

Of Self-Denial

by John Gill

Self-denial is the act of renouncing one's own desires, interests, and pleasures for the sake of God and His kingdom.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, Luke 14:26, Philippians 2:5

Topics: "Humility", "Self-Denial"

Description

John Gill emphasizes the vital role of self-denial in the life of a Christian, asserting that true humility and self-denial are intertwined. He explains that self-denial is not about rejecting one's identity or blessings but involves prioritizing Christ above all worldly pleasures, relationships, and even one's own life. Gill illustrates that self-denial is a command from Christ, exemplified by His own life, and is essential for anyone wishing to follow Him. He encourages believers to recognize the necessity of denying sinful and self-righteous tendencies to fully embrace the grace of God. Ultimately, Gill concludes that self-denial leads to true fulfillment and eternal rewards in Christ.

Transcript

A Body of PRACTICAL Divinity

Book 1--Chapter 15

OF SELF - DENIAL

Self-denial accompanies humility; where the one is the other is; a self-denying man is an humble man, and an humble man is a self-denying man. "Proud, boasters, are lovers of their own selves," and cannot by any means deny themselves; but the meek and humble, the followers of the lowly Jesus, "deny themselves," and go after him; "If any man will come after me," says Christ, that is, be a disciple of his, "let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24), this is one of the hardest lessons to be learnt in the school of Christ, by his disciples; and no man can be a disciple of Christ without learning it. 1.

It will be proper to inquire what self-denial is, or what it is for a man to deny himself. 1a. It is not to deny what a man is or has; what he truly is, and what he really has; for that would be a falsehood; in this sense "God cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13), not his nature, and the perfections of it; or do, or affirm anything contrary thereunto. So a man ought not to deny himself as a man, nor the rational powers which he is

possessed of; one may indeed, speaking in the language of another, and as expressing the meanness and contempt in which he is held by such, say, "I am a worm, and no man," as David the type, and Christ his antitype, did; a man may also, in a comparative sense, with respect to others, and as exaggerating his own folly, ignorance, and stupidity, say, as Asaph did, "So foolish was I and ignorant, I was as a beast;" or was a very beast, "before thee," in thy sight, or could not be otherwise reckoned of by thee: and so Agur; "Surely, I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man," in comparison of others, and having a very low share of it, in his own opinion (Ps. 73:22; Prov. 30:2), in these senses such phrases may be admitted; otherwise it would not be true of a man, nor doing justice to himself, to say that he was no other than "a horse and a mule, which have no understanding."

Nor should a man deny what he has of the external benefits and blessings of providence; if God bestows riches and honour upon a man, as he did on David, he should own them as coming to him from God, as David did, and bless God for such benefits, and make use of them for the glory of God, and the good of his interest; and if God has bestowed internal endowments on men, gifts and talents, qualifying for public service and usefulness, some way or another, they are to own them, and use them, and not wrap them up in a napkin, or hide them in the earth, which is interpretatively to deny that they have them.

Nor should a truly good and gracious man deny what he is and has; but acknowledge it, and how by grace he came by it; and say with the apostle, "By the grace of God I am what I am;" if a man is a believer in Christ he should confess his faith in him (Rom. 10:10), there were some among the Jews, in the times of Christ, who believed he was the Messiah, and yet confessed him not; because they "loved the praise of men," were lovers of themselves, and could not deny themselves of praise from men; yet such non-confession of Christ is tacitly a denial of him, and is so interpreted by Christ (Matthew 10:31,32), but especially when a man has true faith in Christ, has spiritual knowledge of him, and is a real disciple of his, to deny this is very criminal; this was the sin of Peter, when challenged with being acquainted with Jesus, and being a disciple of his, denied that he knew him, and that he was one of them that belonged to him.

And so if a man has faith in Christ, and good hope through grace, and the grace of God has been exceeding abundant, with faith and love, which is in Christ, he ought to be very careful that he does not deny these things. There is in some weaker Christians, I do not know well what name to call it by, it is an over modesty, a thinking and speaking over meanly of themselves; and which they affect to do, and carry things to too great a length very much this way, as if they had no faith, nor love, and scarce any hope; and are ready to express themselves in such sort as seems to border, at least, upon a denial of the work of grace upon their souls; and is like a tearing up by the roots, as much as in them lies, the very principles of grace in them; which should never be encouraged, but discountenanced; the least measure of grace should be owned, and men should be thankful for it, and pray for an increase of it. 1b.

To deny a man's self is not to refuse favors conferred on him in a course of providence; nor to neglect a lawful use of them; nor to take no care of himself and of his affairs. 1b1. Self-denial does not require that a man should refuse temporal honours and riches bestowed on him in a providential way; so Joseph, though a self-denying man, did not refuse the honours, and the tokens of them, Pharaoh gave him, when he made him ruler over the land of Egypt; nor David, when the tribes made him king over all Israel; nor Daniel, when he was advanced in Nebuchadnezzar's court, and was honored by Belshazzar, and prospered in the reigns of Darius and Cyrus; but these good men improved them all to the glory of God and the good of others. 1b2.

Nor are the creatures of God, and the use of them, to be rejected; "Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused" (1 Tim. 4:4), nor ought a man to debar himself of the free and lawful use of them; we are told there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy the fruit of his labour, and that it is his portion, and the gift of God; and that to withhold it from himself is a sore evil under the sun, vanity, and an evil disease (Eccl. 2:24; 5:19; 6:1,2), only care should be taken in using the world, and worldly things, that they are not abused (1 Cor. 7:31), this is all with respect to worldly things that self-denial requires; even a non-gratification of the carnal and sensual appetite to excess; which branch of self-denial the wise man expresses by "putting a knife to the throat;" (see Prov. 23:2). 1b3.

Nor should a man be careless of his life, and health, and family, though he should not be anxiously careful for life, for food, and raiment to support and secure it; yet he may be lawfully careful for life, which is better than them; and so likewise for his health, to preserve it by proper means; as the apostle Paul advised the mariners with him, to take meat for their health's sake; and Timothy to the use of wine for his often infirmities (Acts 27:33,34; 1 Tim. 5:23), and in like manner a man should be careful for his family; which should he not, it would be so far from being reckoned self-denial, in a good sense, that it might be justly treated as a denial of the faith (1 Tim. 5:8). 1b4.

There is a self-love which is not criminal, nor contrary to the grace of self-denial; "For no man ever yet hated his own flesh" (Eph. 5:29), himself, which he is not obliged to by, yea, would be contrary to, the law of nature, and the law of God; to take care of a man's self, and to preserve his life, is the first principle and law of nature;^[1] and it is commanded by the law of God, that a man should love himself; for according to that, he is to "love his neighbour as himself," and therefore must first love himself to love his neighbour as himself; there is a filautia, an inordinate love of a man's self, which is the source of all sin, of covetousness, pride, blasphemy, disobedience to parents, ingratitude, &c. which is carefully to be avoided (2 Tim. 3:2-4). 1b5.

Nor is it self-denial, or any part of it, to abuse the body in any respect, and even on religious accounts, by cutting it with knives and lances, as Baal's priests; or by lashing it with whips and scourges, as the papists for penance; or by severe fastings and abstinence, "by neglecting it, not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh," as some ancient heretics in the apostle's days (Col. 2:23), nor should any thing be done that endangers life, and much less should any, under whatsoever pretence, lay violent hands on themselves, to which sometimes the temptations of Satan lead (Matthew 4:6).

But, 1c. Self-denial lies in a man's renouncing, foregoing, and postponing all his pleasures, profits, relations, interest, and whatever he enjoys, which may be in competition with Christ from love to him, and to be given up at his command; a self-denying man seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and leaves all other things with God, to bestow upon him as he thinks fit; and what he has given him he is ready to give back again when called for, preferring Christ to all things in heaven and earth; he is ready at command to bring all he has, and lay it at his feet; as the first Christians brought all they had and laid at the feet of the apostles.

This is self-denial. The common distribution of it is not amiss, into natural or civil self, sinful self, and righteous self; all which a self-denying Christian is made willing to part with. 1c1. First, with natural and civil self, with things relative both to soul and body, of which a man's self consists. 1c1a. The soul, with its powers and faculties of understanding, will, and affections; and there are self-denying acts, which respect each of these. 1c1a1. The understanding; and it is a self-denying act in a man, "to lean not to his own understanding," which is natural to him; but give it up to God, to be instructed, guided, and directed by him

in all religious matters, according to his word, and the influenced of his grace and Spirit; thus Saul, when called by grace, "conferred not with flesh and blood," with the carnal reasonings of his mind, whether he should profess and preach Christ the Son of God, or not; but immediately set about it, following the divine light and supernatural instructions given him: and this is the case of all self denying Christians, when their reason is brought to stoop to divine revelation; and their carnal reasonings, and vain imaginations, and their high towering and exalted thoughts of themselves, and of their own understandings, are cast down, and brought into the obedience of Christ. 1c1a2.

The will; and then does a man deny himself, when his will becomes subject to the will of God; when, with good old Eli, he says, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good," though ever so disagreeable to himself, and the interests of his family; and so the friends of the apostle Paul, when they were so desirous of his continuance, and found that all entreaties prevailed not, said, "The will of the Lord be done!" and when in all cases, the will of a man is brought to this, then may he be said to deny himself, of which Christ is a pattern to him; "Not my will, but thine be done!" (see 1 Sam. 3:18; Acts 21:14; Luke 22:42). 1c1a3.

The affections; these are sometimes called "inordinate affections" (Col. 3:5), as when they are out of due course and order; when the world, and the things of it, are loved with an immoderate love, in a manner inconsistent with the love of God, and when friends and relations are loved more than Christ; now self-denial checks and restrains the affections, and reduces them to proper order, and forbids such a love of the world, and the things of it; and will not suffer a man to love father or mother, son or daughter, more than Christ; but will declare such unworthy of him (1 John 2:15; Matthew 10:37). 1c1b.

The body, and its members, and things relative to that, and all external things: about these self-denial is exercised; as, 1c1b1. When the members of the body are restrained from the service of sin; when "sin" is not "suffered to reign in the mortal body," and the "members" thereof are not "yielded as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; but the deeds of it are mortified, and no provision is made for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom. 6:12,13; 8:13; 13:14). 1c1b2.

When external honours from men are not sought for, only the honour which comes from God; when a man is content to suffer the loss of fame, name, and credit among men for Christ's sake; to be defamed, made the filth of the world, and the offscouring of all things; to pass through honour and dishonor, good report and bad report, and suffer all indignities for the sake of religion. This is self-denial; an instance of this we have in Moses, who for forty years lived in the court of Pharaoh, and enjoyed the honours, pleasures, and riches of that court; yet denied himself of them all, chose to visit and rank himself among his brethren the Israelites, then in a low and despicable condition, and refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, and reproach for Christ's sake, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin and the riches of Egypt (Acts 7:23; Heb. 11:25,26). 1c1b3.

When worldly profits and emoluments are left for the sake of Christ, and the interest of religion; this is self-denial: as when the disciples, one and another of them, left their fishing nets and boats, and worldly employments, and followed Christ; yea, Peter, in the name of them all, could say, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee" (Matthew 4:20,22; 19:27). So Matthew, at the receipt of custom, which, perhaps, was a lucrative and profitable employment; yet, called by Christ, left it and followed him; (Matthew 9:9).

And so many a gospel minister has given up himself to the ministry of the word, when worldly offers and views have directed him another way; and many private Christians have joyfully suffered the confiscation

of goods, and even imprisonment of the body, for the sake of religion and a good conscience; this is self-denial. An instance to the contrary of all this we have in a young man, who could not part with his worldly substance and follow Christ, of whom he asked, what good thing he must do to have eternal life? and was answered, "Keep the commandments;" these he thought an easy task, and what he had been always used to, and seemed highly delighted with it; "All these things I have kept from my youth; what lack I yet?" a hard lesson is then set him to learn; "Sell that thou hast and give to the poor;" and though he was promised treasure in heaven, it did not countervail; "He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions," which he could not part with and deny himself of (Matthew 19:16-22). 1c1b4.

The nearest and dearest friends and relations, which are a part of a man's self, these are to be left, when God calls for it; so Abraham was commanded to come out from his country and kindred, and his father's house, which, though a self-denying order, he was obedient to; and so the people of God, when called by grace, are directed to forsake their own people, and their father's house and when these attempt to obstruct them in the ways of God, they are not to be obeyed, but resisted; yea, even to be "hated," comparatively, that is, less love and respect are to be shown them than to Christ (Luke 14:26), a great instance of self-denial of this kind we have in Abraham, who was called to part with his son, his only son, his beloved son, the son of the promise, from whom the Messiah was to spring, to offer him upon a mount he should be shown; this was a great trial of faith, an hard lesson of self-denial to learn, and yet he withheld not his son from God; by which he gave evidence of a self-denying spirit, of his love to God, his fear of him, and obedience to his command. 1c1b5.

Health and hazard of life; as when men risk their health in the service of God and Christ, and true religion; so Epaphroditus, for the work of Christ was nigh unto death; and many, like the apostle Paul, have spent and been spent in the cause of God, by hard studies and frequent ministrations; so Paul and Barnabas hazarded their lives, through the rage of men, for the name of our Lord Jesus, preaching the gospel; and Aquila and Priscilla were ready to lay down their own necks for the apostle, that is, to risk their lives for his sake. 1c1b6.

Life itself is to be laid down when called for; the apostle Paul did not count his life dear to himself, but was ready to part with it for the sake of the gospel: and of others we read, that they loved not their lives unto death; and this is the great instance of self-denial Christ gives (Matthew 16:24,25). 1c2. Secondly, another branch of self-denial lies in denying sinful self; this lesson, not nature, but grace teaches, even to deny "ungodliness and worldly lusts," which include all kinds of sin; internal lusts and external actions of sin; sins of heart, lip, and life; everything that is contrary to God and his righteous law.

This is a hard lesson to learn; to part with sinful self is not an easy task, sin is so natural to men, they are conceived and born in it, are transgressors from the womb, and have lived in sin from their youth upward; sin and the soul have been long companions, and are loath to part; sin is as natural to the sinner as blackness to the Ethiopian, and spots to the leopard; it is as grateful to him as cold water to a thirsty soul; and is like a sweet morsel in his mouth, and he hides and spares it, and cares not to forsake it; it promises him much pleasure, though short lived, vain, and fallacious; some sins are right hand and right eye sins, as dear as the right hand and right eye be; and to cut off and pluck out such and cast them away is a great piece of self-denial; and is hard work, until the Spirit of God thoroughly convinces a man of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, what an evil and bitter thing it is, and how pernicious in its effects and consequences; and then being called and required to forsake it, does, and says with Ephraim, "What have I to do any more with idols?" and this self-denial appears by loathing it and themselves for it; by detesting and abhorring it, and themselves on account of it; and by repenting of it in deep humiliation for it, by lamenting

the indwelling and prevalence of it, and by praying against it; by abstaining from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, and from all appearance of sin; by making no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts of it; by opposing them, resisting unto blood, striving against sin; and by declaring to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness: so persons and things are said to be denied, when there is an aversion to them, a rejection of them, a disowning them as belonging to them, and as having any connection with them; so Moses was denied by the Israelites, and Christ by the Jews (Acts 3:14; 7:35).

A branch of this part of self-denial lies in parting with sinful companions, which are a sort of second self; and especially sinful relations, whom to part with is difficult work, as to withstand their solicitations, earnest entreaties, enticing language, and fair promises of pleasure and profit; as also to bear their reproaches, revilings, and censures, on refusing to associate with them; for "he that departs from evil maketh himself a prey" (Isa. 59:15), but being called by divine grace to come out from among them, and to be separate from them; and being convinced of the folly and danger of keeping company with them, and having better companions, and more preferable communion and fellowship, they are called into; and having had too long an abode with them to their great grief and loss, determine through the grace of God to leave them, and to have nothing more to do with them; which is self-denial. 1c3.

Thirdly, another branch of self-denial is to deny righteous self, which is not to refuse to do works of righteousness for necessary uses, to glorify God, to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour, and a profession of it; to show the genuineness and truth of faith, and to do good to others; this the grace of God teaches and obliges unto: but to deny righteous self, is to renounce all trust in and dependence on a man's own righteousness for justification before God, and acceptance with him; and to submit to the righteousness of Christ, and depend upon that for such purposes.

Now this is a hard lesson to learn, for a man to quit all trust in himself that he is righteous, and to depend upon the righteousness of another; to live out of himself upon another; to be beholden entirely to the free grace of God, and to the righteousness of Christ, disclaiming all works done by himself for his justification and whole salvation, is disagreeable to self: it is against the grain; a man's righteousness is his own, and he does not care to part with it, he would fain hold it fast; it is the effect of great toil and labour, and which he has endeavoured to establish and settle fast, and to have it all pulled down at once he cannot bear it; it is matter of glorying and boasting, and to have this excluded, and to be stripped of all his feathers, is not pleasing to flesh and blood; it is his idol he has bowed unto, and to take this away from him is as cutting as it was to Micah, when his images were stolen from him, and he said, "Ye have taken away my Gods, and what have I more?" but when the Spirit of God convinces a man of the insufficiency of his own righteousness to justify him before God, and of the excellency of the righteousness of Christ for such a purpose, then he quits his own, and lays hold on that; an instance of this kind of self-denial we have in the apostle Paul, who was at first a self-righteous man, who thought that touching the righteousness of the law he was blameless; he counted it gain unto him, and trusted in it, and expected to be justified and saved by it; but when he came to see the imperfection of it, and was convinced of its unprofitableness to God, he counted it loss and dung, and rejected it as such, desiring to be "found in Christ," and in his righteousness, and not his own (Phil. 2:6-9). 2.

There are various arguments or motives, which may be made use of to excite truly gracious souls to the exercise of this grace of self-denial in the several branches of it. 2a. It is required of them; it is an injunction of Christ on his disciples, even all of them, and therefore to be strictly regarded, complied with, and exercised; "If any man wilt come after me," is desirous of being a disciple and follower of Christ, "let him deny himself" (Matthew 16:24), nay, this is necessary to a man's being a disciple of Christ, he cannot

be one without it; see (Luke 14:26,21). 2b.

Christ has not only commanded it, but he has set an example of it himself; he denied himself for our sakes; came forth from his Father, and came down from heaven to serve us; though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor, that we, through his poverty, might be made rich; though he was in the form of God, and thought it no robbery to be equal with God, yet he so far humbled and denied himself as to be found in fashion as a man, and in the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, the death of the cross; he pleased not himself, but patiently bore the reproaches of men, which could not but be very disagreeable to him; and he endured the contradiction of sinners against himself; anti in all which and more he was an example of self-denial (Phil. 2:5-8). 2c.

The examples of saints in all ages may serve to excite and encourage to it; as of Abraham, in leaving his country and father's house, and especially in offering up his son at the command of God; in Moses, refusing to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; in the Old Testament saints and martyrs, who suffered bonds, imprisonment, trial of cruel mockings, and death itself, in various shapes; and so in others since: in the apostles of Christ, who left all and followed him; an instance of denial of sinful self may be observed in Zacchaeus and others; and of righteous self in the apostle Paul. 2d.

If a man does not deny himself, as required of God, he sets up himself for god, makes a god of himself, and is guilty of idolatry; such live to themselves, and not unto God and Christ, which the love of Christ constrains unto; namely, that they who live, should not live to themselves, but to him who died for them and rose again; yea, that they should none of them neither live to themselves, nor die to themselves, but to the Lord; that both living and dying they may appear to be his, and not their own (2 Cor. 5:14,15; Rom. 14:7,8). 2e.

The loss and gain of not denying and of denying self should be considered. Such who think to save themselves by not denying themselves, lose themselves and their own souls; lose Christ and his righteousness, heaven and eternal life; when those who deny themselves for Christ's sake, find the life of their souls, gain Christ and his righteousness, have treasure in heaven, the recompence of reward, the more enduring substance (Matthew 16:25,26; Phil. 3:7,8; Heb. 11:26,27; 10:34). ENDNOTES:

[1] "Principio, generi animantium omni est a natura tributum, ut se, vitam corpusque tueatur, declinetque ea quae nocitura videantur." Cicero de Officiis, l. 1. c. 4.

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