

SELF-DENIAL

by C.H. Mackintosh

“If only we exercise a little self denial every day, we shall get on to heaven very comfortably.” What a volume of wholesome practical truth in this brief utterance! The path of self-denial is the Christian's true path. “If any man,” says Christ, “will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9: 23). It is not, “let him deny certain things belonging to himself.” No, he must “deny himself,” and this is a “daily” thing. Each morning, as we rise and enter afresh upon the pathway of daily life, we have the same grand and all-important work before us, namely, to deny self.

This hateful self will meet us at every step, for, although we know through grace that “our old man is crucified” — is dead and buried out of God's sight — still this is only as regards our standing in Christ, according to God's view of us. We know that self has to be denied, judged and subjugated every day, every hour, every moment. The principle of our standing must be worked out in practice. God sees us perfect in Christ. We are not in the flesh, but the flesh is in us, and it must be denied and kept by the power of the Spirit.

Be it remembered, it is not merely in its grossness that self must be denied, but in its refinement — not merely in its low habits, but in its cultivated tastes — not merely in its roughness and rudeness, but in its most polished and elegant forms. This is not always seen. It too often happens that, like Saul, we spare that which we consider “the best” and bring the edge of the sword to bear only upon “the vile and refuse.” This will never do. It is self that must be denied. Yes, self in all its length and breadth — not merely some branches, but the great parent stem — not merely some accessories of nature, but nature itself. It is a comparatively easy matter to deny certain things pertaining to self, while self is pampered and gratified all the time. I may deny my appetite to feed my religious pride. I may starve myself to minister to my love of money. I may wear shabby clothes while I pride myself in sumptuous furniture and splendid equipment. Hence, the need of being reminded that we must deny self.

Who can sum up all that is contained in this weighty word, self-denial? Self acts everywhere. In the closet, in the family, in the shop, in the railway car, in the street — everywhere, at all times and under all circumstances. It has its tastes and its habits, its prejudices, its likes and dislikes. It must be denied in all these. We may frequently detect ourselves liking our own image. This must be denied with uncommon decision.

Then again in matters of religion, we like those who suit us, who agree and sympathize with us, who admire our opinions or mode of propounding them. All this must be brought under the sharp edge of the knife of self-denial. If not, we may find ourselves despising some dear and honored Christian simply because of something which does not suit us. On the other hand, we may praise to the skies some hollow, worthless character, just because of some feature which we like. Indeed, of all the ten thousand shapes which self assumes, there is not one more hateful than that of religion. Clad in this garb it will make itself the center of a clique, confine its affections within that narrow enclosure, and call that Christian communion. From this contracted circle, it will diligently expel everyone who happens to have a single disagreeable point or angle. It will obstinately refuse to accommodate itself to the scruples and infirmities of others. As to these it will not yield a single hair's breadth, while at the same time, it will surrender any amount of truth to hold fellowship with its own image. All this is terrible and should be most diligently guarded against.

If my reader will study carefully 1 Corinthians 8: 10, he will find a most precious lesson on the subject of self-denial. The heading of this entire section might be thus worded, “*Any length in self-denial; not an inch in surrendering truth.*” This should ever be the Christian's motto. If it be merely a question of self, surrender all; if it be a question of truth, surrender nothing. “If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (1 Cor. 8: 13). Noble resolution! May we have grace to carry it out!

Again, “Though I be free from all, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.... I am made all things to all, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9: 19-22). “Let no man seek his own” — the very thing we are so ready to seek. “But every man another's wealth” — the very last thing we feel disposed to do.

It is important and very needful to observe that when the apostle declares that he was “made all things to all,” it was entirely a matter of self-denial and not of self-indulgence. He neither indulged himself nor surrendered a single iota of the truth of God, but made himself servant to all for their good and God's glory. This is our model. May the Lord endow us with grace to imitate it! We are called to surrender not only our points and angles, prejudices and preferences, but also our personal rights for the profit of others. This is the Christian's daily business, and it is as he is enabled to discharge it that he will walk in the footsteps of Jesus and “get on comfortably to heaven.”