up for Christ and do your duty everywhere manfully, and especially you will be all weakness when the path of duty leads you where your feelings will be wounded. And no man can expect to escape such emergencies always. If then you would maintain the path of duty without swerving, and enjoy real life and blessedness, you must determine to deny yourself wherever God and reason demand it, and fully up to the extent of those demands. So will you gain more than you can lose. If you are firm and determined, your path will be easy and joyous.

It often happens that the entire drift of a Christian's feelings is towards self-indulgence, so that if he allowed himself to be guided by his feelings he would surely make shipwreck of his soul. God, on his part, shuts him up to simple faith. Then if he follows the Lord's guidance, he will triumph, and all suddenly his "soul is like the chariots of Amminadab." A case in point is now before my mind of a man who once lived here. After a period of Christian life, he went from our place, backslid from God sorely, became almost an infidel, quite a Swedenborgian, became wealthy, and just when you might suppose him to have gained the heights of earthly happiness, and when he supposed so himself, he became, instead completely wretched. He was forced to fall back upon himself and say--I must return to God and do his will--the whole of it, whatever it may be, or I shall utterly perish. I will, said he, put an extinguisher upon every worldly affection. Nothing that is hostile to God's will shall be tolerated a moment. No sooner had he done this than all his religious life and joys came back again. Then his wife and neighbors began to say of him, "He is indeed a new man in Christ Jesus." From that day, the peace of God ruled in his heart and his cup of joy was full to overflowing. Any man, therefore, can afford to deny himself, since thereby he opens his heart to the joys of immortal life and peace. This is the only way of real happiness.

This subject explains many of the otherwise strange facts of Christian experience. Here is one man who cannot pray before his family. Enquire more deeply into his case and you will probably find that he cannot enjoy anything in religious duty. Enquire yet further into the cause and you will find that he does not deny himself, but lives under the laws of self-indulgence. Poor man, he cannot please God so!

Another cannot come out and confess Christ before men. The truth probably is that he has not made up his mind to deny himself at all. On the contrary, he really denies Christ. He shuns the cross. Ah, that is not the way to heaven. In that path you can have no communion with God. Try it a thousand times and you will

still find the same result, no peace, and no communion with God.

Our text says--"Take up your cross daily." So you must. This is the only possible way of holy living. And it must be done firmly, sternly and continually. It must be made your life-work, save as you gain a respite by substantial victory over your propensities to self-indulgence. Let a man attempt to rule down the appetite for alcoholic drinks, and do it at special seasons only, say once a day, or once in a week, while all the rest of the time he gives himself to full indulgence, he must utterly fail. He never can succeed unless he takes up his cross daily and bears it all the time. Absolutely he must persevere, or his efforts are all for nought. Precisely in proportion as we sternly take up our cross, it grows light and we grow strong to bear it. When a man indulges himself in tobacco, each day's indulgence makes him more a slave. On the contrary, each successive day's abstinence makes him more a conqueror. If a man resolutely declares--By the help of God, no lust, no appetite, shall have dominion over me, then holding on, he comes off conqueror. The more firmly you adhere to this principle and the more steadily you rule down the clamors for self-indulgence, so much the more speedily and surely do you gain the victory. Although at first you take up this work tremblingly, if you hold on, you will gain ground. These appetites will take less and less hold upon you. Bearing your cross will itself make you strong for your toil in the Christian life.

Shunning the cross grieves the Spirit. If you neglect duty, if you fail to pray in your family, omitting it perhaps because you have company present, you may be very sure the Spirit of God is grieved. Satan throws these temptations in your path, and you give him every advantage against you. You will perhaps try to pray while in this state; but, oh! God is not with you! You have been placed where you should have done some things unpleasant to flesh and blood; you evaded the claims of present duty; you went to bed at night without doing your duty. How was it then with your soul? Did not dark clouds shut off the light of God's face? Did you have any comfort of his presence? or any communion with your Savior? Pause and ask your heart for the answer.

REMARKS

So long as the religious sensibilities are not developed, men will of course feel a strong demand for worldly affections. What do they know about the religious affections of the heart? What do they know of real love to God, or of the consciousness of the Spirit's witness to their hearts that they are God's children? Really nothing. They have never crossed their sensual propensities. Of course they have not taken the first step towards developing the heavenly affections of the heart. Consequently all their enjoyments are earthly. Their hearts are only below. But just in proportion as they deny themselves do they fall into adjustment to their spiritual nature.

It is a great and blessed thing for the Christian to find his nature conformed progressively more and more to God; to find it manifestly coming round right and adjusting itself under divine grace, to the demands of benevolence.

Crossbearing, persisted in, brings out a ripe spiritual culture. The soul longs intensely for spiritual manifestations and loves communion with God. Hear him say--How sweet the memory of those scenes when my soul lay low before God! How did my heart enjoy his presence! Now I am always sensible of an aching void unless God be there.

When men go about to seek enjoyment as an end, they surely miss it. All such seeking must certainly be in vain. Benevolence leads the soul out of itself, and sets it upon making others happy. So real blessedness comes.

Your usefulness as Christians will be as your crossbearing and as your firmness in this course of life. For your knowledge in spiritual things, your spiritual vitality, your communion with God and, all in one word, your aid from the Holy Ghost, must turn upon the fidelity with which you deny yourself.

If you have once known the blessedness of spiritual life, and your heart has been molded into the image of the heavenly, you can no longer return to the miserable flesh-pots of Egypt. There is no longer any possibility of your enjoying earthly things as the portion of your soul. Let that be considered settled. Abandon at once and forever all further thought of finding your joys in worldly, selfish indulgences.

To the young, let me say, your sensibilities are quick and lean to worldly things. Now is the time for you to be stern in dealing with your self-indulgent spirit before you have gone too far ever to succeed. Are you strongly tempted to give way to self-indulgence? Remember it is an unalterable law of your nature that you must seek your peace and blessedness in God. You cannot find it elsewhere. You must have Jesus for your friend, or be eternally friendless. Your very nature demands that you seek God as your God--the King of your life--the Portion of your soul for happiness. You cannot find him such to you save as you deny yourself, take up your daily cross, and follow Jesus.

To those of you who being yet in your sins, cannot conceive how you can ever enjoy God, and cannot even imagine how your heart can cleave to God, and call him a thousand endearing names, and pour out your heart in love to Jesus, let me beg of you to consider that there is such communion with God--there is such joy of his presence, and you may have it at the price of self-denial and whole-hearted devotion to Jesus;--not otherwise. And why should you not make this choice? Already you are saying--every cup of worldly pleasure is blasted--dried up and worthless. Then let them go. Bid them away, and make the better choice of pleasures that are purer far and better and which endure forever.

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