

"The Duty of Self-denial"
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St. John Henry Newman
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"Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child." Psalm cxxxi. 2.

SELF-DENIAL of some kind or other is involved, as is evident, in the very notion of renewal and holy obedience. To change our hearts is to learn to love things which we do not naturally love—to unlearn the love of this world; but this involves, of course, a thwarting of our natural wishes and tastes. To be righteous and obedient implies self-command; but to possess power we must have gained it; nor can we gain it without a vigorous struggle, a persevering warfare against ourselves. The very notion of being religious implies self-denial, because by nature we do not love religion.

Self-denial, then, is a subject never out of place in Christian teaching; still more appropriate is it at a time like this, when we have entered upon the forty days of Lent, the season of the year set apart for fasting and humiliation.

This indeed is not all that is meant by self-denial; but before proceeding with the subject, I would ask whether the generality of mankind go as far as this: it is plain that they do not. They do not go so far as to realize to themselves that religious obedience involves a thwarting of those wishes and inclinations which are natural to them. They do not like to be convinced, much less will they act upon the notion, that religion is difficult. You may hear men of the world say plainly, and as if in the way of argument, "that God will not punish us for indulging the passions with which we are born; that it is no praise to be unnatural; and no crime to be a man." This, however, may seem an extreme case; yet are there not a great many decent and respectable men, as far as outward character goes, who at least fix their thoughts on worldly comfort, as the greatest of goods, and who labour to place themselves in easy circumstances, under the notion that, when they can retire from the business of their temporal calling, then they may (in a quiet, unexceptionable way of course) consult their own tastes and likings, take their pleasure, and indulge themselves in self-importance and self-satisfaction, in the enjoyment of wealth, power, distinction, popularity, and credit? I am not at this moment asking whether such indulgences are in themselves allowable or not, but whether the life which centres in them does not imply the absence of any very deep views of sanctification as a process, a change, a painful toil, of working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, of preparing to meet our God, and waiting for the judgment? You may go into mixed society; you will hear men conversing on their friend's prospects, openings in trade, or realized wealth, on his advantageous situation, the pleasant connexions he has formed, the land he has purchased, the house he has built; then they amuse themselves with conjecturing what this or that man's property may be, where he lost, where he gained, his shrewdness, or his rashness, or his good fortune in this or that speculation. Observe, I do not say that such conversation is wrong; I do not say that we

36 must always have on our lips the very thoughts which are deepest in our hearts, or that
37 it is safe to judge of individuals by such speeches; but when this sort of conversation is
38 the customary standard conversation of the world, and when a line of conduct
39 answering to it is the prevalent conduct of the world (and this is the case), is it not a
40 grave question for each of us, as living in the world, to ask himself what abiding notion
41 we have of the necessity of self-denial, and how far we are clear of the danger of
42 resembling that evil generation which "ate and drank, which married wives, and were
43 given in marriage, which bought and sold, planted, and builded, till it rained fire and
44 brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all?" [Luke xvii. 27-29.]

45 It is strange, indeed, how far this same forgetfulness and transgression of the duty of
46 self-denial at present spreads. Take another class of persons, very different from those
47 just mentioned, men who profess much love for religion—I mean such as maintain, that
48 if a man has faith he will have works without his trouble, so that he need be at no pains
49 about performing them. Such persons at best seem to say, that religious obedience is to
50 follow as a matter of course, an easy work, or rather a necessary consequence, from
51 having some strong urgent motive, or from some bright vision of the Truth acting on the
52 mind; and thus they dismiss from their religion the notion of self-denial, or the effort and
53 warfare of faith against our corrupt natural will, whether they actually own that they
54 dismiss it or not. I say that they do this at best; for it often happens, as I just now
55 intimated, that they actually avow their belief that faith is all-sufficient, and do not let
56 their minds dwell at all on the necessity of works of righteousness. All this being
57 considered, surely I am not wrong in saying that the notion of self-denial as a distinct
58 religious duty, and, much more (as it may well be called), the essence of religious
59 obedience, is not admitted into the minds of the generality of men.

60 But let it be observed, I have hitherto spoken of self-denial not as a distinct duty actually
61 commanded in Scripture, but merely as it is involved in the very notion of sanctification,
62 as necessarily attendant on that change of nature which God the Holy Spirit vouchsafes
63 to work within us. But now let us consider it in the light of the Scripture precepts
64 concerning it, and we shall come to a still more serious view of it, serious (I mean) to
65 those who are living to the world; it is this,—that it is our duty, not only to deny ourselves
66 in what is sinful, but even, in a certain measure, in lawful things, to keep a restraint over
67 ourselves even in innocent pleasures and enjoyments.

68 Now the first proof I shall give of this will at the same time explain what I mean.

69 Fasting is clearly a Christian duty, as our Saviour implies in His Sermon on the Mount.
70 Now what is fasting but a refraining from what is lawful; not merely from what is sinful,
71 but what is innocent?—from that bread which we might lawfully take and eat with
72 thanksgiving, but which at certain times we do not take, in order to deny ourselves.
73 Such is Christian self-denial,—not merely a mortification of what is sinful, but an
74 abstinence even from God's blessings.

75 Again: consider the following declaration of our Saviour: He first tells us, "Strait is the
76 gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." And

again: "Strive to enter in, for many, I say unto you, will seek (only seek) to enter in, and shall not be able." Then He explains to us what this peculiar difficulty of a Christian's life consists in: "If any man come to Me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." [Matt. vii. 14. Luke xiii. 24; xiv. 26] Now whatever is precisely meant by this (which I will not here stop to inquire), so far is evident, that our Lord enjoins a certain refraining, not merely from sin, but from innocent comforts and enjoyments of this life, or a self-denial in things lawful.

Again, He says, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." [Luke ix. 23.] Here He shows us from His own example what Christian self-denial is. It is taking on us a cross after His pattern, not a mere refraining from sin, for He had no sin, but a giving up what we might lawfully use. This was the peculiar character in which Christ came on earth. It was this spontaneous and exuberant self-denial which brought Him down. He who was one with God, took upon Him our nature, and suffered death—and why? to save us whom He needed not save. Thus He denied Himself, and took up His cross. This is the very aspect, in which God, as revealed in Scripture, is distinguished from that exhibition of His glory, which nature gives us: power, wisdom, love, mercy, long-suffering—these attributes, though far more fully and clearly displayed in Scripture than in nature, still are in their degree seen on the face of the visible creation; but self-denial, if it may be said, this incomprehensible attribute of Divine Providence, is disclosed to us only in Scripture. "God so loved the world that He gave His Son." [John iii. 16.] Here is self-denial. And the Son of God so loved us, that "though He was rich yet for our sakes He became poor." [2 Cor. viii. 9.] Here is our Saviour's self-denial. "He pleased not Himself."

And what Christ did when He came on earth, that have all His saints done both before and since His coming. Even the saints of the Old Testament so conducted themselves, to whom a temporal promise was made, and who, if any, might have surrendered themselves to the enjoyment of it. They had a temporal promise, they had a present reward; yet, with a noble faith, and a largeness of soul (how they put us to shame who have so much higher privileges!) the Jewish believers grudged themselves the milk and honey of Canaan, as seeking a better country, that is a heavenly. Elijah, how unlike is he to one who had a temporal promise! Or take again the instance of Daniel, which is still more striking,—"They that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses." Daniel was first in power in the palace of the greatest monarchs of his time. Yet what do we read of him? First of his living upon pulse and water, afterwards of his fasting in sackcloth and ashes, at another time of his mourning three full weeks, eating no pleasant bread, neither flesh nor wine coming in his mouth, nor anointing himself at all, till those three weeks were fulfilled. Can any thing more clearly show the duty of self-denial, even in lawful things, in the case of Christians, when even God's servants, before Christ came and commanded it, in proportion as they had evangelical gifts, observed it?

Or again, consider the words of the text spoken by David, who, if any, had riches and power poured upon him by the hand of God. He says, he has "behaved and quieted" himself lest he should be proud, and made himself "as a weaned child." What an

120 impressive word is "weaned!" David had put away the unreserved love and the use of
121 this world. We naturally love the world, and innocently; it is before us, and meets our
122 eyes and hands first; its pleasures are dear to us, and many of them not in themselves
123 sinful, only in their excess, and some of them not sinful at all;—those, for instance,
124 which we derive from our home, our friends, and our prospects, are the first and natural
125 food of our mind. But as children are weaned from their first nourishment, so must our
126 souls put away childish things, and be turned from the pleasures of earth to those of
127 heaven; we must learn to compose and quiet ourselves as a weaned child, to put up
128 with the loss of what is dear to us, nay, voluntarily to give it up for Christ's sake.

129 Much more after Christ came does St. Paul give us this same lesson in the ninth
130 chapter of his first Epistle to the Corinthians: "Every one that striveth for the mastery is
131 temperate in all things," i.e. has power over himself, and keeps himself in subjection, as
132 he presently says. Again, in the seventh chapter, "The time is short; it remaineth that
133 both they that have wives be as though they had none, and they that weep as though
134 they wept not, and they that rejoice as though they rejoiced not, and they that buy as
135 though they possessed not, and they that use this world as not abusing it." Here the
136 same doctrine of moderation or temperance in lawful indulgences is strongly enforced;
137 to weep, to rejoice, to buy, to possess, to marry, to use this world, are not unlawful, yet
138 we must not use God's earthly gifts to the full, but in all things we must be self-denying.

139 Such is Christian self-denial, and it is incumbent upon us for many reasons. The
140 Christian denies himself in things lawful because he is aware of his own weakness and
141 liability to sin; he dares not walk on the edge of a precipice; instead of going to the
142 extreme of what is allowable, he keeps at a distance from evil, that he may be safe. He
143 abstains lest he should not be temperate; he fasts lest he should eat and drink with the
144 drunken. As is evident, many things are in themselves right and unexceptionable which
145 are inexpedient in the case of a weak and sinful creature: his case is like that of a sick
146 person; many kinds of food, good for a man in health, are hurtful when he is ill—wine is
147 poison to a man in a fierce fever. And just so, many acts, thoughts, and feelings, which
148 would have been allowable in Adam before his fall, are prejudicial or dangerous in man
149 {95} fallen. For instance, anger is not sinful in itself. St. Paul implies this, when he says,
150 "Be ye angry and sin not." [Eph. iv. 26.] And our Saviour on one occasion is said to
151 have been angry, and He was sinless. Almighty God, too, is angry with the wicked.
152 Anger, then, is not in itself a sinful feeling; but in man, constituted as he is, it is so highly
153 dangerous to indulge it, that self-denial here is a duty from mere prudence. It is almost
154 impossible for a man to be angry only so far as he ought to be; he will exceed the right
155 limit; his anger will degenerate into pride, sullenness, malice, cruelty, revenge, and
156 hatred. It will inflame his diseased soul, and poison it. Therefore, he must abstain from
157 it, as if it were *in itself* a sin (though it is not), for it is practically such to him.

158 Again, the love of praise is in itself an innocent passion, and might be indulged, were
159 the world's opinion right and our hearts sound; but, as things are, human applause, if
160 listened to, will soon make us forget how weak and sinful we are; so we must deny
161 ourselves, and accept the praise even of good men, and those we love, cautiously and
162 with reserve.

163 So, again, love of power is commonly attendant on a great mind; but he is the greatest
164 of a sinful race who refrains himself, and turns from the temptation of it; for it is at once
165 unbecoming and dangerous in a son of Adam. "Whosoever will be great among you, let
166 him be your minister," says our Lord; "and whosoever will be chief among you, let him
167 be your servant." [Matt. xx. 26, 27.] His reward will be hereafter; to reign with Christ, to
168 sit down with Him on His throne, to judge angels,—yet without pride.

169 Again, even in affection towards our relations and friends, we must be watchful over
170 ourselves, lest it seduce us from the path of duty. Many a father, from a kind wish to
171 provide well for his family, neglects his own soul. Here, then, is a fault; not that we can
172 love our relations too well, but that that strong and most praiseworthy affection for them
173 may, accidentally, ensnare and corrupt our weak nature.

174 These considerations will show us the meaning of our Saviour's words already cited,
175 about the duty of hating our friends. To hate is to feel that perfect distaste for an object,
176 that you wish it put away and got rid of; it is to turn away from it, and to blot out the
177 thought of it from your mind. Now this is just the feeling we must cherish towards all
178 earthly blessings, so far as Christ does not cast His light upon them. He (blessed be His
179 name) has sanctioned and enjoined love and care for our relations and friends. Such
180 love is a great duty; but should at any time His guidance lead us by a strange way, and
181 the light of His providence pass on, and cast these objects of our earthly affection into
182 the shade, then they must be at once in the shade to *us*,—they must, for the time,
183 disappear from our hearts. "He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy
184 of Me." So He says; and at such times, though still loving them, we shall seem to hate
185 them; for we shall put aside the thought of them, and act as if they did not exist. And in
186 this sense an ancient and harsh proverb is true: we must always so love our friends as
187 feeling that one day or other we may perchance be called upon to hate them,—that is,
188 forget them in the pursuit of higher duties.

189 Here, again, then, is an instance of self-denial in lawful things; and if a person says it is
190 painful thus to feel, and that it checks the spontaneous and continual flow of love
191 towards our friends to have this memento sounding in our ears, we must boldly
192 acknowledge that it *is* painful. It is a sad thought, not that we can ever be called upon
193 actually to put away the love of them, but to have to act as if we did not love them,—as
194 Abraham when called on to slay his son. And this thought of the uncertainty of the
195 future, doubtless, does tinge all our brightest affections (as far as this world is
196 concerned) with a grave and melancholy hue. We need not shrink from this confession,
197 remembering that this life is not our rest or happiness;—"that remaineth" to come. This
198 sober chastised feeling is the very temper of David, when he speaks of having
199 composed and quieted his soul, and weaned it from the babe's nourishment which this
200 world supplies.

201 I hope I have made it clear, by these instances, what is meant by Christian self-denial. If
202 we have good health, and are in easy circumstances, let us beware of high-
203 mindedness, self-sufficiency, self-conceit, arrogance; of delicacy of living, indulgences,
204 luxuries, comforts. Nothing is so likely to corrupt our heart, and to seduce us from God,

205 as to surround ourselves with comforts,—to have things our own way,—to be the centre
206 of a sort of world, whether of things animate or inanimate, which minister to us. For
207 then, in turn, we shall depend on them; they will become necessary to us; their very
208 service and adulation will lead us to trust ourselves to them, and to idolize them. What
209 examples are there in Scripture of soft luxurious men! Was it Abraham before the Law,
210 who wandered through his days, without a home? or Moses, who gave the Law, and
211 died in the wilderness? or David under the Law, who "had no proud looks," and was "as
212 a weaned child?" or the Prophets, in the latter days of the Law, who wandered in
213 sheepskins and goatskins? or the Baptist, when the Gospel was superseding it, who
214 was clad in raiment of camel's hair, and ate the food of the wilderness? or the Apostles,
215 who were "the offscouring of all things"? or our blessed Saviour, who "had not a place to
216 lay His head"? Who are the soft luxurious men in Scripture? There was the rich man,
217 who "fared sumptuously every day," and then "lifted up his eyes in hell, being in
218 torments." There was that other, whose "ground brought forth plentifully," and {99} who
219 said, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years;" and his soul was required of
220 him that night. There was Demas, who forsook St. Paul, "having loved this present
221 world." And, alas! there was that highly-favoured, that divinely-inspired king, rich and
222 wise Solomon, whom it availed nothing to have measured the earth, and numbered its
223 inhabitants, when in his old age he "loved many strange women," and worshipped their
224 gods.

225 Far be it from us, soldiers of Christ, thus to perplex ourselves with this world, who are
226 making our way towards the world to come. "No man that warreth, entangleth himself
227 with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.
228 If a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully." This
229 is St. Paul's rule, as has already been referred to: accordingly, in another place, he
230 bears witness of himself that he "died daily." Day by day he got more and more dead to
231 this world; he had fewer ties to earth, a larger treasure in heaven. Nor let us think that it
232 is over-difficult to imitate him, though we be not Apostles, nor are called to any
233 extraordinary work, nor are enriched with any miraculous gifts: he would have all men
234 like himself, and all may be like him, according to their place and measure of grace. If
235 we would be followers of the great Apostle, first let us with him fix our eyes upon Christ
236 our Saviour; consider the splendour and glory of His holiness, and try to love it. Let us
237 strive and pray that the love of holiness may be created within our hearts; and then acts
238 will follow, such as befit us and our circumstances, in due time, without our distressing
239 ourselves to find what they should be. You need not attempt to draw any precise line
240 between what is sinful and what is only allowable: look up to Christ, and deny
241 yourselves every thing, whatever its character, which you think He would have you
242 relinquish. You need not calculate and measure, if you love much: you need not perplex
243 yourselves with points of curiosity, if you have a heart to venture after Him. True,
244 difficulties will sometimes arise, but they will be seldom. He bids you take up your cross;
245 therefore accept the daily opportunities which occur of yielding to others, when you
246 need not yield, and of doing unpleasant services, which you might avoid. He bids those
247 who would be highest, live as the lowest: therefore, turn from ambitious thoughts, and
248 (as far as you religiously may) make resolves against taking on you authority and rule.
249 He bids you sell and give alms; therefore, hate to spend money on yourself. Shut your

250 ears to praise, when it grows loud: set your face like a flint, when the world ridicules,
251 and smile at its threats. Learn to master your heart, when it would burst forth into
252 vehemence, or prolong a barren sorrow, or dissolve into unseasonable tenderness.
253 Curb your tongue, and turn away your eye, lest you fall into temptation. Avoid the
254 dangerous air which relaxes you, and brace yourself upon the heights. Be up at prayer
255 "a great while before day," and seek the true, your only Bridegroom, "by night on your
256 bed." So shall self-denial become natural to you, and a change come over you, gently
257 and imperceptibly; and, like Jacob, you will lie down in the waste, and will soon see
258 Angels, and a way opened for you into heaven.