



Deny Yourself

And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself (his soul)? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:23-27)

The idea of self denial seems almost un-American today. We have become the land of excess, the land of doing my thing. We want to "have it our way". We "go for it", we are "killing it", we "just do it". There are areas of American life where self denial is the norm, expected, typical, even problematic. One of these areas is in our careers. Granted, we are denying ourselves for selfish reasons, namely to get ahead, to get more, to get recognition, make more money, etc. We deny ourselves many things and often make sacrifices on the altar of career.

Some of the things we deny ourselves in order to excel in our careers include rest, time with our spouse, time with our children, our health, vacations, where we want to live, who we want to associate with, etc. We deny ourselves all kinds of things in order to excel in our careers. We deny ourselves these things because we want to. We are trading one thing for something that we value more. If our career is as an athlete, self denial is taken to an entirely new level. We don't even eat the foods we want to eat, live the lifestyle we want to live, etc. So Americans are willing to endure self denial, as long as it is for an acceptable reason in our mind and in the eyes of the culture. Jesus says in the above verse that if we want to come after Him, we must first deny ourselves. What does He mean by this? What is He asking us to do?

Self-denial is about priorities. If we want to lose weight, we deny our self ice cream and other fattening foods. We have made losing weight a higher priority than eating whatever we want. We are free to do either one, but they are exclusive of each other. We cannot do both simultaneously. We can either choose to eat right, and we will lose weight, or we can choose to eat junk, and we will not lose weight. We must decide which one is our priority, and make our decisions based on that priority. This leads to self-denial in either case. In one case we deny our self the food we want and lose weight. In the other case we deny our self the ability to lose weight, but we get to eat the ice cream we want – the ice cream takes priority over losing weight. We would also start doing certain things, like regular exercise, if we wanted to lose weight, denying our self couch and TV time perhaps. So self-denial has to do with our priorities and involves both doing certain things, and not doing certain things.

Jesus is telling us that we must first get our priorities straight if we want to come after Him. We must put God first – He must be our top priority, to the point that we are willing to deny our self anything that stands in the way of our relationship with Him. This may mean getting up early or staying up late to spend time reading the Bible and in prayer. It means getting our lazy bones out of bed on Sunday mornings to be a part of a Christian fellowship group (church). It may mean that we quit doing certain things (sins usually), like drinking heavily, doing drugs, sexual promiscuity, lying, cheating, stealing, coveting, etc. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). It also means that we start doing some new things, like giving to the poor, volunteering to help and serve others, supporting missions, teaching, praying for others, putting the needs of others before our own, etc.

When we think of self-denial, we usually think of making sacrifices. But God says He doesn't want sacrifices just for the sake of sacrificing:

For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. (Psalm 51:16-17, see also Psalm 40:6)

In the verse above, David has sinned, and he wants to make up for it by giving sacrifices. But God makes it clear that what He really wants is for David to be sorry for his sin. It is not the idea of sacrifice that Jesus is looking for, but rather He wants us to order our priorities so that sin grieves us, sin breaks our heart, and we are truly repentant. God wants our heart. Denying our self is to set our heart on loving God, living for God, and to make that our top priority. We may sacrifice some lower priority things in order to do this, but sacrifice is not the main thing in self-denial. Loving God and putting Him first is the main thing. That is true self-denial. To take self off the throne of our heart, and put God there.

What is your heart set on today? Do you long to know God more fully? Where are you spending your time every day? What are you spending your money on? Do you spend more time watching TV or doing fantasy football than you do with God and His word? Or maybe you are an exercise fanatic, and spend hours in the gym every day. Give your heart to God. Make your relationship with Jesus your top priority. Be a Deuteronomy 6:4-9 kind of guy. Do it today.