



Self-de-ni-al: *n* – the act/practice of giving up or rejecting something once enjoyed or desired; a restraint or limitation of one's own interests and desire

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. - Mark 8:34; Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23

Introduction

Christians are quick to testify about victory over our demons. Yet, no one ever celebrates denial of ourselves. Truthfully, self-denial is antithetical to everything we desire. And yet, Jesus repeatedly begs, demands implore us to do just that! Following Christ will always involve a mental process of self-denial and sacrifice. Self-denial is the decision to deny ourselves something we would like, something we crave and believe we cannot live without. Self-denial or self-sacrifice is an act of letting go of the self, as with altruistic abstinence – the willingness to forgo personal pleasures or undergo personal trials in the pursuit of the increased good of another.

¹¹⁻¹⁴ God’s readiness to give and forgive is now public. Salvation’s available for everyone! We’re being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life. This new life is starting right now and is whetting our appetites for the glorious day when our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, appears. He offered himself as a sacrifice to free us from a dark, rebellious life into this good, pure life, making us a people he can be proud of, energetic in goodness.
- Titus 2: 11-14 (MSG)

A Longing for Egypt

That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. ² All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴ And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”
- Numbers 14: 1-4

We struggle with self-denial because we tend to focus on ending the old and not beginning the new. We spend all our energy mourning what we lost, not what we gained. Our new beginning always starts with a longing for the old. Thus, we can’t get to the Promised Land while still obsessing about Egypt!

But God wants us to self-deny the habits of old, the destructive cycles that have medicated us in our misery, making us co-conspirators to our bondage! We have become our most effective enablers. But, without a vision of our future, we are destined to return to our past. All we know is the Egypt we are leaving. Moses provided the Hebrew enslaved people with a prophetic vision of the place they were going – a Promised Land.

Prayer

Oh God, give us the strength to focus on moving forward, forgetting the former things, and pressing onward to the high calling you have set before us. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your voice in the wilderness calling us forward to the place we are destined to be – a Promised Land. Amen

Practicing Self-Denial

Practicing self-denial may often seem like an impossibility. Have you ever practiced the discipline of fasting? Though many agree with the advantages of prayer, there remains debate about fasting as a discipline. Yet, Jesus tells us to fast and pray repeatedly. Fasting is a practice of refraining from everyday activities to focus our attention on Christ. Most commonly, fasting is avoiding food for specific periods. But we can fast other things.

So, He said to them, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.” – Mark 9:29

We may intellectually understand and agree with the call for self-denial. We even see the benefit in obeying Christ, even if it contradicts our deep desires. We pray for the strength to obey and dispute our longings, but compulsion is an addictive mental force that causes us to falter. It is tough to say no when we have every means to satisfy ourselves. There are no “virtue points” for saying no to ourselves. Fasting is a discipline that helps us **practice** saying no to ourselves. It helps us learn the habit of setting aside our desires to make room for pursuing God’s will.

Prayer

I confess, Lord, that I often avoid doing the good that I would like to do. I admit that I regularly violate Your commands, despite my best intentions. Transform me, making me new, so I can do what is good and right for myself and obey Your will. Amen.

Self-Denial as Self-Care

Most of us never consider self-care until crisis or trauma forces us - addiction, depression, etc., robbing us of peace of mind and body. God can use problems to confront us in revelations we have never considered. Self-care is any activity we do deliberately to enhance our mental, emotional, and physical health. In these self-care activities, we can find greater freedom and joy in Him. Self-denial is a vital part of the process of self-care. No self-denial, no self-care.

We hesitate to self-deny because of an unspoken fear that we can’t live without the destructive things that satisfy us. Self-denial as self-care puts us back in charge of our thoughts and feelings, rather than being at the mercy of thoughts and feelings! We have wasted so much time obsessing about something that never satisfied us, something that kills us in the long term. Self-denial returns power over things that had dominion over us. We live in fear of being without what medicates us from pain, never considering self-denial will eventually heal us from pain.

Jesus said, “Are you tired? Worn out and burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me, and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me, and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” – Matt. 11:26-30 (MSG)

Prayer

Oh God, we depend upon You, humbling ourselves before You, recognizing all that you have done for us and will do for us. Give us strength, Oh God, to deny those things that would cause us harm and embrace those things that bring us life. Reveal the blessings that You have in store if we obey Your word. Amen.