

“Surrender to God”
Faith and Prejudice Sermon 5
St. John Henry Newman
March 12, 1848

1 I suppose it has struck many persons as very remarkable, that in the latter times the
2 strictness and severity in religion of former ages has been so much relaxed. There has
3 been a gradual abandonment of painful duties which were formerly enforced upon all.
4 Time was when all persons, to speak generally, abstained from flesh through the whole
5 of Lent. There have been dispensations on this point again and again, and this very
6 year there is a fresh one. What is the meaning of this? What are we to gather from it?
7 This is a question worth considering. Various answers may be given, but I shall confine
8 myself to one of them.

9 I answer that fasting is only one branch of a large and momentous duty, the subduing of
10 ourselves to Christ. We must surrender to Him all we have, all we are. We must keep
11 nothing back. We must present to Him as captive prisoners with whom He may do what
12 He will, our soul and body, our reason, our judgement, our affections, our imagination,
13 our tastes, our appetite. The great thing is to *subdue* ourselves; but as to the particular
14 form in which the great precept of self-conquest and self-surrender is to be expressed,
15 that depends on the person himself, and on the time or place. What is good for one age
16 or person, is not good for another.

17 There are other instances of the same variation. For example, devotion to the Saints is
18 a Catholic practice. It is founded on a clear Catholic doctrine, and the Catholic practice
19 has been the same from the beginning. It could not possibly change. Yet it is certain
20 that the prominent object of that devotion has varied at different times, varying now in
21 the case of individuals, one person having a devotion to one saint, another to another;
22 and in like manner it has varied in the Church at large—for example, quite at first the
23 Martyrs, as was natural, took up this principal attention. It was natural, when their
24 friends were dying daily under the sword or at the stake before their eyes, to direct their
25 devotion in the first instance to their glorified spirits. But when a time of external peace
26 was granted, then the thought of the Blessed Virgin took up its abode in the hearts of
27 the faithful, and there was a greater devotion than before to her. And this thought of the
28 Blessed Virgin has grown stronger and clearer and more influential in the minds of the
29 Church. The devout servants of Mary were comparatively few in the first ages, now they
30 are many.

31 Again, to take another instance, the present war with evil spirits would seem to be very
32 different from what it was in former ages. They attack a civilized age in a more subtle
33 way than they attack a rude age. We read in lives of saints and others of the evil spirit
34 showing himself and fighting with them face to face, but now those subtle and
35 experienced spirits find it is more to their purpose not to show themselves, or at least
36 not so much. They find it their interest to let the idea of them die away from the minds of
37 men, that being unrecognized, they may do the more mischief. And they assault men in
38 a more subtle way—not grossly, in some broad temptation, which everyone can

39 understand, but in some refined way they address themselves to our pride or self-
40 importance, or love of money, or love of ease, or love of show, or our depraved reason,
41 and thus have really the dominion over persons who seem at first sight to be quite
42 superior to temptation.

43 Now apply these illustrations to the case in point. From what has been said it follows
44 that you must not suppose that nothing is incumbent on us in the way of mortification,
45 though you have not to fast so strictly as formerly. It is reasonable to think that some
46 other duty of the same general kind, may take its place; and therefore the permission
47 granted us in eating may be a suggestion to us to be more severe with ourselves on the
48 other hand in certain other respects.

49 And this anticipation is confirmed by the history of our Lord's temptation in the
50 wilderness. It *began*, you will observe, with an attempt on the part of the evil one to
51 make Him break His fast improperly. It *began*, but it did not end there. It was but the first
52 of three temptations, and the other two were more addressed to His mind, not His bodily
53 wants. One was to throw Himself down from the pinnacle, the other the offer of all the
54 kingdoms of the world. They were more subtle temptations. Now I have used the word
55 "subtle" already, and it needs some explanation. By a subtle temptation or a subtle sin, I
56 mean one which it is very difficult to find out. Everyone knows what it is to break the ten
57 commandments, the first, the second, the third, and so on. When a thing is directly
58 commanded, and the devil tempts us directly to break it, this is *not* a subtle temptation,
59 but a broad and gross temptation. But there are a great many things wrong which are
60 not so obviously wrong. They are wrong as leading to what is wrong or the
61 consequence of what is wrong, or they are wrong because they are the very same thing
62 as what is forbidden, but dressed up and looking differently. The human mind is very
63 deceitful; when a thing is forbidden, a man does not like directly to do it, but he goes to
64 work if he can to get at the forbidden end in some way. It is like a man who has to make
65 for some place. First he attempts to go straight to it, but finds the way blocked up; then
66 he goes round about it. At first you would not think he is going in the right direction; he
67 sets off perhaps at a right angle, but he just makes one little bend, then another, till at
68 length he gets to his point. Or still more it is like a sailing vessel at sea with the wind
69 contrary, but tacking first this way, and then that, the mariners contrive at length to get
70 to their destination. This then is a subtle sin, when it at first seems not to be a sin, but
71 comes round to the same point as an open direct sin.

72 To take some examples. If the devil tempted one to go out into the highway and rob,
73 this would be an open, bold temptation. But if he tempted one to do something unfair in
74 the course of business, which was to one's neighbour's hurt and to one's own
75 advantage, it would be a more subtle temptation. The man would still take what was his
76 neighbour's, but his conscience would not be so much shocked. So equivocation is a
77 more subtle sin than direct lying. In like manner a person who does not intoxicate
78 himself, may eat too much. Gluttony is a more subtle sin than drunkenness, because it
79 does not show so much. And again, sins of the soul are more subtle sins than sins of
80 the body. Infidelity is a more subtle sin than licentiousness.

81 Even in our Blessed Lord's case the Tempter began by addressing himself to His bodily
82 wants. He had fasted forty days, and afterwards was hungered. So the devil tempted
83 Him to eat. But when He did not consent, then he went on to more subtle temptations.
84 He tempted Him to spiritual pride, and he tempted Him by ambition for power. Many a
85 man would shrink from intemperance, of being proud of his spiritual attainments; that is,
86 he would confess such things were wrong, but he would not see that he was guilty of
87 them.

88 Next I observe that a civilized age is more exposed to subtle sins than a rude age.
89 Why? For this simple reason, because it is more fertile in excuses and evasions. It can
90 defend error, and hence can blind the eyes of those who have not very careful
91 consciences. It can make error plausible, it can make vice look like virtue. It dignifies sin
92 by fine names; it calls avarice proper care of one's family, or industry, it calls pride
93 independence, it calls ambition greatness of mind; resentment it calls proper spirit and
94 sense of honour, and so on.

95 Such is this age, and hence our self-denial must be very different from what was
96 necessary for a rude age. Barbarians lately converted, or warlike multitudes, of fierce
97 spirit and robust power—nothing can tame them better than fasting. But we are very
98 different. Whether from the natural course of centuries or from our mode of living, from
99 the largeness of our towns or other causes, so it is that our powers are weak and we
100 cannot bear what our ancestors did. Then again what numbers there are who anyhow
101 must have dispensation, whether because their labour is so hard, or because they
102 never have enough, and cannot be called on to stint themselves in Lent. These are
103 reasons for the rule of fasting not being so strict as once it was. And let me now say,
104 that the rule which the Church now gives us, though indulgent, yet is strict too. It tries a
105 man. One meal a day is trial to most people, even though on some days meat is
106 allowed. It is sufficient, with our weak frames, to be a mortification of sensuality. It
107 serves that end for which all fasting was instituted. On the other hand its being so light
108 as it is, so much lighter than it was in former times, is a suggestion to us that there are
109 other sins and weaknesses to mortify in us besides gluttony and drunkenness. It is a
110 suggestion to us, while we strive to be pure and undefiled in our bodies, to be on our
111 guard lest we are unclean and sinful in our intellects, in our affections, in our wills.

112 When the old rude age of the world was just ended, and an age which is called light and
113 civilization had begun—I mean in the 16th century—the Providence of Almighty God
114 raised up two saints. One came from Florence, and the other came from Spain, and
115 they met together in Rome. They were as unlike each other as any two men could be,
116 unlike in their history, in their character, in the religious institutes, which ultimately, by
117 God's all-directing grace they were prospered in founding. The Spaniard had been a
118 soldier—his history was exciting. He had been tossed about the world, and, after his
119 conversion he founded a company of spiritual knights or cavaliers, as they may be
120 called, who were bound to a sort of military service to the Holy See. The Florentine had
121 been a saint from a boy, perhaps he never committed a mortal sin, and he was a
122 stationary, home saint. For sixty years he lived in Rome and never left it. St. Philip Neri
123 is the Florentine, and St. Ignatius is the Spaniard. These two saints, so different from

124 each other, were both great masters in their own persons of the grace of abstinence
125 and fasting. Their own personal asceticism was wonderful, and yet these two great
126 lights, though so different from each other, and so mortified themselves, agreed in
127 this—not to impose bodily afflictions to any great extent on their disciples, but
128 mortification of the spirit, of the will, of the affections, of the tastes, of the judgement, of
129 the reason. They were divinely enlightened to see that the coming age, at the beginning
130 of which they stood, required more than anything else, not mortification of the body
131 (though it needed that too, of course,) but more than it mortification of the reason and
132 the will.

133 Now then I have got at length, my Brethren, to my practical conclusion. What all of us
134 want more than anything else, what this age wants, is that its intellect and its will should
135 be under a law. At present it is lawless, its will is its own law, its own reason is the
136 standard of all truth. It does not bow to authority, it does not submit to the law of faith. It
137 is wise in its own eyes and it relies on its own resources. And you, as living in the world,
138 are in danger of being seduced by it, and being a partner in its sin, and so coming in at
139 the end for its punishment. Now then let me in conclusion, suggest one or two points in
140 which you may profitably subdue your minds, which require it even more than your
141 bodies.

142 For example, in respect to curiosity. What a deal of time is lost, to say nothing else, in
143 this day by curiosity, about things which in no ways concern us. I am not speaking
144 against interest in the news of the day altogether, for the course of the world must ever
145 be interesting to a Christian from its bearing upon the fortunes of the Church, but I
146 speak of vain curiosity, love of scandal, love of idle tales, curious prying into the private
147 history of people, curiosity about trials and offences, and personal matters, nay often
148 what is much worse than this, curiosity into sin. What strange diseased curiosity is
149 sometimes felt about the history of murders, and of the malefactors themselves! Worse
150 still, it is shocking to say, but there is so much evil curiosity to know about deeds of
151 darkness, of which the Apostle says that it is shameful to speak. Many a person, who
152 has no intention of doing the like, from an evil curiosity reads what he ought not to read.
153 This is in one shape or other very much the sin of boys, and they suffer for it. The
154 knowledge of what is evil is the first step in their case to the commission of it. Hence this
155 is the way in which we are called upon, with this Lent we now begin, to mortify
156 ourselves. Let us mortify our curiosity.

157 Again, the desire of knowledge is in itself praiseworthy, but it may be excessive, it may
158 take us from higher things, it may take up too much of our time—it is a vanity. The
159 Preacher makes the distinction between profitable and unprofitable learning when he
160 says, "The words of the wise are like goads and nails." They excite and stimulate us
161 and are fixed in our memories. "But further than this, my son, inquire not. Of making
162 many books there is no end, and much study" (that is, poring over secular subjects,) "is
163 affliction of the flesh. Let us one and all have an end of the discourse: fear God and
164 keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man." Knowledge is very well in its
165 place, but it is like flowers without fruit. We cannot feed on knowledge, we cannot thrive
166 on knowledge. Just as the leaves of the grove are very beautiful but would make a bad

167 meal, so we shall ever be hungry and never be satisfied if we think to take knowledge
168 for our food. Knowledge is no food. Religion is our only food. Here then is another
169 mortification. Mortify your desire of knowledge. Do not go into excess in seeking after
170 truths which are not religious.

171 Again, mortify your reason. In order to try you, God puts before you things which are
172 difficult to believe. St. Thomas's faith was tried; so is yours. He said "My Lord and My
173 God." You say so too. Bring your proud intellect into subjection. Believe what you
174 cannot see, what you cannot understand, what you cannot explain, what you cannot
175 prove, when God says it.

176 Lastly, bring your will into subjection. We all like our own will—let us consult the will of
177 others. Numbers of persons are obliged to do this. Servants are obliged to do the will of
178 their masters, workmen of their employers, children of their parents, husbands of their
179 wives. Well, in these cases let your will go with that of those who have a right to
180 command you. Don't rebel against it. Sanctify what is after all a necessary act. Make it
181 in a certain sense your own, sanctify it, and get merit from it. And again when you are
182 your own master, be on your guard against going too much by your own opinion. Take
183 some wise counsellor or director, and obey him. There are persons who cry out against
184 such obedience, and call it a number of bad names. They are the very persons who
185 need it. It would do them much good. They say that men are made mere machines, and
186 lose the dignity of human nature by going by the word of another. And I should like to
187 know what they become by going by their own will. I appeal to any candid person and
188 ask whether he would not confess that on the whole the world would be much happier,
189 that individuals would be much happier, if they had not a will of their own. For one
190 person who has been hurt by following the direction of another, a hundred persons have
191 been ruined by going by their own will. This is another subject. But this is enough. May
192 almighty God enable you, etc.