

Is Self-Denial a Mistake?

by J.R. Miller

Self-denial is not always a good thing, but when done in the service of love and doing one's duty, it is essential in every worthy life.

Scripture: Matthew 7:12, Matthew 16:24, Luke 6:31, John 15:13, Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 13:3, 2 Corinthians 5:15, Galatians 6:2, Philippians 2:4, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Self-Denial", "Love in Service"

Description

J.R. Miller addresses the question of self-denial, emphasizing that it should not be practiced for its own sake but rather as an expression of love and duty. He critiques the notion of self-denial that leads to self-inflicted suffering, arguing that true sacrifice is rooted in love and service to others, as exemplified by Christ. Miller warns against over-helping, which can foster selfishness in others, and encourages individuals to bear their own burdens while also being ready to serve those in need. He concludes that self-denial is essential in living a life that reflects Christ's love, urging believers to balance helping others with encouraging them to grow independently. Ultimately, true self-denial is about loving and serving others without losing sight of one's own responsibilities.

Transcript

One writes in a letter: "A friend of mine was speaking to me about self-denial. She does not think one ought to sacrifice one's self too much, even for one's own family. Often we find one person in a family doing things for another member of the household, waiting on her, bearing her burdens, when she is more able to do these things herself. My friend does not think it is right to wear one's self out for others. It only makes the others selfish, and they do not even thank you for it--but sit with folded hands, expecting you to continue to do and do and do for them. Please give me your opinion about this."

This question is important enough and of wide enough interest to have a thoughtful answer. The matter of self-denial for others is one of which we should think very sanely and carefully. Self-denial for its own sake--is nothing at all. In mediaeval days people thought they were pleasing God when they scourged themselves with whips, put nails or pebbles in their shoes to hurt their feet and make walking a torture, and endured all sorts of self-inflicted pains and sufferings. They supposed that this was being like Christ, and that in passing through such experiences, they were proving themselves saints of a high order. The truth is, however, that the whole system was a piece of self-deception. It was abomination in God's sight. The sacrifice to which God calls us is a living sacrifice, a devotement of our life, with all its powers at their

best, to him for service.

It is just as foolish, when people voluntarily, without any call of love or duty, cause themselves suffering or loss. God does not want us to make ourselves unhappy--unhappiness is not a lovely quality, nor is it meritorious in itself, and it is not pleasing to God. Self-denial has nothing praiseworthy in it--except when it is exercised in the service of love, and radiant with the spirit of love. Alone, it does no one any good and adds nothing to the world's treasure of blessing. Merely for its own sake--it avails nothing. "If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . . but have not love--it profits me nothing."

Self-sacrifice avails, only when it is required in doing one's duty. Then it becomes beautiful. For example, if some friend is in trouble and you are called to care for him, and to endure loss, pain, and cost, in ministering to him, and do it, and do it cheerfully--that is self-sacrifice which pleases God. Jesus Christ himself showed the highest, the supreme, example of self-denial, when he went to his cross in service of love for men. He did not go to the cross, merely to make a spectacle before the world, doing something that would attract attention or set before men an ideal; he went there in devotion to the will of God and in love for men. It was the good Shepherd giving his life for his sheep. It was the Son of God loving and giving himself for us.

We must carefully distinguish, therefore, between self-denial as a matter of show--and self-denial in doing God's will and in the service of love. It is not the act itself that is beautiful--but the love that is in the act. There are multitudes of people who practice what they call self-denials--giving up certain indulgences on certain occasions, supposing that thus they are pleasing God, while in reality they are only playing 'pious farces' in the sight of God, and deceiving themselves.

It never is right to wear one's self out, as this writer's friend puts it, for another, unless the sacrifice is one that is required in the doing of one's duty, and one that does good. Ofttimes there is harm done by mothers, for example, in denying themselves for their children. Too many mothers, with love that is tenderer than wise, make a serious mistake-- pampering their children's selfishness, self-esteem, and pride--while they sacrifice their own life in doing things for them--which the children ought to do for themselves! The truest home education is not that which does everything for children--but that which teaches them to carry their own burdens, to fight their own battles, to work out the problems of their own lives.

The older sister, for example, who solves all the problems for her little sister, and helps her with her lessons when she comes from school, doing the child's work for her and saving her the effort--may think she is very kind and is proving a true and helpful sister. But really, she is harming the child, robbing her of the opportunity of growing in intellectual experience and strength! The truest kindness on the part of such a sister--would be to encourage, stimulate, and inspire her sister, and thus lead her to work out the problems, and get the lessons, for herself. A wise man tells us that our best friend is he who makes us do our best!

That is God's own way of dealing with us and of helping us. He does not do things for us--but encourages us to do them for ourselves. There is an old Scripture promise which reads, "Cast your burden upon the Lord." It does not go on to say, however, that the Lord will carry the burden for us, leaving us with no load of our own. Rather the promise is, "He shall sustain you." That is, we may cast our burden upon the Lord in faith and confidence, and then he will strengthen us, encourage and inspire us, and give us wisdom and grace--so that we may carry our burdens for ourselves, growing stronger meanwhile.

Since this is God's way of helping us, we best show our love for our friends--when we help them in the same way. Over-helping is a serious danger of all friendship. We only make less prepared for real and victorious life--those for whom we make everything easy.

Thoughtful readers of the Bible note in all the Lord's helping of others--an economy of miracle and grace. He did not do for them--anything they could do for themselves. He required them to co-operate with him, too, when he would help or heal them. The lepers were bidden to go and show themselves to the priest, and it was "as they went" that they were cleansed. The lame man was commanded to rise up and walk--and in his obedience strength came, and he walked, supernaturally helped to obey. This is the law of all divine helping. We are not carried along on our way, nor are our tasks done for us--we must walk and work, and Christ works with us. If we fail in our part, through disobedience, or indolence, or unbelief--the work is not done, and the responsibility for the failure is ours, not God's.

Whatever we may say of unwise and unnecessary self-denial, however, there come times in each one's life when everything must be laid down in the self-forgetfulness of love, while we serve others in Christ's name. Christ himself did this. He loved unto the uttermost, and so must we. He gave his life for the world--and so must we. The apostles did the same when they went forth preaching and enduring persecution, most of them in the end suffering martyrdom. They stopped at no cost or sacrifice when duty called them. Every true Christian shows the same spirit--when he forgets himself and lives for the helping of others. Every good deed we do--costs something, and is the fruit of a self-denial. It is impossible for us to live truly and worthily a single day for self alone--we must continually give up our own way, denying ourselves the indulgence of our own desires, and living to serve.

There is no question, therefore, concerning the duty of self-denial. It is essential in every worthy life. We do not begin to live truly, or to be like Christ, until we begin to love, and we cannot love without denying self continually. Whatever may be our duty to our friends in the way of inciting them to bear their own burdens and do their own tasks, our heart must ever be filled with that love which seeks not its own, and we must always be ready to serve those who need our help, regardless of the cost to ourselves. One said of another, "He is a very good man--but he does not remind me of Jesus Christ." Of another it was said, "He makes people fall in love with Jesus Christ." This was a better witness. Those alone remind us of Christ--who have learned to love as he loved, and to serve in self-forgetful ministry without reserve, without stint, unto the uttermost.

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