

Lesson 1

What Is Self-Denial?

Jesus said, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mark 8:34). Self-denial is one of the basic attributes of Christianity. Yet, it is one of the most difficult to attain. One reason for that is because it requires great strength of will.

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Man has a great problem mastering himself. Those who willfully engage in sin have not learned to control themselves. Those who are overcome in a moment of temptation have a problem (at least for the moment) with self-control. When we get angry, let our tempers flare and our words fly, our character is then flawed due to not practicing self-discipline. We exhibit a lack of will power when we overeat, are lazy, or are addicted to alcohol, tobacco, or some other drug. Thus, denying self requires constant work for all of us. The difference in us is that we may need to work on it in different areas of our lives.

Shakespeare wrote, “Brave Conquerors! for so you are, that war against your own affections and the huge army of the world’s desires.” John Sterling said, “The worst education which teaches self-denial is better than the best which teaches everything else, and not that.”

There are more passages that imply the principle of self-denial than we may think at first. To learn and grow in self-denial is to grow in heart, in soul, and in character. This is one quality that we can use every moment of every day in every place.

Let’s Define Self-Denial.

1. Different words used in the New Testament. There are three different words or phrases used in the Bible that point to the same concept of denying or controlling self.

- a. Jesus used the phrase “deny himself” (Mark 8:34).
- b. The NKJV uses the words “self- control” in 2 Peter 1:6 and Titus 1:8.
- c. The word “temperance” or “temperate” is used in the KJV in 2 Peter 1:6, 1 Corinthians 9:25, and Titus 2:2.

2. “Deny self ” means “to forget oneself, lose sight of oneself and one’s own interest” (Thayer 54). Literally it means to say “No!” to yourself. It is hard to say “no” to others, but even harder to say “no” to ourselves.

3. “Temperance” means “self government” (Thayer). Strong’s says the original word translated “temperance” comes from a word that means “to be strong in a thing (i.e., masterful).” It means dominion, power or strength. Thus, temperance means to have power or dominion over self. William Barclay suggests that it is the “ability to take a grip of oneself.”



Self-Denial

4. Aristotle proposed that there are four states of man with reference to the battle between reason and passion.

- a. *Perfect Temperance*: This is where reason rules over passion. The fight is won.
- b. On the other end of the spectrum is *unbridled lust*: This is where passion rules over reason. The fight is lost. In between these two states is where the battle within ourselves takes place.
- c. *Incontinence*: This is where reason fights, but passion prevails. The battle is on, but at the moment, reason is losing.
- d. *Self-Control*: This is where passion fights against reason, but reason prevails. The battle is still on, but at the moment, reason is winning. (Taken from Barclay in his comments on 2 Pet. 1:6.)

Four States in the Battle between Reason and Passion

- Perfect Temperance
- Unbridled Lust
- Incontinence
- Self-Control

—Aristotle

The Reality of Life

The principle of self-denial or self-control deals with the reality of life. The Bible does not picture the Christian void of all passion, drained of all desires, or detached from all temptation. Rather, it envisions that all of his appetites and desires remain, but he keeps them under control and mastery. With self-control, man becomes the master and not the slave of his passions.

Questions

1. Why does man have a problem mastering himself? _____

2. What are the three different words or expressions that suggests the idea of denying self?

NOTES

3. What does “deny self ” mean? _____

4. What does “temperance” mean? _____

5. Define the state of man known as “perfect temperance.” _____

6. Define the state of man known as “unbridled lust.” _____

7. Define the state of man known as “incontinence.” _____

8. Define the state of man known as “self-control.” _____

9. How does self-denial deal with the reality of life? _____

10. List any practical lessons you learned from this study. _____

