

"Self-Denial the Test of Religious Earnestness"

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1 "Now it is high time to awake out of sleep." Rom. xiii. 11.

2 BY "sleep," in this passage, St. Paul means a state of insensibility to things as they  
3 really are in God's sight. When we are asleep, we are absent from this world's action, as  
4 if we were no longer concerned in it. It goes on without us, or, if our rest be broken, and  
5 we have some slight notion of people and occurrences about us, if we hear a voice or a  
6 sentence, and see a face, yet we are unable to catch these external objects justly and  
7 truly; we make them part of our dreams, and pervert them till they have scarcely a  
8 resemblance to what they really are; and such is the state of men as regards religious  
9 truth. God is ever Almighty and All-knowing. He is on His throne in heaven, trying the  
10 reins and the hearts; and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, is on His right hand; and  
11 ten thousand Angels and Saints are ministering to Him, rapt in the contemplation of  
12 Him, or by their errands of mercy connecting this lower world with His courts above;  
13 they go to and fro, as though upon the ladder which Jacob saw. And the disclosure of  
14 this glorious invisible world is made to us principally by means of the Bible, partly by the  
15 course of nature, partly by the floating opinions of mankind, partly by the suggestions of  
16 the heart and conscience:—and all these means of information concerning it are  
17 collected and combined by the Holy Church, which heralds the news forth to the whole  
18 earth, and applies it with power to individual minds, partly by direct instruction, partly by  
19 her very form and fashion, which witnesses to them; so that the truths of religion  
20 circulate through the world almost as the light of day, every corner and recess having  
21 some portion of its blessed rays. Such is the state of a Christian country. Meanwhile,  
22 how is it with those who dwell in it? The words of the text remind us of their condition.  
23 They are *asleep*. While the Ministers of Christ are using the armour of light, and all  
24 things speak of Him, they "walk" not "becomingly, as in the day." Many live altogether as  
25 though the day shone not on them, but the shadows still endured; and far the greater  
26 part of them are but very faintly sensible of the great truths preached around them. They  
27 see and hear as people in a dream; they mix up the Holy Word of God with their own  
28 idle imaginings; if startled for a moment, still they soon relapse into slumber; they refuse  
29 to be awakened, and think their happiness consists in continuing as they are.

30 Now I do not for an instant suspect, my brethren, that you are in the sound slumber of  
31 sin. This is a miserable state, which I should hope was, on the whole, the condition of  
32 few men, at least in a place like this. But, allowing this, yet there is great reason for  
33 fearing that very many of you are not wide awake: that though your dreams are  
34 disturbed, yet dreams they are; and that the view of religion which you think to be a true  
35 one, is not that vision of the Truth which you would see were your eyes open, but such  
36 a vague, defective, extravagant picture of it as a man sees when he is asleep. At all  
37 events, however this may be, it will be useful (please God) if you ask yourselves, one by  
38 one, the question, "*How do I know I am in the right way? How do I know that I have real*  
39 *faith, and am not in a dream?*"

40 The circumstances of these times render it very difficult to answer this question. When  
41 the world was against Christianity it was comparatively easy. But (in one sense) the  
42 world is now *for it*. I do not mean there are not turbulent lawless men, who would bring  
43 all things into confusion, if they could; who hate religion, and would overturn every  
44 established institution which proceeds from, or is connected with it. Doubtless there are  
45 very many such, but from such men religion has nothing to fear. The truth has ever  
46 flourished and strengthened under persecution. But what we have to fear is the opposite  
47 fact, that all the rank, and the station, and the intelligence, and the opulence of the  
48 country is professedly with religion. We have cause to fear from the very circumstance  
49 that the institutions of the country are based upon the acknowledgment of religion as  
50 true. Worthy of all honour are they who so based them! Miserable is the guilt which lies  
51 upon those who have attempted, and partly succeeded, in shaking that holy foundation!  
52 But it often happens that our most bitter are not our most dangerous enemies; on the  
53 other hand, greatest blessings are the most serious temptations to the unwary. And our  
54 danger, at present, is this, that a man's having a general character for religion,  
55 reverencing the Gospel and professing it, and to a certain point obeying it, so fully  
56 promotes his temporal interests, that it is difficult for him to make out for himself whether  
57 he really acts on faith, or from a desire of this world's advantages. It is difficult to  
58 find *tests* which may bring home the truth to his mind, and probe his heart after the  
59 manner of Him who, from His throne above, tries it with an Almighty Wisdom. It can  
60 scarcely be denied that attention to their religious duties is becoming a fashion among  
61 large portions of the community,—so large, that, to many individuals, these portions are  
62 in fact *the world*. We are, every now and then, surprised to find persons to be in the  
63 observance of family prayer, of reading Scripture, or of Holy Communion, of whom we  
64 should not have expected beforehand such a profession of faith; or we hear them  
65 avowing the high evangelical truths of the New Testament, and countenancing those  
66 who maintain them. All this brings it about, that it is our interest in this world to profess  
67 to be Christ's disciples.

68 And further than this, it is necessary to remark, that, in spite of this general profession of  
69 zeal for the Gospel among all respectable persons at this day, nevertheless there is  
70 reason for fearing, that it is not altogether the real Gospel that they are zealous for.  
71 Doubtless we have cause to be thankful whenever we see persons earnest in the  
72 various ways I have mentioned. Yet, somehow, after all, there is reason for being  
73 dissatisfied with the character of the religion of the day; dissatisfied, first, because  
74 oftentimes these same persons are very inconsistent;—often, for instance, talk  
75 irreverently and profanely, ridicule or slight things sacred, speak against the Holy  
76 Church, or against the blessed Saints of early times, or even against the favoured  
77 servants of God, set before us in Scripture; or act with the world and the worse sort of  
78 men, even when they do not speak like them; attend to them more than to the Ministers  
79 of God, or are very lukewarm, lax, and unscrupulous in matters of conduct, so much so,  
80 that they seem hardly to go by principle, but by what is merely expedient and  
81 convenient. And then again, putting aside our judgment of these men as individuals,  
82 and thinking of them as well as we can (which of course it is our duty to do), yet, after  
83 all, taking merely the multitude of them as a symptom of a state of things, I own I am  
84 suspicious of any religion that is a people's religion, or an age's religion. Our Saviour

85 says, "Narrow is the way." This, of course, must not be interpreted without great  
86 caution; yet surely the whole tenor of the Inspired Volume leads us to believe that His  
87 Truth will not be heartily received by the many, that it is against the current of human  
88 feeling and opinion, and the course of the world, and so far forth as it *is* received by a  
89 man, will be opposed by himself, *i.e.* by his old nature which remains about him, next by  
90 all others, so far forth as they have not received it. "The light shining in darkness" is the  
91 token of true religion; and, though doubtless there are seasons when a sudden  
92 enthusiasm arises in favour of the Truth (as in the history of St. John the Baptist, in  
93 whose "light" the Jews "were willing for a season to rejoice," [John v. 35.] so as even "to  
94 be baptized of him, confessing their sins" [Matt. iii. 6.]), yet such a popularity of the Truth  
95 is *but* sudden, comes at once and goes at once, has no regular growth, no abiding stay.  
96 It is error alone which grows and is received heartily on a large scale. St. Paul has set  
97 up his warning against our supposing Truth will ever be heartily accepted, whatever  
98 show there may be of a general profession of it, in his last Epistle, where he tells  
99 Timothy, among other sad prophecies, that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and  
100 worse." [2 Tim. iii. 13.] Truth, indeed, has that power in it, that it forces men to profess it  
101 in words; but when they go on to act, instead of obeying *it*, they substitute some idol in  
102 the place of it. On these accounts, when there is much talk of religion in a country, and  
103 much congratulation that there is a general concern for it, a cautious mind will feel  
104 anxious lest some counterfeit be, in fact, honoured instead of it: lest it be the dream of  
105 man rather than the verities of God's word, which has become popular, and lest the  
106 received form have no more of truth in it than is just necessary to recommend it to the  
107 reason and conscience:—lest, in short, it be Satan transformed into an angel of light,  
108 rather than the Light itself, which is attracting followers.

109 If, then, this be a time (which I suppose it is) when a general profession of religion is  
110 thought respectable and right in the virtuous and orderly classes of the community, this  
111 circumstance should not diminish your anxiety about your own state before God, but  
112 rather (I may say) increase it; for two reasons, first, because you are in danger of doing  
113 right from motives of this world; next, because you may, perchance, be cheated of the  
114 Truth, by some ingenuity which the world puts, like counterfeit coin, in the place of the  
115 Truth.

116 Some, indeed, of those who now hear me, are in situations where they are almost  
117 shielded from the world's influence, whatever it is. There are persons so happily placed  
118 as to have religious superiors, who direct them to what is good only, and who are kind  
119 to them, as well as pious towards God. This is their happiness, and they must thank  
120 God for the gift; but it is their temptation too. At least they are under one of the two  
121 temptations just mentioned; good behaviour is, in their case, not only a matter of duty,  
122 but of interest. If they obey God, they gain praise from men as well as from Him; so that  
123 it is very difficult for them to know whether they do right for conscience' sake, or for the  
124 world's sake. Thus, whether in private families, or in the world, in all the ranks of middle  
125 life, men lie under a considerable danger at this day, a more than ordinary danger, of  
126 self-deception, of being asleep while they think themselves awake.

127 How then shall we try ourselves? Can any tests be named which will bring certainty to  
128 our minds on the subject? No indisputable tests can be given. We cannot know for  
129 certain. We must beware of an impatience about knowing what our real state is. St. Paul  
130 himself did not know till the last days of his life (as far as we know), that he was one of  
131 God's elect who shall never perish. He said, "I know nothing by myself, yet am I not  
132 hereby justified;" [1 Cor. iv. 4.] i.e. though I am not conscious to myself of neglect of  
133 duty, yet am I not therefore confident of my acceptance? Judge nothing before the time.  
134 Accordingly he says in another place, "I keep under my body, and bring it into  
135 subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be  
136 a castaway." [1 Cor. ix. 27.] And yet though this absolute certainty of our election unto  
137 glory be unattainable, and the desire to obtain it an impatience which ill befits sinners,  
138 nevertheless a comfortable hope, a sober and subdued belief that God has pardoned  
139 and justified us for Christ's sake (blessed be His name!), is attainable, according to St.  
140 John's words, "If our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God." [1  
141 John iii. 21.] And the question is, how are we to attain to this, under the circumstances  
142 in which we are placed? In what does it consist?

143 Were we in a heathen land (as I said just now) it were easy to answer. The very  
144 profession of the Gospel would almost bring evidence of true faith, as far as we could  
145 have evidence; for such profession among Pagans is almost sure to involve  
146 persecution. Hence it is that the Epistles are so full of expressions of joy in the Lord  
147 Jesus, and in the exulting hope of salvation. Well might they be confident who had  
148 suffered for Christ. "Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience and  
149 experience hope." [Rom. v. 3, 4.] "Henceforth let no man trouble me, for I bear in my  
150 body the marks of the Lord Jesus" [Gal. vi. 17.] "Always bearing about in the body the  
151 dying of the Lord Jesus; that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body."  
152 [2 Cor. iv. 10.] "Our hope of you is stedfast knowing that as ye are partakers of the  
153 suffering, so shall ye be also of the consolation." [2 Cor. i. 7.] These and such like texts  
154 belong to those only who have witnessed for the truth like the early Christians. They are  
155 beyond *us*.

156 This is certain; yet since the nature of Christian obedience is the same in every age, it  
157 still brings with it, as it did then, an evidence of God's favour. We cannot indeed make  
158 ourselves as sure of our being in the number of God's true servants as the early  
159 Christians were, yet we may possess our degree of certainty, and by the same kind of  
160 evidence, the evidence of *self-denial*. This was the great evidence which the first  
161 disciples gave, and which we can give still. Reflect upon our Saviour's plain  
162 declarations, "Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his  
163 cross and follow Me." [Mark viii. 34.] "If any man come to Me, and hate not his father  
164 and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also,  
165 he cannot be My disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after Me,  
166 he cannot be My disciple." [Luke xiv. 26, 27.] "If thy hand offend thee, cut it off ... if thy  
167 foot offend thee, cut it off ... if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: ... it is better for thee to  
168 enter into life maimed ... halt ... with one eye than to be cast into hell." [Mark ix. 43-47.]

169 Now without attempting to explain perfectly such passages as these, which doubtless  
170 cannot be understood without a fulness of grace which is possessed by very few men,  
171 yet at least we learn thus much from them, that a rigorous self-denial is a chief duty,  
172 nay, that it may be considered the test whether we are Christ's disciples, whether we  
173 are living in a mere dream, which we mistake for Christian faith and obedience, or are  
174 really and truly awake, alive, living in the day, on our road heavenwards. The early  
175 Christians went through self-denials in their very profession of the Gospel; *what are our*  
176 *self-denials*, now that the profession of the Gospel is not a self-denial? In what sense  
177 do we fulfil the words of Christ? have we any distinct notion what is meant by the words  
178 "taking up our cross?" in what way are we acting, in which we should not act, supposing  
179 the Bible and the Church were unknown to this country, and religion, as existing among  
180 us, was *merely* a fashion of this world? What are we doing, which we have reason to  
181 trust is done for Christ's sake who bought us?

182 You know well enough that works are said to be the fruits and evidence of faith. That  
183 faith is said to be dead which has them not. Now what works have we to show of such a  
184 kind as to give us "confidence," so that we may "not be ashamed before Him at His  
185 coming?" [1 John ii. 28.]

186 In answering this question I observe, first of all, that, according to Scripture, the self-  
187 denial which is the test of our faith must be daily. "If any man will come after Me, let him  
188 deny himself, and take up his cross *daily*, and follow Me." [Luke ix. 23.] It is thus St.  
189 Luke records our Saviour's words. Accordingly, it seems that Christian obedience does  
190 not consist merely in a few occasional efforts, a few accidental good deeds, or certain  
191 seasons of repentance, prayer, and activity; a mistake, which minds of a certain class  
192 are very apt to fall into. This is the kind of obedience which constitutes what the world  
193 calls a great man, i.e. a man who has some noble points, and every now and then acts  
194 heroically, so as to astonish and subdue the minds of beholders, but who in private life  
195 has no abiding personal religion, who does not regulate his thoughts, words, and deeds,  
196 according to the law of God. Again, the word *daily* implies, that the self-denial which is  
197 pleasing to Christ consists in little things. This is plain, for opportunity for great self-  
198 denials does not come every day. Thus to take up the cross of Christ is no great action  
199 done once for all, it consists in the continual practice of small duties which are  
200 distasteful to us.

201 If, then, a person asks how he is to know whether he is dreaming on in the world's  
202 slumber, or is really awake and alive unto God, let him first fix his mind upon some one  
203 or other of his besetting infirmities. Every one who is at all in the habit of examining  
204 himself, must be conscious of such within him. Many men have more than one, all of us  
205 have some one or other; and in resisting and overcoming such, self-denial has its first  
206 employment. One man is indolent and fond of amusement, another man is passionate  
207 or ill-tempered, another is vain, another has little control over his tongue; others are  
208 weak, and cannot resist the ridicule of thoughtless companions; others are tormented  
209 with bad passions, of which they are ashamed, yet are overcome. Now let every one  
210 consider what his weak point is; in that is his trial. His trial is not in those things which  
211 are easy to him, but in that one thing, in those several things, whatever they are, in

212 which to do his duty is against his nature. Never think yourself safe because you do  
213 your duty in ninety-nine points; it is the hundredth which is to be the ground of your self-  
214 denial, which must evidence, or rather instance and realize your faith. It is in reference  
215 to this you must watch and pray; pray continually for God's grace to help you, and watch  
216 with fear and trembling lest you fall. Other men may not know what these weak points of  
217 your character are, they may mistake them. But you may know them; you may know  
218 them by *the* *ir* *g* *u* *ess* and hints, and your own observation, and the light of the Spirit of  
219 God. And oh, that you may have strength to wrestle with them and overcome them! Oh,  
220 that you may have the wisdom to care little for the world's religion, or the praise you get  
221 from the world, and your agreement with what clever men, or powerful men, or many  
222 men, make the standard of religion, compared with the secret consciousness that you  
223 are obeying God in little things as well as great, in the hundredth duty as well as in the  
224 ninety-nine! Oh, that you may (as it were) sweep the house diligently to discover what  
225 you lack of the *full* measure of obedience! for be quite sure, that this apparently small  
226 defect will influence your whole spirit and judgment in all things. Be quite sure that your  
227 judgment of persons, and of events, and of actions, and of doctrines, and your spirit  
228 towards God and man, your faith in the high truths of the Gospel, and your knowledge  
229 of your duty, all depend in a strange way on this strict endeavour to observe the whole  
230 law, on this self-denial in those little things in which obedience *is* a self-denial. Be not  
231 content with a warmth of faith carrying you over many obstacles even in your  
232 obedience, forcing you past the fear of men, and the usages of society, and the  
233 persuasions of interest; exult not in your experience of God's past mercies, and your  
234 assurance of what He has already done for your soul, if you are conscious you have  
235 neglected the one thing needful, the "one thing" which "thou lackest,"—daily self-denial.

236 But, besides this, there are other modes of self-denial to try your faith and sincerity,  
237 which it may be right just to mention. It may so happen that the sin you are most liable  
238 to, is not called forth every day. For instance: anger and passion are irresistible perhaps  
239 when they come upon you, but it is only at times that you are provoked, and then you  
240 are off your guard; so that the occasion is over, and you have failed, before you were  
241 well aware of its coming. It is right then almost to *find out* for yourself daily self-denials;  
242 and this because our Lord bids you take up your cross daily, and because it proves your  
243 earnestness, and because by doing so you strengthen your general power of self-  
244 mastery, and come to have such an habitual command of yourself, as will be a defence  
245 ready prepared when the season of temptation comes. Rise up then in the morning with  
246 the purpose that (please God) the day shall not pass without its self-denial, with a self-  
247 denial in innocent pleasures and tastes, if none occurs to mortify sin. Let your very  
248 rising from your bed be a self-denial; let your meals be self-denials. Determine to yield  
249 to others in things indifferent, to go out of your way in small matters, to inconvenience  
250 yourself (so that no direct duty suffers by it), rather than you should not meet with your  
251 daily discipline. This was the Psalmist's method, who was, as it were, "punished all day  
252 long, and chastened every morning." [Psalm lxxiii. 14.] It was St. Paul's method, who  
253 "kept under," or bruised "his body, and brought it into subjection." [1 Cor. ix. 27.] This is  
254 one great end of fasting. A man says to himself, "How am I to know I am in earnest? I  
255 would suggest to him, Make some sacrifice, do some distasteful thing, which you are  
256 not actually obliged to do, (so that it be lawful,) to bring home to your mind that in fact

257 you do love your Saviour, that you do hate sin, that you do hate your sinful nature, that  
258 you have put aside the present world. Thus you will have an evidence (to a certain  
259 point) that you are not using mere words. It is easy to make professions, easy to say  
260 fine things in speech or in writing, easy to astonish men with truths which they do not  
261 know, and sentiments which rise above human nature. "But thou, O servant of God, flee  
262 these things, and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness."  
263 Let not your words run on; force every one of them into action as it goes, and thus,  
264 cleansing yourself from all pollution of the flesh and spirit, perfect holiness in the fear of  
265 God. In dreams we sometimes move our arms to see if we are awake or not, and so we  
266 are awakened. This is the way to keep your heart awake also. Try yourself daily in little  
267 deeds, to prove that your faith is more than a deceit.

268 I am aware all this is a hard doctrine; hard to those even who assent to it, and can  
269 describe it most accurately. There are such imperfections, such inconsistencies in the  
270 heart and life of even the better sort of men, that continual repentance must ever go  
271 hand in hand with our endeavours to obey. Much we need the grace of Christ's blood to  
272 wash us from the guilt we daily incur; much need we the aid of His promised Spirit! And  
273 surely He will grant all the riches of His mercy to His true servants; but as surely He will  
274 vouchsafe to none of us the power to believe in Him, and the blessedness of being one  
275 with Him, who are not as earnest in obeying Him as if salvation depended on  
276 themselves.